

Israeli parliament approves bill to ban UNRWA in another effort to block aid and starve Palestinians



A damaged sign is pictured at the headquarters of UNRWA following an Israeli raid in Gaza City
[File: Dawoud Abu Alkas/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, October 29 (RHC)-- The Israeli parliament has approved a controversial bill to ban the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), considered a lifeline for Gaza, from operating on Israeli territory.

This law bans UNRWA from operating in areas under Israeli control, which would lead to the closure of its premises in the occupied Palestinian territory – the West Bank, including occupied East Jerusalem – and Gaza.

The legislation, which will not take effect immediately, risks collapsing the already fragile aid distribution process at a moment when the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is worsening and Israel is under increased pressure to allow in aid supplies.

The ban will effectively paralyse the agency's ability to fulfil its mandate as set out by the UN General Assembly in 1949.

UNRWA is the leading agency running humanitarian aid in Gaza, which has been devastated by more than a year of Israel's war. Hundreds of UNRWA workers have been killed in Israeli strikes, making it the deadliest conflict for UN workers.

The vote passed 92-10 and followed a fiery debate between supporters of the law and its opponents, primarily members of Arab parliamentary parties.

The UNRWA head said the ban set "a dangerous precedent" and would "only deepen the suffering of Palestinians." "This is the latest in the ongoing campaign to discredit UNRWA... These bills will only deepen the suffering of Palestinians," the agency's chief Philippe Lazzarini said on X.

Earlier, a UNRWA spokesperson decried the move as "outrageous." "It's outrageous that a member state of the United Nations is working to dismantle a UN agency which also happens to be the largest responder in the humanitarian operation in Gaza," Juliette Touma told the AFP news agency.

The media adviser to UNRWA, Adnan Abu Hasna, said Israel's decision to ban the organisation would mean the collapse of the humanitarian process as a whole. Speaking to Al Jazeera, Hasna described the decision as an "unprecedented" escalation.

The UN agency has provided essential aid and assistance across Palestinian territory – including the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem, as well as to Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria – for more than seven decades. It has for years been subject to harsh Israeli criticism, which escalated after the start of Israel's ongoing deadly assault on the besieged Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian presidency condemned the ban, saying it would not allow such a move. "We reject and condemn the legislation... We will not allow this... The overwhelming vote of the so-called Knesset [Israel's parliament] shows Israel's transformation into a fascist state," Nabil Abu Rudeineh, the spokesman for the presidency in Ramallah, said in a statement.

Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh, reporting from Amman in Jordan, said this would "deprive about 3 million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza from any service provided by UNRWA."

"UNRWA provides education, health services and vocational training for Palestinian refugees. It's a gigantic operation in the Palestinian territory and employs 13,000 people just in Gaza," Odeh said.

The bills, which do not include provisions for alternative organisations to oversee its work, have been strongly criticised by international aid groups and a handful of Israel's Western allies.

The United States said it was "deeply concerned" about the bill. "We have made quite clear to the government of Israel that we are deeply concerned by this," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller

told reporters, reiterating the “critical” role the agency plays in distributing humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip.

EU’s foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the ban “would de facto render UNRWA’s vital operations in Gaza impossible and seriously hamper its provision of services in the West Bank.” In a post on X, he said the legislation stands “in stark contradiction to international law and the fundamental principle of humanity”.

Before the legislation was passed, foreign ministers from France, Germany, Britain, Japan and South Korea, Canada and Australia issued a statement expressing “grave concern.”

“It is crucial that UNRWA and other UN organisations and agencies be fully able to deliver humanitarian aid and their assistance to those who need it most, fulfilling their mandates effectively,” the statement said.

UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies have accused Israel of severely restricting aid flow into Gaza, where almost all of the enclave’s 2.4 million people have been displaced at least once since October last year. More than 43,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to health officials.

Israeli forces have continued to shut vital border crossings, including the Rafah crossing, banning the entry of humanitarian aid including food, medicine, and much-needed fuel from entering the bombed territory. In Gaza’s north, a total siege for more than 20 days has left hospitals at the brink of collapse and some 400,000 people without access to basic necessities.

UNRWA itself has suffered heavy losses since last year, with at least 233 of its team members killed, and two-thirds of the agency’s facilities in Gaza damaged or destroyed since the war began.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose administration has restricted aid into Gaza, pledged to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians after the ban. “Sustained humanitarian aid must remain available in Gaza now and in the future... We stand ready to work with our international partners to ensure Israel continues to facilitate humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza in a way that does not threaten Israel’s security,” Netanyahu said in a post on social media platform X.

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