

World condemns Israel's UNRWA ban as intolerable and dangerous



Israeli soldiers operate next to what's left of the UNRWA headquarters in the Gaza Strip, in February 2024 [File: Dylan Martinez/Reuters]

United Nations, October 29 (RHC)-- The United Nations and countries across the globe have denounced Israel after its parliament passed two laws that brands the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA)

a “terror” group and bans the humanitarian organisation from operating on Israeli soil.

The legislation, approved on Monday, would – if implemented – prevent UNRWA from providing life-saving support to Palestinians across Israeli-occupied Gaza and the West Bank.

UNRWA was created by the UN General Assembly in 1949 to support Palestinian refugees expelled from their homes during the creation of Israel and it remains the main organisation providing humanitarian services in Gaza, and supports millions of Palestinian refugees in the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

Here’s a round-up of the global reaction to Israel’s move:

Palestine

The Palestinian presidency rejected and condemned the Israeli legislation. “We will not allow this. The overwhelming vote of the Knesset reflects Israel’s transformation into a fascist state,” said Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for the presidency in Ramallah.

Hamas also denounced the move saying it considers the bill a “part of the Zionist war and aggression against our people”, while the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) called it “an escalation in the genocide” against Palestinians.

United Nations

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called UNRWA’s work “indispensable” and said there is “no alternative” to the agency. “The implementation of the laws could have devastating consequences for Palestine refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which is unacceptable,” he said, urging Israel to “act consistently with its obligations under the Charter of the United Nations and its other obligations under international law”.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini, meanwhile, said the Knesset move set a “dangerous precedent” as it “opposes the UN Charter and violates the State of Israel’s obligations under international law”.

“These bills will only deepen the suffering of Palestinians, especially in #Gaza where people have been going through more than a year of sheer hell,” he wrote on X.

China

Fu Cong, the Chinese envoy to the UN, called the Israeli move “outrageous.” “We are firmly opposed to this decision. As I said, this is an outrageous decision and we do believe that UNRWA has played a key role in maintaining a lifeline for the Palestinian people in Gaza,” he told reporters in New York.

Russia

Vasily Nebenzia, Russia’s UN ambassador, described Israel’s UNRWA ban as “terrible” and said it worsens the situation in Gaza. He also called on Israel’s main ally, the United States, to “pay their dues to UNRWA to demonstrate their commitment to the agency”.

The U.S. had withdrawn funding from UNRWA after Israel accused some of the agency’s staff of taking part in Hamas’s October 7 attacks on southern Israel – a move by the US that critics have labelled disproportionate.

United Kingdom

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer expressed grave concern and said the Israeli legislation “risks making UNRWA’s essential work for Palestinians impossible”. He described the humanitarian situation in Gaza as

“simply unacceptable” and said Israel must ensure sufficient aid reaches civilians in the enclave.

“Only UNRWA can deliver humanitarian aid at the scale and pace needed,” he said.

Jordan

Jordan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs “strongly condemned” the Israeli move, describing it as a “flagrant violation of international law and the obligations of Israel as the occupying power” in Palestine. He warned that the Israeli campaign “aimed at assassinating UNRWA politically” would have “catastrophic consequences”.

Ireland, Norway, Slovenia and Spain

The governments of the four European countries – all of which have recognised Palestinian statehood – issued a joint statement condemning the Knesset’s targeting of the agency.

“UNRWA has a mandate from the United Nations General Assembly,” the statement noted. “The legislation approved by the Knesset sets a very serious precedent for the work of the United Nations and for all organizations of the multilateral system.”

Australia

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said UNRWA does life-saving work and her government opposes the Israeli Knesset’s decision to “severely restrict” the agency’s operations. “Australia again calls on Israel to comply with the binding orders of the [International Court of Justice] to enable the provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance at scale in Gaza,” she wrote on X.

Belgium

Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib urged Israeli authorities to let UNRWA carry out its UN General Assembly-ordered mandate across the Middle East. Lahbib said the agency provided “life-saving services in Gaza, the West Bank – including East Jerusalem – and across Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.” “UNRWA is crucial to regional stability,” she wrote on X.

Switzerland

The Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a post on X that it is “concerned about the humanitarian, political and legal implications” of the Israeli laws banning cooperation with UNRWA.

World Health Organization

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said UNRWA has been an “irreplaceable lifeline” for the Palestinian people for the past seven decades. “UNRWA was created by the UN member states. Today’s decision by the Israeli parliament barring UNRWA from its life-saving and health-protecting work on behalf of millions of Palestinians will have devastating consequences,” he said in a post on X.

“This is intolerable. It contravenes Israel’s obligations and responsibilities, and threatens the lives and health of all those who depend on UNRWA.”

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