

UNRWA chief slams Sweden's disappointing decision to end funding



Palestinians look at the destruction after an Israeli strike on a school run by UNRWA, the U.N. agency helping Palestinian refugees, in Nuseirat, Gaza Strip, Tuesday, May 14, 2024. (AP Photo/Abdel Kareem Hana)

United Nations, December 20 (RHC)-- Sweden will no longer fund the United Nations refugee agency for Palestinians (UNRWA) and will instead provide increased overall humanitarian assistance to Gaza via other channels, the Nordic country says, in a move denounced by the head of the agency.

"The government's core support to UNRWA ends," the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement on Friday.

UNRWA provides assistance to nearly six million Palestinian refugees across Gaza, the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

Israel, which said it will ban UNRWA operations in the country from late January, has alleged that 19 employees from the agency were involved in the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attacks on Israel.

After an investigation by the UN's oversight body, the UN terminated nine UNRWA employees it found "may have been involved" in the attack.

Sweden's decision was made in response to the Israeli ban because it will make channelling aid via UNRWA more difficult, Swedish International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade Minister Benjamin Dousa told Swedish broadcaster TV4.

Sweden plans to increase its overall humanitarian assistance to Gaza next year to 800 million Swedish kronor (\$72.44 million) from 451 million Swedish kronor (\$41 million) spent this year, its Foreign Ministry said.

Aid will flow via several organisations, including the UN World Food Programme, UNICEF, the UN Population Fund and the International Committee of the Red Cross, the ministry added.

The new Israeli law does not directly ban UNRWA's operations in the occupied West Bank and Gaza but it will have a severe impact on UNRWA's ability to work. Top UN officials described UNRWA as the backbone of Gaza's aid response.

The Palestinian embassy in Stockholm said in a statement that it rejects the idea of finding "alternatives to UNRWA", adding that the agency had a "special mandate to provide services to Palestinian refugees".

The refugee population relies on UNRWA healthcare, education, emergency relief and humanitarian assistance, it noted. The UN General Assembly threw its support behind UNRWA this month, demanding that Israel respect the agency's mandate and "enable its operations to proceed without impediment or restriction".

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini called Sweden's decision "disappointing" and coming at the "worst time for Palestine refugees".

"The decision is one day after the members of the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a resolution in support of UNRWA," he said in a post on X. "This is a sad day for Palestine Refugees and the multilateral system which Sweden has spearheaded," Lazzarini said.

Meanwhile, Amichai Chikli, Israel's diaspora affairs minister, hailed the Nordic country's decision, claiming UNRWA "has lost its legitimacy to exist."

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Sharren Haskel thanked Dousa for a meeting they had this week and for Sweden's decision to drop its support for UNRWA.

"There are worthy and viable alternatives for humanitarian aid, and I appreciate the willingness to listen and adopt a different approach," she said. After the nine UNRWA staff members were fired, Israel claimed in July that another 100 UNRWA employees were members of Hamas and other Palestinian

armed groups.

The agency said last month it had asked Israel to provide more information and had not received a response.

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