

Palestinian refugees in Gaza fear UNRWA ban will spell death for many



Gaza City, January 30 (RHC)-- With the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) ordered to cease operations in Israel and the occupied territory on Thursday, many Palestinians dread the implications on their lives and future.

For the duration of Israel's 15-month war on Gaza, which has uprooted most of its population and reduced most of the enclave to rubble, UNRWA was a critical lifeline of support for the 2.3 million stranded Palestinians, even as humanitarian supplies dwindled.

Besides UNRWA's critical humanitarian role, refugees – who account for 71 percent of Gaza's population – fear they will be left without a link to their family's original homes or a right to ever return to the land that was once historic Palestine and is now Israel.

Since its creation in 1949 to serve and handle the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians forcibly displaced by Israel's creation a year earlier, UNRWA has symbolised the hope of refugees to return home.

Sitting in front of the remnants of his destroyed home in Khan Younis, 74-year-old Abu Nael Hamouda describes UNRWA as “a lifeline across generations” – one that has provided education, healthcare and food in times of peace and war alike.

“UNRWA is the lung that Palestinian refugees breathe from,” says Hamouda, who himself originally hails from what was once the Palestinian town of Majdal. He was forced to evacuate from Majdal as a child, as it became part of Ashkelon in Israel.

“Without it, we would suffocate. My children and grandchildren went to UNRWA's schools, we were treated in UNRWA hospitals, and it helped us put roofs over our heads.”

In October 2024, the Israeli Knesset passed two laws: one designating UNRWA as a so-called “terrorist” organisation and the other banning it from operating in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. While Israel argues that UNRWA supports “terrorism” by providing aid to Hamas, the ruling has drawn criticism from much of the international community, including some of Israel's closest allies.

While the recent Israel-Hamas ceasefire has made aid shipments into Gaza of up to 600 trucks per day possible, the absence of UNRWA, the largest aid organisation working in the Strip, poses a significant risk for its inhabitants.

For families like Hamouda's, who have relied on the agency for generations, the absence of UNRWA is not just a logistical challenge; it represents “a death sentence for millions of Palestinian refugees, in Gaza and beyond”, he says.

As the deadline for UNRWA's closure approaches, refugees are left to wonder what will happen next, especially after United States President Donald Trump called for Palestinians in Gaza to move to Egypt and Jordan, a proposal rejected by Palestinian leaders, the UN, and Egypt and Jordan, and threatens to add more refugees to the 5.9 million who are dispersed in Palestine and around the world.

In the southern Gaza refugee camp of Khan Younis, Abu Ahmed Hamad, a father of 10 who was forced to leave his home in Beit Hanoon in Gaza's north to flee the violence, reflects on his family's reliance on the agency during times of peace and war. He and his wife hold UNRWA ID cards too.

“UNRWA is a lifesaver,” Hamad says. “It has been a safe haven for us – providing food, shelter and healthcare, and even recreational activities for our children during the war.”

Despite the efforts of other humanitarian organisations, Hamad is sceptical about whether they can replace UNRWA's comprehensive services. “The war proved that UNRWA is the most capable of handling the crisis. Other groups were operating, but they barely covered a fraction of the needs of the

Palestinian people,” he says, citing the sheer number of UNRWA workers and expertise in numerous wars imposed on Palestinians.

“Palestinians are the ones who know most the importance of UNRWA and why it’s being targeted, in particular by Israel and the US. Replacing it by any other organisation is futile for Palestinians, and a grave victory for the occupation,” he stresses. “It’s an erasure of the Palestinian refugee cause altogether.”

The agency’s establishment in 1949 was directly linked to United Nations Resolution 194, which affirms the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and receive compensation for their losses.

Many Palestinians view the agency as a key pillar in their fight for justice and recognition, and they regard its closure not only as a loss of vital services but also as an attack on this fundamental right.

“This is bigger than aid,” says Ibrahim Abdel Qader, a refugee from the Khan Younis camp. “What they’re trying to do is erase the refugee issue and the right of return.”

Sami Mshasha, an expert on Palestinian refugee issues and a former spokesman for UNRWA, asserts that the agency has been hit hard by Israel.

“UNRWA is pivotal in many ways,” Mshasha says. “Israel’s actions against UNRWA bears massive political devastation for refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, not to mention the symbolic significance in shutting down its 70-year-old headquarters in [occupied East] Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah.”

Mshasha notes that more than 200 UNRWA facilities in Gaza have been destroyed, and hundreds of staff members were killed during the war. This is in addition to the massive financial cuts impacting the agency’s ability to fulfil its responsibilities. The agency launched a feeble emergency appeal for \$464m, “but this amount falls far short of the \$1.7 billion it needs annually to sustain its operations in the five main locations it operates in,” he notes.

The U.S., in the past a key donor to UNRWA, has also been criticized for its support of Israel’s actions. In January 2024, the Biden administration cut funding to the agency following Israel’s allegations that 12 of its 13,000 staff members were involved in the October 7 attack on Israel carried out by Hamas, exacerbating the financial strain.

Mshasha also criticises UNRWA’s leadership for its handling of the ban. “There’s no clear plan from the agency’s top management to navigate the crisis, despite 13,000 staff in Gaza ready to serve”, the expert adds.

He questions why UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini has yet to visit Gaza. “He is one of the UN’s most senior officials in the Middle East. He should be on the ground, ensuring that UNRWA begins to recover instead of leaving Gaza to navigate this crisis alone,” Mshasha says.

While Israel continues its efforts to undermine UNRWA, the agency must respond with decisive action. “Yes, the commissioner-general faces Israeli pressure, but the scale of Gaza’s catastrophe demands a stronger response and a clear recovery plan. Otherwise, the situation will only get worse,” Mshasha adds.

Hamouda, the 74-year-old who has lived through multiple wars and displacement, fears for the future of his family as the ban comes into effect. He doesn’t want them to face these hardships without the agency that has sustained them for generations.

“If UNRWA goes, we will have nothing left,” he says. “We can’t survive without it. It is the only thing that has kept us alive.”

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