

Israel's ban on UNRWA comes into effect despite backlash



Women enter an United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Jerusalem Health Center Israel's ban on UNRWA comes into effect despite backlash

United Nations, January 30 (RHC)-- A ban on the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) in Israel has come into effect, impacting the organisation's life-saving work in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

On Thursday, the law, which was passed in October, bans UNRWA from operating on Israeli land, including in occupied East Jerusalem, and contact with Israeli authorities is forbidden.

For more than 70 years, UNRWA has provided support for Palestinian refugees across the Middle East, but the organisation has often clashed with Israeli officials over its work.

Israel has repeatedly accused UNRWA employees of involvement in the October 7 attack without providing proof.

Ahead of the ban coming into effect, Israel's Foreign Ministry spokesman Oren Marmorstein said that "humanitarian aid doesn't equal UNRWA", adding that "alternative" organisations exist that can facilitate aid into the Gaza Strip.

On Wednesday, Israel's Supreme Court rejected a petition by human rights group Adalah to contest the ban. However, the court noted that the legislation "prohibits UNRWA activity only on the sovereign territory of the State of Israel" but "does not prohibit such activity in the areas of Judea-Samaria [occupied West Bank] and the Gaza Strip."

UNRWA spokesperson Juliette Touma expressed concerns about the potential consequences of the ban, telling Al Jazeera: "If the ban takes place and we are not able to operate in Gaza, the ceasefire, which also includes bringing in humanitarian supplies for the agency and people in need, might collapse."

On Tuesday, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini told the UN Security Council that his organisation has delivered "two-thirds of all food assistance, provided shelter to over a million displaced persons" since October 2023.

"Since the ceasefire began, UNRWA has brought in 60 percent of the food entering Gaza, reaching more than half a million people. We conduct some 17,000 medical consultations every day," he said. Lazzarini added that UNRWA had been victim to a "fierce disinformation campaign" to "portray the agency as a terrorist organisation".

In April 2024, former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna released a report for the UN investigating Israeli claims that UNRWA had staff that were Hamas members.

The report found that while there were some "neutrality related issues", Israel presented no evidence to support its allegations.

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.

The organisation – employing 30,000 staff, primarily Palestinian refugees along with a small number of international employees – delivers emergency relief, education, healthcare and social services to at least 5.9 million Palestinians within Palestine and neighbouring countries.

Sitting in front of the rubble of his destroyed home in Khan Younis, 74-year-old Abu Nael Hamouda described 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."

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