

UN chief calls for urgent contributions to UNRWA to help Palestinians

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United Nations, November 30 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has voiced concern about the financial situation of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), calling on member states to make “urgent contributions” to enable the agency to provide relief to Palestinians.

The UN chief made the remarks on Sunday, in a message marking the International Day of Solidarity with the People of Palestine, which is celebrated annually on November 29th. The occasion is a UN-organized observance to remind the world of the Palestinian people’s just cause and legitimate rights. It is commemorated worldwide, with officials expressing their support for the Palestinian cause and denouncing the Israeli conduct in the occupied lands.

In 1977, the UN General Assembly called for the annual observance. It marks the day in 1947 when the UN General Assembly adopted the Palestine partition Resolution 181. "I appeal to all Member States to urgently contribute to enable UNRWA to meet the critical humanitarian and development needs of Palestine refugees during the pandemic," Guterres urged.

UNRWA was originally founded in 1949 to protect hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war mainly through providing them with humanitarian aid. It was initially established as a temporary agency, but it has continued to support the Palestinian refugees for the better part of six decades.

The agency currently supports an estimated 5.7 million Palestinians with refugee status across the besieged Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, providing them with health care, education, and social services. Most are descendants of the roughly 700,000 Palestinians who were driven out of their homes or fled the 1948 war, which led to the creation of Israel.

UNRWA's finances have been ravaged since 2018, when the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump decided to cancel all the U.S funding to the agency, as part of a policy to impose maximum pressure on the Palestinians to satisfy Israeli interests and Zionist constituencies in the United States.

Before Trump's cuts, Washington had been providing UNRWA \$300 million a year, roughly a third of its core annual budget.

On November 15, UNRWA warned that the "worst financial crisis" it has ever experienced could spell "disaster" in the besieged Gaza Strip and cause insecurity in Lebanon. It has received the lowest level of contributions since 2012, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is increasingly exacerbating the needs of refugees.

On Thursday, Philip Lazzarini, UNRWA commissioner-general, warned at a press conference in the besieged Gaza Strip Gaza that the agency was on the "edge of a cliff." "But I still believe we can avoid falling. We can avoid falling if the solidarity of the international community is expressed now," he added.

Earlier this month, Lazzarini had warned that it had to raise \$70 million by the end of the month to be able to pay full salaries for the months of November and December. Some 28,000 staffers of the agency across the West Bank, East Jerusalem al-Quds, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Jordan will be affected by the shortfall. Most of the staffers are refugees themselves.

With some 13,000 people on staff, UNRWA is the main employer, after local authorities, in the Gaza Strip, which is home to about two million people. The situation is particularly critical in the blockaded enclave where the unemployment rate is over 50 percent.

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