

*UN agency for Palestinian
refugees seeks \$1.6 billion in
funding*

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UNRWA says facing immense strain, calls for urgent funding to operate in 2023 amid 'compounding challenges'???

United Nations, January 26 (RHC)-- The UN agency for Palestinian refugees has appealed for \$1.6 billion for its work in 2023 after its head warned it was struggling to fulfil its mandate due to spiralling costs and shrinking resources.

UNRWA, which provides services to nearly six million Palestinians registered in the occupied Palestinian territories and neighbouring countries, warned that “compounding challenges” had placed it under “immense strain”.

“Compounding challenges over the last year including underfunding, competing global crises, inflation, disruption in the supply chain, geopolitical dynamics and skyrocketing levels of poverty and unemployment among Palestine refugees have put immense strain on UNRWA,” the agency said in a statement.

The agency, which has nearly 30,000 staff – most of them Palestinian refugees – runs more than 700 schools that offer education to half a million children, and provides health, sanitation and social services, including food and cash assistance.

The refugees mostly live in camps that have been transformed into built-up, but often underserved, residential areas in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, as well as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

In the besieged Gaza Strip alone, which has been blockaded for more than 15 years, the agency once helped more than half of the enclave’s roughly two million population.

Of the \$1.6 billion requested, UNRWA said \$848 million was needed for such core services. It said another \$781.6m was needed for emergency operations.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said the agency played “an indispensable role” for millions of Palestinian refugees. “We work to maintain the delivery of basic services in an incredibly difficult financial and political context,” he said in a statement.

The agency warned that most Palestinian refugees now lived below the poverty line and a growing number were dependent on UNRWA for assistance, sometimes for their “sheer survival”.

Lazzarini said he had just returned from a trip to Syria where he had “witnessed firsthand indescribable suffering and despair.” That situation, he said, was “sadly mirrored in other places like Lebanon and Gaza where Palestine refugees are hitting rock bottom”.

“Many told me that all they asked for was a life of dignity; that’s not much to ask for.”

UNRWA has long faced chronic budget shortfalls, which worsened dramatically in 2018 when former US President Donald Trump cut support to the agency. His administration branded UNRWA “irredeemably flawed” -- siding with Israeli criticisms of the agency founded in 1949, a year after the Palestinian Nakba – or catastrophe – which referred to the mass forced expulsion of Palestinians by Zionist forces that accompanied the founding of the state of Israel.

U.S. President Joe Biden’s administration has fully restored support but UNRWA has said it is still struggling. Last year, UNRWA raised only about \$1.2 billion of the \$1.6 billion for which it had appealed, Lazzarini said. “We cannot and should not be always scrambling to bring in funds to cover our contribution to human rights and stability,” Lazzarini said, stressing the need for “a more sustainable model of funding ... a predictable, long-term and regular source of funding.”

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