

UN Palestinian agency says deliberate attempt to strangle Gaza operations

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United Nations, November 19 (RHC)-- The head of the United Nations Palestinian refugee agency has warned of a “deliberate attempt to strangle” its operations in the Gaza Strip and said it risks shutting down all its humanitarian work because of a lack of fuel.

Israel has refused to allow fuel shipments to the enclave it has besieged, arguing they would be used by the Palestinian group Hamas for military purposes.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) supports more than 800,000 displaced people in Gaza. It was at risk of having to suspend its operations entirely, according to its commissioner-general, Philippe Lazzarini.

“I do believe there is a deliberate attempt to strangle our operation and paralyse the UNRWA operation,” Lazzarini said on Thursday at a news conference in Geneva. “For weeks on end, we have pleaded, warning about the impact of the lack of fuel,” he said, adding that in the past few weeks, the agency was able to tap into the remaining fuel reserves in the territory. “But now we are running out,” he said. “We run the risk of having to suspend the entire humanitarian operation.”

Israel cut off fuel shipments into the Gaza Strip as part of a “complete siege” on the area after Hamas fighters from Gaza launched an attack on southern Israel on October 7, killing about 1,200 people, according to Israeli authorities.

Since the attack, Israel has bombarded the Palestinian territory, launched a ground offensive and severely restricted supplies of water, food and electricity. More than 11,600 people have been killed in the Israeli assault, according to Palestinian authorities, including more than 4,700 children.

UNRWA said it had received 23,000 litres (6,075 gallons) of fuel. However, Israeli authorities have restricted its use exclusively for the transport of aid delivered from Egypt. Lazzarini said 160,000 litres (42,000 gallons) a day are needed just to run basic humanitarian operations.

“I do believe that it is outrageous that humanitarian agencies have been reduced to begging for fuel,” he told reporters. Lazzarini said humanitarian conditions have now severely deteriorated as 70 percent of the population in southern Gaza has no access to clean water, and raw sewage has started flowing onto the streets.

Fuel is needed to operate water desalination plants, the sewage pumping system and bakeries.

Earlier on Thursday, Palestinian telecommunications companies Jawwal and Paltel announced their network went out of service in Gaza as “all energy sources sustaining it” were depleted, plunging the enclave into a near-total communications blackout and seriously hampering the work of first responders and emergency services.

“It can provoke or accelerate [the breakdown of the] last remaining civil order we have in the Gaza Strip,” Lazzarini said of the blackout, calling the scale of loss and destruction in Gaza “just staggering”.

UNRWA said the telecommunications outage “makes it impossible to manage or coordinate humanitarian aid convoys”. It said its cross-border aid operation at the Rafah crossing with Egypt – the only one open for aid deliveries – would be suspended on Friday.

Lazzarini said fuel was being used as a “weapon of war.” “Today what we are saying is if the fuel does not come in, people will start to die because of the lack of fuel,” he said.

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