

Palestinians slam suspension of UNRWA funding by some Western nations

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A truck carrying humanitarian aid from UNRWA arrives at the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip [File: Khaled Desouki/AFP]

Ramallah, January 28 (RHC)-- Top Palestinian officials and Hamas have criticized the decision by some Western countries to suspend funding to the United Nations relief agency for Palestinians and called for an immediate reversal of the move that entails "great" risk.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) earlier said it had opened an investigation into some employees that Israel alleges were involved in the October 7 attacks that triggered the current conflict.

On Saturday, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Secretary-General Hussein al-Sheikh said the countries' decision "entails great political and humanitarian relief risks." "At this particular time and in light of the continuing aggression against the Palestinian people, we need the maximum support for this international organization and not stopping support and assistance to it," he wrote on X, urging the countries to "immediately reverse their decision."

Italy, Australia, Canada and the United States said they would halt funding to the agency, while European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the 27-member bloc would "assess further steps and draw lessons based on the result of the full and comprehensive investigation."

The United Kingdom and Finland also joined the growing list of countries to pause financial aid to the UN agency, whose facilities where displaced Palestinians sought shelter have been repeatedly attacked in Israeli airstrikes.

Hamas on Saturday slammed Israeli "threats" against the agency, after Israel accused several UNRWA staff of involvement in Hamas's October 7th attacks in southern Israel that the authorities there say killed about 1,140 people.

"We ask the UN and the international organisations to not cave in to the threats and blackmail" from Israel, Hamas's press office said in a post on Telegram.

On Friday, UNRWA said it had fired several employees and that it had opened an investigation into the allegations. "The Israeli authorities have provided UNRWA with information about the alleged involvement of several UNRWA employees in the horrific attacks on Israel on October 7," said UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini.

"To protect the agency's ability to deliver humanitarian assistance, I have taken the decision to immediately terminate the contracts of these staff members and launch an investigation in order to establish the truth without delay."

UNRWA was founded in the wake of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 to provide hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were forcibly displaced with education, healthcare, social services and jobs. It started operations in 1950.

The cash-strapped agency today supports nearly six million Palestinians in Gaza, the occupied West Bank, as well as in neighbouring Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Britain on Saturday said it had joined the U.S. in "temporarily pausing" future financial aid for UNRWA, which is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from UN member countries. "The UK is appalled by allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attack against Israel, a heinous act of terrorism that the UK Government has repeatedly condemned," the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said in a statement.

Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said on Saturday that his country was joining its allies and cutting its support for the agency. "Allied countries have taken a similar decision. We are committed to providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinian population while protecting Israel's security," he posted on X.

Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong said she was "deeply concerned" by the allegations against UNRWA.

"We are speaking with partners and will temporarily pause disbursement of recent funding," she wrote on X.

"We welcome UNRWA's immediate response, including terminating contracts and launching an investigation, as well as its recent announcement of a full investigation into allegations against the organization," she added.

Israel praised the countries for halting their support to the UN agency, saying it wants to completely stop its operations after the war on Gaza has ended.

Foreign Minister Israel Katz said Israel "aims to promoting a policy ensuring that UNRWA will not be a part of the day after, addressing other contributing factors." "We will work to garner bipartisan support in the US, the European Union, and other nations globally for this policy aimed at halting UNRWA's activities in Gaza," he said.

Canada's International Development Minister Ahmed Hussen on Friday announced that Ottawa had "temporarily paused any additional funding to UNRWA while it undertakes a thorough investigation into these allegations". "Canada is taking these reports extremely seriously and is engaging closely with UNRWA and other donors on this issue," he wrote on X.

"Should the allegations prove to be accurate, Canada expects UNRWA to immediately act against those determined to have been involved in Hamas's terrorist attacks."

The U.S. halted funding to UNRWA on Friday because of the allegations against 12 employees who "may have been involved" in the Hamas attack. Lazzarini did not disclose the number of employees nor the nature of their alleged involvement, but said "any UNRWA employee who was involved in acts of terror" would be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution.

At least 26,257 people have been killed and 64,797 wounded in Israeli attacks on Gaza since October 7.

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