

UNRWA refutes Israeli implications of Hamas tunnel below Gaza HQ

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Geneva, February 12 (RHC)-- The chief of the UN's aid agency in Gaza has said that it had no knowledge of what was beneath its abandoned headquarters amid Israeli claims that a Hamas tunnel ran below the Gaza City site.

Philippe Lazzarini of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said on X late on Saturday that the agency "did not know what is under its headquarters in Gaza". Israel has previously accused UNRWA of colluding with Hamas's military operations, prompting several donors to withdraw funding.

The UNRWA chief's comments came after the Israeli army invited journalists to visit the tunnel. The Israeli military did not provide definitive proof that Hamas fighters operated at the location, but showed that at least a portion of the tunnel system ran underneath the courtyard of the aid agency's headquarters.

Inside one of the buildings journalists saw a room full of computers with wires stretching down into the ground. Soldiers then showed them a room in an underground tunnel complex where they claimed the wires connected.

That underground room bore a wall of electrical cabinets with multicoloured buttons and was lined with dozens of cables. The military claimed the room served as a hub powering tunnel infrastructure in the area.

Israel has repeatedly said that one of the main objectives of its war in Gaza is to destroy the underground network that it says is used by Hamas to move its fighters, weapons and supplies. While few know the full extent of what some Israeli officials call the "metro", the tunnels are believed to cross the entire enclave for hundreds of kilometres. Experts estimate a depth of 15 to 60 metres (50 to 200 feet).

Israel's claims over the tunnel appear part of a pattern intended to implicate UNRWA in Hamas's military operations. The main humanitarian agency in Gaza, UNRWA, has been facing an unprecedented funding crisis after its main international donors led by the United States cut its funding over "terror" allegations.

Lazzarini insisted that UNRWA had no knowledge if anything was below the headquarters, which it vacated shortly after Israel launched its bombardment of the Gaza Strip in early October.

"UNRWA is made aware of reports through the media regarding a tunnel under the UNRWA Headquarters in Gaza," said on X. He added that while the reports merit an independent inquiry, "that is currently not possible to undertake given Gaza is an active war zone".

Lazzarini said that UNRWA staff left the headquarters on October 12, following an Israeli evacuation order, and that they were not aware of any activity that may have taken place there since. In times of no active conflict, he added, the agency inspects its premises every quarter.

"UNRWA is a human development and humanitarian organisation that does not have the military and security expertise nor the capacity to undertake military inspections of what is or might be under its premises," he said.

In the past, Lazzarini added, "protest letters" were filed to Hamas officials and Israeli authorities "whenever suspicious cavity was found close to or under UNRWA premises" and that the matter was "consistently reported" to the UN General Assembly.

The UN agency, the only lifeline to the more than two million people in Gaza, has come under intense scrutiny after Israel alleged that 11 of its employees took part in Hamas's deadly assault into southern Israel on October 7.

Hamas fighters launched an unprecedented attack killing more than 1,100 people and took about 240 captives. Israel has responded with a ferocious bombing campaign killing more than 28,000 people and displacing nearly 85 percent of the population.

Despite UNRWA terminating the contracts of those accused by Israel of joining the attack and launching an investigation, major donors suspended their funding, plunging the agency into a financial crisis. The agency said that Israel has also frozen its bank account, embargoed aid shipments and cancelled its tax benefits.

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