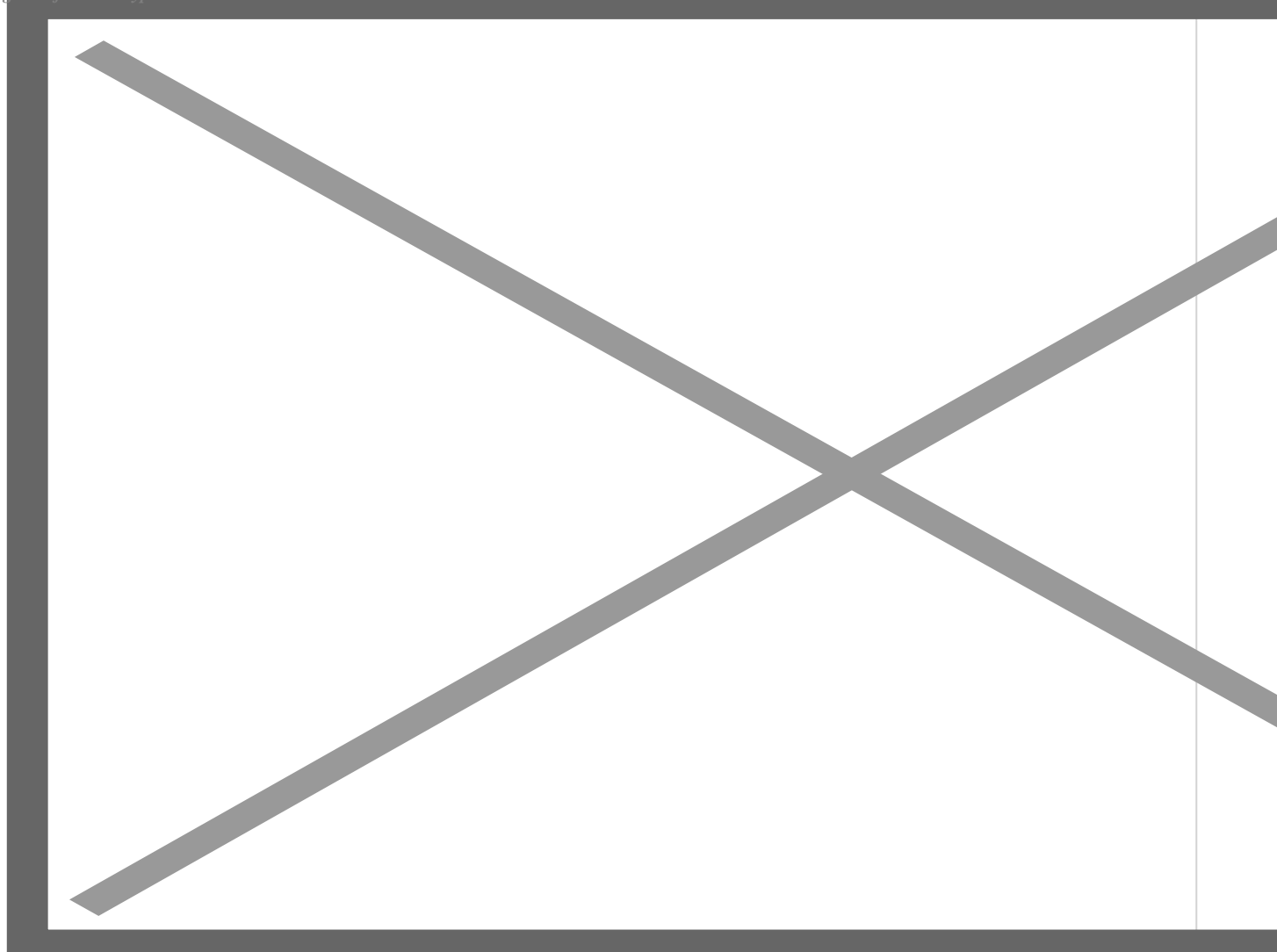


Agency chief says calls for UNRWA closure in Gaza short-sighted

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UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini addresses media at the United Nations

Geneva, February 16 (RHC)-- The head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) has denounced "short-sighted" calls to have the agency dismantled amid the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. The agency's chief Philippe Lazzarini said he warned the member states at a meeting in Geneva "about all these calls to have UNRWA dismantled, to be terminated."

"I have warned about the impact, I have said that these calls are short-sighted." "If we want to give a chance to any future transition to succeed, we need also to make sure that the international community has the tools and one of the tools is UNRWA."

He said: "There is absolutely no other UN agency or international NGOs which have been tasked over the last two decades to provide government-like services like education to hundreds of thousands of children."

Nearly the entire population of Gaza now relies on UNRWA for basics including food, water and hygiene supplies. Major donors, including the United States, Britain, Germany and Japan, have suspended funding after Israel claimed 12 of UNRWA's employees were suspected of involvement in the Hamas Operation al-Aqsa Storm against the regime in early October.

Lazzarini said what Israel said about the agency's former employees is just allegations and that the regime "did not share with us information or evidence regarding the allegations leveled against the former employees."

Lazzarini further raised the alarm about Israel's attacks on Rafah, Gaza's overcrowded southern town that has become the last refuge for Palestinians fleeing Israel's bombardment of the besieged coastal territory. He said the Rafah situation was "deeply concerning," with people "anxious and in fear" of a major military assault "in the middle of a sea of displaced people."

More than four months into the regime's onslaught on Gaza, the military forces have now ramped up airstrikes on the border town, where more than half of the territory's population of 2.4 million has been forcibly displaced.

"The question is, where will the civilians go?" Lazzarini said. "There is absolutely no safe place in Rafah anymore. The fear is that the number of people killed and injured might again significantly increase."

UNRWA warned on Friday that the bombardment of Rafah would be a "recipe for disaster." Since the regime started its war on Gaza in early October, 1.9 million people – 85 percent of Gaza's population – have been internally displaced.

The Israeli attacks have killed more than 28,000 people so far, according to the Gaza health ministry. Lazzarini said more than 150 UNRWA installations have also been hit since October.



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