



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 7

**Human rights situation in Palestine and other  
occupied Arab territories**

### **Written statement\* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[10 August 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Attacks on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East as Part of Israel's Genocide against the Palestinian people**

On the same day that the International Court of Justice provided its provisional measures ruling that instructed Israel to take significant steps to prevent plausible genocide in Gaza, shockingly several international governments decided to suspend their contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This decision came after some of its staff were accused by Israeli authorities of being involved in the October 7 attack. Since the accusations over ten countries – including the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Germany, Canada, Italy, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Finland, Switzerland, France and Australia – announced they were suspending funding to UNRWA. The United States of America suspending funds to UNRWA means that it has fallen in a severe crisis given that it is the agency's biggest donor. The defunding came at a time when Palestinians were facing the Israeli invasion and genocidal attack on the Gaza Strip and are at one of their most vulnerable points in history.

UN experts have raised the alarm that those who have decided to defund Gaza could be violating the Genocide Convention.(1) The UN secretary-general stated: 'I strongly appeal to the governments that have suspended their contributions to, at least, guarantee the continuity of UNRWA's operations.'<sup>(2)</sup> According to the head of UNRWA, Philippe Lazzarini, 'It would be immensely irresponsible to sanction an Agency and an entire community it serves because of allegations of criminal acts against some individuals, especially at a time of war, displacement and political crises in the region.' Alongside the United States of America, Germany, the EU and Sweden were the largest individual donors contributing 61.4 percent of the agency's overall funding in total. Importantly, Ireland, Norway and Spain expressed continued support for UNRWA, saying the agency does crucial work to help Palestinians displaced and in desperate need of assistance in Gaza.

It has emerged that already back on 4 January 2024, Israeli authorities were plotting for liquidating UNRWA. Former Israeli Foreign Minister, Noga Arbell issued call to destroy UN agency that is providing aids to Palestinian refugees. In a footage shared by Israeli media, she was seen as saying, it will not be possible to win the war if we do not destroy UNRWA. And this destruction must begin immediately.'<sup>(3)</sup> The following month, on 2 February 2024, an Israeli naval vessel fired upon a UNRWA convoy waiting to enter northern Gaza. Under international humanitarian law, all parties to an armed conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need. On 24 March 2024, Israeli authorities informed the United Nations that it will no longer approve the passage of any UNRWA food convoys into northern Gaza. In addition to blanket bans and attacks on humanitarian aid convoys, Israel's screening procedures for aid entering Gaza have imposed restrictions inconsistent with the above standards.<sup>(4)</sup>

Emboldened by the lack of accountability for these attacks on 29 May 2024, a bill aimed at designating UNRWA as a 'terrorist' organisation passed a preliminary reading in Israel's parliament, known as the Knesset, prior to three further readings. A second bill that would lead to the severing of all ties with the UN agency and stripping it of various immunities was also recommended and passed a preliminary reading. These two bills would not only forbid UNRWA from operating in Israel entirely but would also criminalise the organisation, its activities, and its staff. Christopher Lockyear, Secretary General of Medicine Sans Frontiers International stated: 'The Israeli Knesset's preliminary bill to designate UNRWA as a terrorist organisation is an outrageous attack on humanitarian assistance, and an act of collective punishment against the Palestinian people. We strongly condemn the proposed designation, and stand in solidarity with UNRWA, which serves as a lifeline, providing essential relief to millions of Palestinians and acting as the backbone of aid delivery to the people in Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the region.'<sup>(5)</sup>

In labelling the UN agency with the largest capacity to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees as a supposed 'terrorist' organisation, Israel is propagating a false narrative with huge implications for the population in dire need of its aid.

This latest dangerous step comes after a coordinated campaign of intimidation, whereby Israeli authorities also attacked UNRWA offices in occupied East Jerusalem. It is the peak of the systematic obstruction of vital humanitarian aid, contributing to the suffering and starving of Gaza's population. Not content with obstructing aid, Israel is aiming to criminalise UNRWA under Israel's Anti-Terrorism Law, which is a violation of international humanitarian law. If passed in its final stage, the law would provide free reign to Israel to continue attacking UNRWA schools and other infrastructure, humanitarian staff, and the Palestinian refugees seeking protection from the agency.

With Palestinians in Gaza currently facing starvation and genocidal violence it is imperative that the international community steps up to its longstanding responsibility towards the refugee issue. The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd calls on UN member states as well as their diplomatic missions and embassies to do all in their power to pressure the several states that have suspended funding to UNRWA. They should release public statements in support of the UN agency and make direct representations to those countries that have frozen contributions, reminding them of their obligations, in particular given the ICJ ruling and the international responsibility to prevent the unfolding genocide in Gaza.

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- (1) <https://www.newarab.com/news/gaza-defunding-unrwa-may-be-violating-genocide-convention>
  - (2) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/war-gaza-un-secretary-general-calls-unrwa-funding-be-restored>
  - (3) <https://timelinedaily.com/west-asia/israel-call-to-destroy-un-agency-in-palestine-while-sewage-water-flood-refugee-camps>
  - (4) Report of the Independent Task Force on the Application of National Security Memorandum-20 to Israel.
  - (5) <https://www.msf.org/israeli-proposal-designate-unrwa-terrorist-organisation-outrageous>