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**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.

[26 January 2026]

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



Humanitarian Implications of 20% Salary Reduction for Staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Lebanon: Financial Challenges, Political Pressures, and Recommendations for Sustainable Support of Palestinian Refugees

Introduction:

The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd (PRC) submit this statement with grave concern regarding recent developments affecting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), particularly the 20% reduction in salaries for its staff in Lebanon. This measure comes amidst the most severe financial crisis in the Agency's history since its establishment in 1949 under UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV). (1)

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon rely on UNRWA for access to education, healthcare, and social assistance. Therefore, these measures have direct humanitarian and human rights implications, warranting the attention and response of this Council to uphold refugees' rights and protect the dignity of local staff who are essential to UNRWA operations on the ground.

I. Recent Measures in Lebanon and Immediate Impact on Basic Services:

In early 2026, UNRWA announced budgetary austerity measures, including a 20% reduction in working hours and salaries for local staff in Lebanon, before expanding similar measures across its fields of operation. These decisions were met with opposition from staff unions and associations, warning that the measures "undermine job security and threaten the quality of education and healthcare services". (1)

Key humanitarian concerns include:

- a. Education: Hundreds of thousands of children in Lebanese refugee camps depend on UNRWA schools; reduced salaries and working hours may compromise educational quality.
- b. Primary healthcare: Clinic operations are at risk amidst Lebanon's economic crisis, which has sharply increased the cost of living and medical services.
- c. Social assistance: Cash-based food assistance and other social support programs risk reduction without sufficient, sustainable funding.

These services are the first line of defence for Palestinian refugees' rights to health, education, and decent living, and any disruption exacerbates vulnerabilities in Lebanon's current socio-economic crisis. (1)

II. UNRWA's Financial Situation: An Official UN Perspective:

Official UN reports, including A/80/340 (15 August 2025), highlight structural financial shortfalls:

- a. The Agency faces persistent budgetary deficits jeopardizing its operational capacity.
- b. By 2024, total shortfalls in regular and emergency programs exceeded USD 1.3 billion.
- c. Despite emergency funding appeals and cost-saving measures, resources remain insufficient to cover core obligations. (1)

Official statements have stressed that delays in funding from major contributors directly impact service delivery and operational budgets. (2)

III. Implications of Delayed or Reduced Contributions:

Reduced contributions from key donor states have a direct and severe impact on UNRWA's ability to maintain services:

- a. The United States of America, historically the largest donor, has suspended portions of its funding in response to political concerns. (4)
- b. Major European contributors have reduced or conditioned funding on political reviews, aggravating operational deficits. (5)
- c. Arab states' contributions, though essential, have comparatively decreased over recent years, further straining UNRWA's budget.

These funding gaps threaten refugees' access to basic rights and social protection, and place local staff at risk, who rely on their salaries for survival amidst Lebanon's escalating cost of living. (1)

IV. Political Pressures and Attempts to Replace UNRWA:

Despite calls from some actors to abolish or diminish UNRWA's role, historical and operational evidence indicates:

1. No ready alternative exists: UNRWA is the only internationally mandated agency since 1949 capable of:

- a. Delivering comprehensive humanitarian services across all Palestinian refugee locations
- b. Maintaining institutional continuity and operational infrastructure
- c. Managing education, health, social protection, and camp infrastructure programs

Alternative proposals via local NGOs or new institutions have consistently failed to provide the same level of service and institutional reliability.

2. Lessons from conflict areas: Statements by the UN Secretary-General confirm that no alternative organization is currently capable of replacing UNRWA in Gaza or other areas of high need, as evidenced by donor conferences affirming support for UNRWA as an indispensable institution. (3)

V. Human Rights Implications:

From a human rights perspective:

- a. Funding shortfalls and salary reductions undermine Palestinian refugees' right to education, health, and decent living.
- b. Threats to UNRWA's operational continuity violate international commitments to protect refugees and maintain essential services in protracted crises.

VI. Recommendations:

In light of the above, the Palestinian Return Centre Ltd respectfully recommends that the Human Rights Council and Member States:

- a. Affirm the primacy of human rights and human dignity;

Recognize that the continuity of UNRWA's services is intrinsically linked to the realization of the human rights of Palestine refugees and should be addressed as a rights-based obligation under international law.

- b. Strengthen multilateral engagement and institutional oversight;

Support the convening of urgent and periodic discussions within relevant United Nations bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, to address UNRWA's long-term financial sustainability and to safeguard its operational continuity and institutional stability.

c. Ensure sustainable, adequate, and predictable financial support;

Honour existing financial commitments and provide reliable, long-term contributions to UNRWA covering both core programmes and emergency operations, while ensuring that the Agency's funding is treated as a permanent humanitarian responsibility rather than a temporary or seasonal arrangement.

d. Safeguard UNRWA's internationally mandated role;

Refrain from any actions aimed at dismantling, undermining, or replacing UNRWA.

e. Protect the rights and livelihoods of UNRWA staff;

Ensure the full protection of the rights, salaries, and working conditions of UNRWA personnel, particularly locally recruited staff, in recognition of their essential role in the delivery of life-saving and rights-based services.

f. Support global awareness-raising and public information efforts;

Encourage the development and implementation of coordinated global information and awareness-raising initiatives, in cooperation with relevant United Nations entities and civil society organizations, aimed at reaffirming UNRWA's indispensable humanitarian and human rights mandate and underscoring the critical importance of the continued provision of its services to millions of Palestine refugees.

g. Enhance national and civil society coordination;

Encourage strengthened coordination among official Palestinian institutions, non-governmental organizations, and civil society actors to articulate a unified and coherent position in support of the continuation of UNRWA, to defend its internationally recognized mandate, and to enhance constructive engagement with the international community with a view to ensuring sustained, predictable, and adequate funding for the Agency.

Conclusion:

The current financial and operational risks faced by UNRWA, including the 20% salary reduction in Lebanon, represent not only a budgetary crisis but also a direct threat to the human rights and dignity of millions of Palestinian refugees. Sustainable support, institutional protection, and international solidarity are essential to ensure UNRWA can continue fulfilling its legally mandated humanitarian and rights-based obligations.

(1) Report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA (A/80/340) — UN General Assembly, 15 August 2025.

<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/report-of-the-working-group-on-the-financing-of-the-united-nations-relief-and-works-agency-for-palestine-refugees-in-the-near-east-a-80-340/>

(2) UN relief agency dire financial shortfall warning – News.cn:

[https://english.news.cn/20251114/cb1d9087d0c24506988ffcab9659dc9a/c.html#:~:text=13%20\(Xinhua\)%20%2D%2D%20The%20UN,the%20UNRWA%20chief%20said%20Thursday.](https://english.news.cn/20251114/cb1d9087d0c24506988ffcab9659dc9a/c.html#:~:text=13%20(Xinhua)%20%2D%2D%20The%20UN,the%20UNRWA%20chief%20said%20Thursday.)

(3) UN Secretary-General: No alternative to UNRWA – Reuters:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-chief-says-no-alternative-un-palestinian-refugee-agency-unrwa-2024-07-12/>

(4) Suspended and reduced donor contributions – AP News:

<https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-01-26-2024-2cd0b3c7b7efe5f0dfc03346e86b773b>

(5) <https://time.com/6589610/unrwa-funding-cuts-gaza/>