

UNRWA, a lifeline for Palestinians amid decades of conflict

AFP- The UN agency for Palestinian refugees, which Israel has vowed to ban on Thursday, is seen by some as an irreplaceable humanitarian lifeline in Gaza, and as an accomplice of Hamas by others.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has for more than seven decades provided essential aid and assistance to Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini has described the organisation as “a lifeline” for nearly six million Palestinian refugees under its charge.

But the agency has long been a lightning rod for harsh Israeli criticism, which ramped up dramatically after Hamas’s deadly attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023 sparked the war in Gaza.

Israel has accused the agency of bias and of being “riddled with Hamas operatives”, and last October, Israeli lawmakers voted to bar the agency from operating on Israeli territory as of January 30.

– Created in wake of war –

UNRWA was established in December 1949 by the UN General Assembly following the first Arab-Israeli conflict after Israel’s creation in May 1948.

The agency began its operations on May 1, 1950, tasked with assisting some 750,000 Palestinians who had been expelled or fled during the war.

It was supposed to be a short-term fix, but in the absence of

a lasting solution for the refugees, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until June 30, 2026.

– Millions of refugees –

The number of people under its charge has ballooned to nearly six million across Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

Palestinian refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict”.

Their descendants also have refugee status.

– Operations –

UNRWA is the main provider of basic public services, including education, healthcare, and social services for registered Palestinian refugees.

It employs more than 30,000, mainly Palestinian refugees themselves and a small number of international staff.

The organisation counts 58 official refugee camps and runs more than 700 schools for over 540,000 students.

It also runs 141 primary healthcare facilities, with nearly seven million patient visits each year, and provides emergency food and cash assistance to some 1.8 million people.

– Gaza –

In the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas since 2007, the humanitarian situation was already critical before the war between Israel and Hamas began in October 2023, with more than 80 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

The territory, squeezed between Israel, Egypt and the

Mediterranean Sea, counts eight camps and around 1.7 million refugees, the overwhelming majority of its 2.4 million inhabitants, according to the UN.

Israel's retaliatory military offensive has killed more than 47,300 people in Gaza, mostly civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory's health ministry, deemed reliable by the UN.

Before a fragile ceasefire took effect on January 19, around two-thirds of all buildings in Gaza had been destroyed, and nearly the entire population had been displaced, many of them multiple times, according to the UN.

UNRWA, which employs some 13,000 in Gaza, has seen 273 of its staff killed and two-thirds of its facilities there damaged or destroyed.

The agency says it had brought in 60 percent of the food that has reached Gaza since the war began and had provided shelter to over a million displaced people.

– Israeli criticism –

Israel has long alleged that UNRWA is perpetuating the Palestinian refugee problem and that its schools use textbooks that promote hatred of Israel.

Since October 7, the criticism has ballooned, particularly targeting UNRWA in Gaza.

Israel claims that a dozen UNRWA employees were involved in the deadly 2023 attack.

A series of probes found some "neutrality related issues" at UNRWA, but found no evidence for Israel's chief allegations.

The agency, which traditionally has been funded almost exclusively through voluntary contributions from governments, was plunged into crisis as a string of nations halted their

backing over Israel's allegations.

Most donors have since resumed funding, although not the United States.

Under US President Donald Trump, who returned to the White House earlier this month, the United States has thrown its weight behind Israel's UNRWA ban.

Both Israel and the US insist other agencies can pick up the slack to provide essential services, aid and reconstruction – something the UN and many donor governments dispute.

Warning that implementation of the Israeli order would be “disastrous”, Lazzarini said this week that the agency was determined “to stay and deliver until it is no longer possible to do so”.

UN chief Antonio Guterres meanwhile demanded that Israel retract its order, insisting that UNRWA was “irreplaceable”.

AFP