

Famine: In Global Appeal, UNRWA Says Gazans Likely Won't Survive If Agency Abandoned

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A United Nations humanitarian agency [warned](#) Thursday that over a dozen countries that have suspended their financial contributions are risking the "sheer survival" of most people in the Gaza Strip amid Israel's war on the besieged Palestinian enclave.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) said in a statement that "the colossal humanitarian needs of over 2 million people in Gaza now face the risk of deepening" due to recent donor suspensions over Israeli [allegations](#) that a handful of agency staff members participated in the Hamas-led attacks on October 7.

The number of countries cutting off funding—including the [United States](#)—has [grown](#) over the past week even though the 30,000-employee agency swiftly [fired](#) nine workers and launched an investigation into the the Israeli government's claims.

While cease-fire talks are [ongoing](#), Israel's nearly four-month assault on Gaza—[condemned](#) as genocide in a South African-led case at the International Court of Justice—continues, with the death toll [topping](#) 27,000 on Thursday and thousands more injured or missing in the bombed and burned [homes](#), hospitals, schools, mosques, shelters, and refugee camps.

In response to Israeli [orders](#) early in the [U.S.-backed](#) war, many Palestinians have fled northern Gaza. Thomas White, director of UNRWA affairs in Gaza and U.N. deputy humanitarian coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory, explained Thursday that the agency has had limited access to the people who remain in the north.

"UNRWA received reports that people in the area are grinding bird feed to make flour.

We continue to coordinate with the Israeli army to be able to go to the north, but this has been largely denied,” he said. “When our convoys are finally permitted to go to the area, people rush to the trucks to get food and often eat it on the spot.”

"Famine is around the corner. There are pockets of starvation & pockets of hunger- especially in the north of [#Gaza](#)" [@JulietteTouma](#) describes the "desperate situation" as 2 million people depend on [@UNRWA](#)'s huge operation for their sheer survival ↓ [@NPRhttps://t.co/NPcTmuplyFpic.twitter.com/sJR2V3J0yr](#)

— UNRWA (@UNRWA) [February 1, 2024](#)

Meanwhile, in southern Gaza, “Rafah has become a sea of people fleeing bombardments,” White added.

According to the UNRWA’s tally, donor nations have suspended at least \$440 million in funding. Philippe Lazzarini, the agency’s commissioner-general, declared Thursday that “as the war in Gaza is being pursued unabated, and at the time the International Court of Justice calls for more humanitarian assistance, it is the time to reinforce and not to weaken UNRWA.”

“The agency remains the largest aid organization in one of the most severe and complex humanitarian crises in the world,” he said. “I echo the call of the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres to resume funding to UNRWA. If the funding remains suspended, we will most likely be forced to shut down our operations by end of February not only in Gaza but also across the region.”

White warned that “it’s difficult to imagine that Gazans will survive this crisis without UNRWA.”

EU top diplomat [@JosepBorrellF](#): "UNRWA is something that cant stop working—otherwise 100s of 1000s of ppl will perish. If you cut funding to UNRWA, you're punishing the whole Palestinian ppl. There's no alternative.. So no collective punishment.. no cutting [of funding] to UNRWA" [pic.twitter.com/EJmNjVccoK](#)

— Omar Shakir (@OmarSShakir) [February 1, 2024](#)

The comments from UNRWA leaders echoed remarks from other U.N. officials, humanitarians, global advocacy [groups](#), and even some progressive [U.S. politicians](#) over the past week.

“UNRWA’s lifesaving services to over three-quarters of Gaza’s residents should not be jeopardized by the alleged actions of a few individuals,” Martin Griffiths, United Nations under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, [told](#) the U.N. Security Council on Wednesday.

“To put very simply and bluntly: Our humanitarian response for the occupied Palestinian territory is completely dependent on UNRWA being adequately funded and operational,”

he added. "Decisions to withhold funds from UNRWA must be revoked."

Griffiths and 14 other U.N. leaders and humanitarian partners who [argued](#) in a Tuesday statement that while the allegations against UNRWA staff "are horrifying" and "any U.N. employee involved in acts of terror will be held accountable," global donors must not prevent the agency from helping the "hundreds of thousands of people homeless and on the brink of famine."

"Withdrawing funds from UNRWA is perilous and would result in the collapse of the humanitarian system in Gaza, with far-reaching humanitarian and human rights consequences in the occupied Palestinian territory and across the region," the coalition said. "The world cannot abandon the people of Gaza."

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Featured image: Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) holds press conference in Jerusalem on October 27, 2023 [Mostafa Alkharouf/Anadolu Agency]

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