



### Concerns Grow Among Rights Activists Regarding the Circumstances Surrounding the Mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)

Rights activists have voiced increasing concern about the state of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). A mixture of underfunding, intense lobbying against the organization, donor fatigue, and increasing food prices have significantly hindered the relief agency. UNRWA largely depends on voluntary donations from United Nations member states, which makes it particularly vulnerable to lobbying efforts aimed at wrongly politicizing and delegitimizing its work. Officials lament that these campaigns seeking to erode the rights of Palestinian refugees have increased in frequency and aggression. UNRWA was established in 1949 to help Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and provides important services to millions including education, medicine, and food. Despite this, Israel has been lobbying to have the agency closed down due to it being the only such entity with a specific mandate regarding Palestinian refugees, who have been denied the right of return to their native homes and lands for decades.

In a statement concerning the circumstances, Philippe Lazzarini, the Commissioner-General of the UNRWA, explained the dire situation that the agency finds itself in. The organization has experienced an annual budget shortfall of \$100 million over the last few years. This has made operations difficult and put the UNRWA in a near-constant state of collapse. Lazzarini reaffirmed that their top priority is to ensure the quality and continuation of the services. One of the options that the UNRWA is currently exploring is to maximize partnership within the broader United Nations System. "Central to this option, is that services could be provided on behalf and under the guidance of the UNRWA, and hence strictly in line with the mandate UNRWA received from the UN General Assembly," said Lazzarini.

The comments however are not much of a comfort to rights and social justice activists. Many fear that this announcement will lead to a steep decline in the donations that fund the UNRWA. There is also the belief that this could reinvigorate efforts to shut down the relief agency. The Israeli government has a long history of lobbying to end the mandate of the UNRWA, which provides critical aid services but also maintains focus on the important Palestinian refugee crisis issue. If the UNRWA was dismantled or merged with the UNHCR, this would effectively end all hope for the refugees to return to their native lands. The UNHCR has different rules and regulations. Outside of the scope of the UNRWA, the Palestinian diaspora would no longer have special classification, and refugees would have to be integrated or resettled under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons. Thus, they would lose their status as refugees and all hopes of repatriation.

The lack of funding and other barriers to the UNRWA's work is regrettable because ultimately, it is vulnerable Palestinian refugees who suffer the negative consequences of this. Rights and social justice activists are hopeful that the important function of the UNRWA will be able to continue in some capacity.