

UN chief calls on countries to resume funding Gaza aid agency after allegations of militant ties

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Online Desk: The secretary-general of the United Nations on Sunday called on countries to continue funding the main agency providing aid in Gaza after several of its employees were accused of taking part in the Hamas attack on Israel that ignited the war four months ago.

The dispute engulfing the biggest provider of vital aid to Palestinians came as U.S. officials said negotiators were closing in on a cease-fire agreement. The emerging deal would bring a two-month halt to the deadliest-ever Israeli-Palestinian violence, which has stoked instability across the Middle East.

Antonio Guterres warned that the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, would be forced to scale back aid to more than 2 million Palestinians as soon as February. The coastal enclave is in the grip of a severe humanitarian crisis, with a quarter of the population facing starvation.

“The abhorrent alleged acts of these staff members must have consequences,” Guterres said in a statement.

“But the tens of thousands of men and women who work for UNRWA, many in some of the most dangerous situations for humanitarian workers, should not be penalized. The dire needs of the desperate populations they serve must be met,” he added.

He said that of the 12 employees accused of taking part in the attack, nine had been immediately terminated, one was confirmed dead and “the identity of the two others is being clarified.” He said all would be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution.

UNRWA has 13,000 staffers in Gaza, nearly all of them Palestinians. It provides basic services, from medical care to education, for Palestinians families who fled or were driven out of what is now Israel during the 1948 war surrounding its creation — a majority of Gaza’s population. It has expanded operations during the war, running shelters housing hundreds of thousands of newly displaced people.

More than 2 million of the territory’s 2.3 million people depend on it for “sheer survival,” including food and shelter, UNRWA director Philippe Lazzarini said, warning this lifeline can “collapse any time now.”

The United States, which is the largest donor to the agency, immediately suspended funding over the weekend, followed by several other countries, including Britain, Germany and Italy.

The Israel-Hamas war has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, destroyed vast swaths of Gaza and displaced nearly 85% of the territory’s people. The Hamas attack in southern Israel killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and about 250 hostages were taken.

PROGRESS IN CEASE-FIRE TALKS

Two senior Biden administration officials said U.S. negotiators were making progress on a potential agreement under which Israel would pause military operations against Hamas for two months in exchange for the release of more than 100 hostages.

The officials, who requested anonymity to discuss the sensitive negotiations, said that emerging terms of the yet-to-be sealed deal would play out over two phases, with the remaining women, elderly and wounded hostages to be released by Hamas in a first 30-day phase. The emerging deal also calls for Israel to allow more humanitarian aid into Gaza.

More than 100 hostages, mainly women and children, were released in November in exchange for a weeklong cease-fire and the release of 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

CIA Director Bill Burns is expected to discuss the contours of the emerging agreement when he meets Sunday in France with David Barnea, the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, and Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel for talks centered on the hostage negotiations.

Despite the apparent progress, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated in a televised news conference late Saturday that the war would continue until "complete victory," including crushing Hamas.

ISRAEL UNDER SCRUTINY AFTER UN COURT RULING

The dispute over UNRWA came as the International Court of Justice ruled Friday that Israel must do its utmost to limit death and destruction in its Gaza offensive.

The top United Nations court has asked Israel for a compliance report in a month, placing added scrutiny on Israel's military. The court's binding ruling stopped short of ordering a cease-fire, but its orders were in part a rebuke of Israel's conduct in its nearly 4-month war against Gaza's Hamas rulers.

The case brought by South Africa to the U.N. court alleged Israel is committing genocide, which Israel vehemently denies. A final ruling is expected to take years.

The court also ordered Israel to urgently get aid to Gaza. The amount of aid entering the territory remains well below the daily average of 500 trucks before the war, and U.N. agencies say distribution within Gaza has been severely hampered by the fighting and delays at Israeli checkpoints.

Israel holds Hamas responsible for civilian casualties, saying the militants embed themselves in the local population. Israel says its air and ground offensive in Gaza has killed more than 9,000 militants.

The offensive caused vast destruction in northern Gaza, where Israel says it has largely dismantled Hamas. The fighting is now focused on the southern city of Khan Younis and a cluster of built-up refugee camps in central Gaza dating back to 1948.

The World Health Organization and the medical charity MSF have issued urgent warnings about the largest health facility in Khan Younis, Nasser Hospital, saying remaining staff could barely function with supplies running out and intense fighting nearby.

WHO footage showed people in the crowded facility being treated on blood-smeared floors as frantic loved ones shouted and jostled. Cats scavenged on a mound of medical waste.

The United States, Israel's closest ally, has increasingly called for restraint and for more humanitarian aid to be allowed into Gaza while supporting the offensive.