

Israel-Hamas war

More countries pull funding from UN agency over October 7 attack allegations

Britain, Italy and Finland put support for UNRWA on hold after agency said 'several' staff may have participated



A UNRWA school in Rafah in the Gaza Strip, which houses displaced Palestinians © AFP via Getty Images

Mehul Srivastava in London JANUARY 27 2024

Several countries including the UK, Italy and Finland have joined the US in suspending their funding for the UN agency that aids Palestinian refugees after allegations that its staff may have taken part in Hamas's October 7 attacks in Israel.

UNRWA said on Friday that it had fired "several" employees and launched an investigation after receiving information from Israel about their alleged involvement. The US responded by halting funding for the agency.

Since the announcement, the UK, Italy, Finland, Australia and Canada have said they would also suspend funding.

The move piles pressure on to UNRWA, which has 30,000 employees, with 13,000 in Gaza alone. It is the primary agency for administering aid and running schools and hospitals for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, including in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

The UK Foreign Office said: "The UK is appalled by allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attack against Israel, a heinous act of terrorism that the UK government has repeatedly condemned."

Antonio Tajani, the Italian foreign minister, posted on social media platform X: "The

Italian government has suspended financing . . . after the atrocious attack on Israel on October 7.”

Norway, a major backer of Palestinians, said it would continue its financial assistance to UNRWA while awaiting the results of the investigation into the allegations.

“International support for Palestine is needed now more than ever,” Norway’s representative to the Palestinian Authority said on X. “We need to distinguish between what individuals may have done and what UNRWA stands for.”

Philippe Lazzarini, the UNRWA commissioner-general, urged the countries to reconsider their suspension before the agency was “forced to suspend its humanitarian response”.

“The lives of people in Gaza depend on this support and so does regional stability,” he said in a statement.

“It would be immensely irresponsible to sanction an Agency and an entire community it serves because of allegations of criminal acts against some individuals, especially at a time of war, displacement and political crises in the region.”

The Palestine Liberation Organisation’s secretary-general Hussein al-Sheikh warned that the suspension of funding carried “great political and humanitarian risks” at a time when millions of Palestinians in Gaza depended on the agency for food, water and medicine.

“We are in desperate need of support rather than the cutting off of crucial aid and assistance,” he said. Kristyan Benedict of Amnesty International UK called the UK’s announcement “a terrible decision”.

“UNRWA is desperately trying to assist Palestinian civilians facing famine and disease in Gaza amid Israel’s ongoing bombardment and blockade, and it’s these civilians who’ll be punished by the UK’s decision,” he said.

UNRWA schools in Gaza shelter hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Palestinians and have been targeted by the Israeli military on several occasions in recent weeks.

The Israel Defense Forces has said that it was responding to fire from militants on those occasions.

At least 150 UNRWA employees have been killed since Israel began its military campaign in Gaza.

UNRWA in Gaza

UNRWA has been a frequent target of Israel's criticism that the UN and other international bodies are biased towards Palestinians. Israel has called for the agency's responsibilities to be handed over to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Israel Katz, Israel's foreign minister, wrote on X that his government would not allow UNRWA to be part of "the day after" in Gaza, a reference to how the enclave would be run after the war ends.

"We have been warning for years: UNRWA perpetuates the refugee issue, obstructs peace and serves as a civilian arm of Hamas in Gaza," Katz wrote.

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