



➤ Palestinian school children attend mathematics lesson in a class in UNRWA Gaza Elementary School in Gaza City in May 2010.
● SUHAIR KARAM/IRIN

Maskripped off

On October 7, Hamas and other armed groups achieved what Israel had assumed was impossible. They broke out of their concentration camp. The Israeli leadership's shock is not just over the bloody nature of the break-out. It is that on that day, Hamas smashed Israel's entire security concept — one designed to keep Palestinians crushed, and Arab states and the region's other resistance groups hopeless.

Last week, in a knockout blow, the World Court agreed to put Israel on trial for genocide in Gaza, collapsing the moral case for an exclusively Jewish state built on the ruins of the Palestinians' homeland.

The judges' near-unanimous conclusion that South Africa has made a plausible case for Israel committing genocide should force a reassessment of everything that went before. Genocides don't just emerge out of thin air. They happen after long periods in which the oppressor group dehumanises another group, incites against it, and abuses it.

The World Court has implicitly conceded that Palestinians were right when they insisted that the Nakba — Israel's mass dispossession and ethnic cleansing op-

eration of 1948 — never ended. It just took on different forms. Israel became better at concealing those crimes until the mask was ripped off after the October 7 break-out.

Israel's efforts to get rid of UNRWA are not new. They date back many years. For a number of reasons, the UN refugee agency is a thorn in Israel's side — and all the more so in Gaza.

Not least, it has provided a lifeline to Palestinians there, keeping them fed and cared for, and providing jobs to many thousands of local people in a place where unemployment rates are among the highest in the world.

It has invested in infrastructure like hospitals and schools that make life in Gaza more bearable, when Israel's goal has long been to make the enclave uninhabitable. UNRWA's well-run schools, staffed by local Palestinians, teach the children their own history, about where their grandparents once lived, and of Israel's campaign of dispossession and ethnic cleansing against them. That runs directly counter to the infamous Zionist slogan about the Palestinians' identity-less future: "The old will die and the young forget."

Divide and rule

But UNRWA's role is bigger than that. Uniquely, it is the sole agency unifying Palestinians wherever they live, even when they are separated by national borders and Israel's fragmentation of the territory it controls.

UNRWA brings Palestinians together even when their own political leaders have been manipulated into endless factionalism by Israel's divide-and-rule policies: Hamas is nominally in charge in Gaza, while Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah pretends to run the West Bank.

In addition, UNRWA keeps alive the moral case for a Palestinian right of return — a principle recognised in international law but long ago abandoned by Western states.

Even before October 7, UNRWA had become an obstacle that needed removing if Israel was ever to ethnically cleanse Gaza. That is why Israel has repeatedly lobbied to stop the biggest donors, especially the US, from funding UNRWA.

Back in 2018, for example, the refugee agency was plunged into an existential crisis when US President Donald Trump acquiesced to Israeli pressure and cut all its funding. Even after the decision was reversed, the agency has been limping along financially.

Now Israel is in full attack mode against the World Court and has even more to gain from destroying UNRWA than it did before. The freeze in funding, and the further weakening of the refugee agency, will undermine the support structures for Palestinians generally. But in Gaza's case, the move will specifically accelerate famine and disease, making the enclave uninhabitable faster.

But it will do more. It will also serve as a stick with which to beat the World Court as Israel tries to fight off the genocide investigation. Israel's barely veiled claim is that 15 of the International Court of Justice's 17 judges fell for South Africa's supposedly anti-Semitic argument that Israel is committing genocide.

The court quoted extensively from UN officials, including the head of UNRWA, that Israel was actively engineering an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Now, as former UK Ambassador Craig Murray notes, the coerced confessions against 12 UNRWA staff serve to "provide a propaganda counter-narrative to the ICJ judgment, and to reduce the credibility of UNRWA's evidence before the court."

Extraordinarily, the Western media have done Israel's PR work for it, happily focusing more attention on Israel's claims about a handful of UNRWA staff than it has on the World Court's decision to put Israel on trial for genocide.

Equally a boon to Israel is that leading Western states have so quickly pinned their colours to the mast. The funding freeze cements their fates to Israel's. It sends a message that they will stand with Israel against the World Court, whatever it decides.

Their war on UNRWA is intended as an act of collective intimidation directed towards the court. It is a sign that the West refuses to accept that international law applies to it, or its client state. It is a reminder that Western states refuse any restraint on their freedom of action — and that it is Israel and its sponsors who are the true rogue states.

The article first appeared on Consortium News.

Amnesty: Cutting off aid to UNRWA while arming Israel 'stark' hypocrisy

COMMON DREAMS — Amnesty International on Monday joined the growing global chorus denouncing Israel's allies for suspending aid to the United Nations' Palestinian refugee agency even as they continue to support the Israeli military's war on the Gaza Strip, risking complicity in genocide.

Agnès Callamard, Amnesty's secretary-general and the former UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings, said that while Israel's claim that a dozen staffers at the refugee agency played a role in Hamas' October 7 attack is "serious and must be independently investigated," the "alleged actions of a few individuals must not be used as a pretext for cutting off lifesaving assistance in what could amount to collective punishment".

"Some of the very governments that announced they will cut off funds to UNRWA over these allegations have, in the meantime, continued to arm Israeli forces despite overwhelming evidence that these arms are used to commit war crimes and serious human rights violations," said Callamard. "Rushing to freeze funds for humanitarian aid, based on allegations that are still being investigated, while refusing to even consider suspending support for the Israeli military is a stark example of double standards."

"Instead of suspending vital funding to those in need," Callamard added, "states should be working to halt arms transfers to Israel and Palestinian armed groups and pushing for an immediate and sustained cease-fire and full humanitarian access to help alleviate devastating suffering." "The humanitarian crisis has reached catastrophic levels, and any additional limitations on aid will result in more deaths and suffering." The United States announced last week that it would temporarily cut off UNRWA funding as it reviews Israel's allegations against the low-level agency employees — a decision that came just hours after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Israel must ensure the provision of humanitarian aid to Gazans, tens of thousands of whom have been killed or wounded by Israeli bombs and shells in less than four months.

need assistance in Gaza actually get it".

"No one else can play the role that UNRWA's been playing, certainly not in the near term," he added. "That only underscores the importance of UNRWA tackling this as quickly, as effectively, and as thoroughly as possible, and that's what we're looking for."

At least a dozen countries — including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands — have joined the US in suspending aid to the UNRWA, the most critical humanitarian aid organization in the famine-stricken Gaza Strip.

The moves have put the UNRWA's operations in jeopardy, with the UN chief warning that the agency's current funding levels won't be enough to meet all of its requirements in February. The agency has no strategic financial reserves.



➤ A displaced Palestinian boy, who fled his house due to Israeli strikes, sits on a water canister at a tent camp, in Rafah, the southern Gaza Strip, on January 18, 2024.
● IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/REUTERS

Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian territories, said that "defunding UNRWA at this critical time overtly defies" the ICJ's ruling.

Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as Doctors Without Borders, similarly warned Monday that "the consequences these cuts in funding will have on the ground contradict the provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice."

"The humanitarian crisis has reached catastrophic levels," the group added, "and any additional limitations on aid will result in more deaths and suffering."

Just over a week before the Biden administration decided to suspend its UNRWA contributions, a spokesperson for the US State Department described the agency's work as "invaluable" and "lifesaving"

On Monday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged that the UNRWA "has played and continues to play an absolutely indispensable role in trying to make sure that men, women, and children who so desperately

Amnesty said the countries that have suspended aid to the UNRWA thus far provided more than half of the agency's budget in 2022.

Several major nations, including Norway and Spain, have refused to join the US-led freeze of aid to the UNRWA, which the Israeli government has been targeting for years and is hoping to push out of Gaza entirely. The UNRWA quickly fired nine of the 12 workers that Israel accused of taking part in the October 7 attack and has launched an investigation.

On Monday, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares said his country will not suspend UNRWA funding, which he said helps "alleviate the terrible humanitarian situation in Gaza".

Albares also pledged to continue pushing for an end to Israel's assault on Gaza, the release of hostages, and a lasting diplomatic solution.

"We will not resign ourselves to watching more innocent women, men, and children killed in Gaza and more suffering of Palestinian families," he said. "We will not resign ourselves to keep watching the suffering of the families of hostages. The violence must stop."