

Jordan says Palestinian refugees at risk with UN agency in crisis



Palestinian refugee school boys play at their United Nations Relief and Work UNRWA school yard at Wihdat refugee camp in Amman. [Jamal Nasrallah/EPA]

Jordan warned on Wednesday (8 August) that a severe financial shortfall facing a United Nations agency that helps Palestinian refugees could have a “catastrophic” impact on the lives of millions of refugees in the region.

Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said after meeting visiting UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl the budget crisis could deprive refugees of core education, healthcare and food security service that would only “deepen their humanitarian plight”.

“UNRWA faces a dangerous financial deficit that threatens catastrophic consequences on refugees if it is not covered before its financial allocations run out,” Safadi was quoted as saying in a foreign ministry statement.

UNRWA has faced a cash crisis since the United States, long its biggest donor, slashed funding to the agency, providing just \$60 million of a promised \$365 million this year.

U.S. President Donald Trump withheld the aid after questioning its value and saying Washington would only provide more assistance if the Palestinians agreed to renew peace talks with Israel.

The largest ever reduction in UNRWA's funding has cast doubts about the agency's long-term outlook and has already begun to impact some services. U.N. officials have said it could even affect the opening of schools at the start of the next academic year

The agency operates around 700 schools, educating 500,000 refugee children in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

Jordan, which hosts the largest number of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East outside Palestinian territories, was engaged in intensive lobbying with donors, Safadi said.

Officials privately have said they were also worried about any U.S. drive to dismantle the agency as part of a nascent Middle East peace plan that Washington has promised to unveil soon

According to diplomats, the plan diverges from longstanding U.S. support for a Palestinian state and backing for a full Israeli withdrawal from territory captured in 1967.

'Mutiny' in Gaza after job cuts

Workers have seized partial control of the headquarters of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees in Hamas-run Gaza, its head said Wednesday, accusing their union of "mutiny" over job cuts.

The UNRWA announced last month more than 250 staff in Gaza and the occupied West Bank would lose their jobs. The redundancies have prompted daily protests by the agency's labour union in the enclave, which UNRWA's Gaza head said have led to security concerns.

"They have taken over the compound where my office and other offices are," said Matthias Schmale.

The agency's Gaza chief admitted UNRWA does not have full control over the site, in Gaza City, explaining he has not been able to work from his own office for more

than two weeks.

Schmale accused the labour union of multiple incidents of “threatening and intimidating other fellow Palestinian staff. For me, that crosses a red line.”

“I am very concerned about the safety and security of my Palestinian colleagues,” he added.

The union denied all allegations of intimidation and is due to continue demonstrating, with a general strike expected in the coming days unless a deal is reached.

“This is a peaceful and safe sit-in inside the regional headquarters of UNRWA to demand (employees’) right to be able to continue their work,” Amir al-Mishal, head of the UNRWA employee union in Gaza, told AFP.

He said some of those affected by the cuts had been working for the agency for more than 30 years and they were seeking dialogue with the management.

On Wednesday the protest inside the UNRWA compound was visited by Mahmoud Zahar, a senior Hamas member, who pledged his Islamist movement’s full support for protesters, an AFP correspondent said.

Schmale was unaware that Zahar had been inside the compound, saying any visit by a figure from Hamas -considered a terrorist organisation by the US and European Union- was forbidden as it breaches the UN’s impartiality rules.

A small number of employees have begun a hunger strike against the cuts outside Schmale’s office, seeking to force management to reverse course.

Source: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/jordan-says-palestinian-refugees-at-risk-with-unrwa-in-crisis/>

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