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UNRWA chief on what lies next for the agency as funding freezes begin to bite

‘Beyond the funding issue, you keep hearing calls for UNRWA to be dismantled... I also think it is extraordinarily short-sighted.’



UNRWA, the largest aid provider in the Gaza Strip, will have to start scaling back its operations in the enclave as soon as March if funding freezes by key donors aren't reversed or if new funders don't step forward, according to the head of the agency, Philippe Lazzarini.

“The situation is already a total disaster in the Gaza Strip,” Lazzarini told The New Humanitarian in a wide-ranging 16 February interview, amid a [humanitarian crisis in Gaza he said was of “staggering” proportions](#).

“We should not forget that UNRWA remains, at least among the UN agencies, the main provider, and all the other agencies also, in reality, rely on the logistical platforms and support that UNRWA is providing in the Gaza Strip. So, [if funding isn't restored], it would make the already miserable even more tragic, if that's even possible.”

Around 20 countries – including UNRWA's top [three](#) donors: the US, Germany, and the EU – suspended funding for the agency three weeks ago. This [followed Israeli allegations](#) that 12 of its 13,000 employees in Gaza were involved in Hamas' 7 October attacks on Israel, which killed around 1,140 people – the majority civilians – according to Israeli authorities.

Israel has [yet to provide](#) conclusive evidence to substantiate the claims, and the UN has [launched](#) an investigation. The funding that is being withheld amounts to nearly half of UNRWA's operating budget, and Israel and some of its supporters are calling on UNRWA to be dismantled and replaced due to what they say are concerns about the agency's ability to maintain neutrality. Other experts,

however, [argue that the challenges](#) UNRWA faces when it comes to maintaining neutrality are the same as any other UN agency or international organisation.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military campaign and siege of Gaza launched following the 7 October attacks have devastated the enclave. More than [29,000](#) Palestinians have been killed – including nearly 21,000 women and children – nearly 70,000 have been wounded, and thousands more are missing and believed to be dead beneath the rubble of destroyed buildings, according to health authorities in Gaza.

Only a trickle of humanitarian assistance is being allowed to enter, and [aid operations in the enclave face major barriers](#). The funding freeze is further threatening UNRWA's ability to respond to needs within Gaza. Also at risk are the agency's operations in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, where it provides education, healthcare, humanitarian support, and other services to millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

The New Humanitarian sat down with Lazzarini to discuss the impact of the funding freeze, the campaign to dismantle UNRWA, the agency's future, the high number of UNRWA employees killed in Gaza, and more.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The New Humanitarian: When do you expect the full effects of funding freezes to hit?

Philippe Lazzarini: If all the money in the pipeline is frozen, we would start to go into negative cash flow in March and we will be in deep, deep, deep, deep red in April. But it depends on a number of factors. It's a moving target right now. It all depends on what kind of new money we might get; what kind of temporary pause of frozen money is unfrozen or being processed. But let's assume absolutely nothing is provided to the agency, our operations would start to be compromised as from March.

The New Humanitarian: What would this look like in practice for people in Gaza?

Lazzarini: The situation is already a total disaster in the Gaza Strip. It's a place where people have lost absolutely everything. They are living in extraordinarily miserable conditions. We know that food insecurity is very widespread, that we have pockets of starvation – if not famine – looming in the Gaza Strip. We are struggling and running behind when it comes to health services. We're running behind when it comes to providing clean water. We're running behind when it comes to providing critical items to confront the harsh weather conditions right now because we are in winter. So, basically, it would make it even more difficult, more miserable.

The New Humanitarian: What is the plan B right now in the short term?

Lazzarini: You should ask all those who want to weaken UNRWA. We have to put this now in the broader context: Beyond the funding issue, you keep hearing calls for UNRWA to be dismantled, for UNRWA to be replaced... I also think it is extraordinarily short-sighted.

Once the military operation comes to an end, we will enter a very long, protracted transition phase where we will have a deep, humanitarian need. It would be a period of misery and pain. It would be a period where the international community will not be ready to invest massively in the absence of

a serious and time-bound political package. It will be the time where there might be an emerging and new Palestinian operation in authority, but clearly this authority will not be able to provide, at scale, critical services to the population.

One of them, for example, is education. We have more than half a million girls and boys deeply traumatised in the Gaza Strip that we have to bring back in a formal and informal education framework. A new administration would not be in a position at the beginning to provide it at scale, and there is absolutely no other UN entity or INGOs which provides education to such a large number of people the way UNRWA has done it.

You also have the political dimension of liquidating UNRWA. This would be felt by the Palestinian community as the international community turning its back... It would also weaken their aspiration for self-determination, because by liquidating UNRWA, basically it's also an indication that we might not be so generally committed to promoting a fair and lasting political solution [to the conflict].

So what I'm trying to say here is that the implications are huge and vast. And they are not only focused on Gaza, but they're also focused on the lifeline we are providing to the Palestinian refugees across the region: in Jordan, in Syria, in Lebanon, and in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

So that is the reason why I keep cautioning about this short-sighted temptation, that, "Oh yes, okay, if UNRWA is now in this trouble, let's find alternatives". But there is no lasting alternative. [There] might be a very punctual alternative – and I don't believe that it can be put in place so quickly and it would be a mistake to try to do it during the acute humanitarian response – but even if we would succeed, the medium-term, longer-term implications are also huge, and the regional implications should definitely not be underestimated.

The New Humanitarian: So how do you foresee UNRWA's role in the future? You're warning that it can't simply be dismantled, but the pressures are there – from Israeli authorities, from your donors.

Lazzarini: Listen, UNRWA is a temporary organisation which unfortunately has now lasted for 75 years. And these 75 years are nothing else than the expression of the international community's failure to have promoted a fair and lasting political solution.

Now the only alternative today – and I really hope that after this seismic transformation and tragic transformation which has hit the region: Palestine and Israel, but also beyond – that this will be the wake-up call to finally be genuinely committed to promote a political solution. We can start to talk after that about the phasing out of UNRWA, because the agency, through its vast number of civil servants, has always been geared towards handing over its services to a state and an administration, which would be the outcome of this political solution.

But I don't see any alternative during the transition or the trajectory leading to this political solution. The *raison d'être* of UNRWA is to provide, in fact, the lifeline to one of the most destitute and under-privileged communities in the region – the Palestinian refugees – until there is a state responsible for them in the future.

The New Humanitarian: Let's shift to the number of UNRWA staff killed since the 7th of October. It's a huge number. Why have so many staff been killed?

Lazzarini: As of today, it's 158. It's a huge number. It's a number which is also proportionate to the number of people reported killed in Gaza compared to the overall population. Many of our staff have been killed with relatives, at home, under bombardment.

If we look at the huge toll the population has paid, and our staff are part of the social fabric of the Gaza Strip, the numbers are absolutely staggering. We're talking about 100,000 people in four months having been either killed, injured, or are missing. This is 5% of the population in four months. We're talking about 17,000 children being completely orphaned having no known relatives around them.

The New Humanitarian: Given that the attacks have also been on aid targets and UNRWA installations, do you feel that UNRWA staff in particular are being targeted?

Lazzarini: What I know is that far too many UN premises sheltering thousands of people have been hit. We had more than 350 people killed in our shelters, thousands have been injured. We know that some of the UN premises have been used for military operations, either by Hamas or by the Israeli army, that the UN flag – despite that we were sharing all our coordinates – has been disregarded and did not provide the protection people would have expected.

I truly believe that we need, after the war, an independent board of inquiry to establish the facts of what happened with all these UN premises [that] were supposed to shelter or provide protection – what happened and who is responsible and who should be made accountable.

The New Humanitarian: I understand that UNRWA has not been shown the evidence regarding the accusations that 12 UNRWA staff were allegedly involved in the 7 October attacks in Israel. Why did you take the measures you did – why fire the staff without this evidence?

Lazzarini: That's a good question, because I believe that not only the reputation of the agency was completely at stake, but also our ability to provide critical humanitarian assistance or our ability to provide the services to millions of Palestinian refugees. So this is the primary reason why I have taken the decision to terminate the contracts based on allegations.

At the same time, there is an ongoing investigation, for which we are also calling for full cooperation, and somehow, it's kind of a reverse due process. This commission of investigation will establish the facts and basically tell us what kind of answers should be given. But I felt that I had no other choice than to try to protect and to shield the ability of the agency to continue and pursue its critical work.

I would say traditional suspension would have conveyed the message that these extraordinarily serious allegations are dealt [with just like] any other type of allegation. In reality, an allegation of having participated in the horrible October 7 massacre – it's an unprecedented type of allegation, and this has also triggered an exceptional internal decision.

Edited by Andrew Gully.