

Gaza: Defunding UNRWA is another heinous act of genocide

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International grassroots and legal pressure continues to mount for Israel to end its genocide of Palestinians. But the Israeli and U.S. governments are seeking to deflect from the demand for accountability and continue to massacre Palestinians by any means necessary.

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On Friday, the International Court of Justice found that South Africa made a plausible case that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians — requiring the Israeli government to do everything in its power to avoid acts of genocide, and to allow the immediate entry of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Just hours later, the Biden administration announced that it was instead cutting its funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, or UNRWA. It was quickly followed by Germany, Canada, the UK, and more than a dozen other Western countries.

UNRWA holds the entire UN mandate for serving Palestinian refugees, and is currently the single largest provider of humanitarian assistance to Gaza. The agency's position is particularly crucial because Israel's ongoing siege of Gaza restricts many other aid agencies from crossing the border.

More than 700,000 people in Gaza are currently facing life-threatening diseases — which are treatable with medical aid. The entire 2.3 million population of Gaza, more than half of whom are children, faces the risk of starvation. These threats are cascading: for instance, no clean water and no medical aid will lead to crisis levels of preventable deaths from diarrhea and water-borne illness.

As a result, the World Health Organization stated that even more Palestinians could die from hunger and disease than have been killed by the war so far — marking another stage of Israel's genocide, conducted with the backing of the U.S. and Western nations.



The dubious accusations against UNRWA

In making these sudden cuts, the U.S. and more than a dozen other Western other countries cited the Israeli military's claims that 13 UNRWA employees may have participated in the October 7 Hamas attacks. These allegations were made public on Friday, as the media was expected to cover two separate court cases accusing Israel of genocide and the U.S. of complicity. There are several problems with the accusations against UNRWA.

1. The Israeli government has sought to undermine UNRWA for decades, recently accusing it of "perpetuating the refugee problem" — in other words, keeping Palestinians alive.
2. The Israeli state has a long history of making false claims to distract media attention from its crimes against Palestinians.
3. None of the evidence against the 13 UNRWA employees has been made public. The Israeli military has already changed its story around how it obtained its evidence for these most recent allegations against the 13 employees. And CNN reported that the claims are so far unsubstantiated.
4. Accusations against 13 UNRWA employees, 0.0004% of their total workforce, hardly indicts the entire organization to the point of immediately cutting funding. By contrast, at least 153 UNRWA workers have been killed in Gaza by the Israeli military in the last few months — a war crime, one to which the U.S. government has yet to respond.
5. The Biden administration refuses to even place conditions on the billions of dollars in weapons and aid to the Israeli state and military — despite mountains of evidence in international court that Israel is committing genocide.

Collective punishment of Palestinians is a war crime

UNRWA does not have financial reserves. It has been chronically underfunded for years, and under immense strain as Israeli bombing has internally displaced nearly the entire population of Gaza. If the U.S. and other nations refuse to reinstate its funding, UNRWA's budget could run out as soon as next month, placing millions of Palestinians in grave danger of death from disease and famine.

Cutting this lifesaving aid amounts to collective punishment of Palestinians, which is a war crime. And it underscores the Biden administration's hypocrisy. Since October, it has reiterated concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, while continuing to fund the Israeli military campaign that is creating these conditions of devastation in the first place.

Right now, UNRWA is the biggest thing standing between starvation and deadly disease for more than a million people. And the U.S. cutting its funding is exactly what complicity in a genocide looks like.

Tell Biden: Reinstate funding to UNRWA.

The Biden administration suspending U.S. funding to UNRWA is collective punishment of Palestinians — a war crime.

Join our sister organization JVP Action in emailing your Congresspeople now to demand that the Biden administration immediately reinstate life-saving funding for UNRWA.

Email Congress now

Israel stands accused of genocide.

Despite their efforts, Israel and the U.S. have not succeeded in distracting attention from Friday's two historic court proceedings. Both call for accountability for each government for committing and supporting the genocide of Palestinians.

In the Hague, the International Court of Justice found that South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide was plausible, and it will move forward with a full trial for the crime of genocide. In a nearly unanimous vote, the court also mandated preliminary measures, including that Israel take "all measures within its power" to prevent committing acts of genocide, and to take immediate measures to allow humanitarian aid to enter Gaza.

The ICJ stopped short of calling for a ceasefire, meaning that for Palestinians on the ground in Gaza, little has changed. In the days since the ICJ ruling, hundreds have been killed by the Israeli military, and Gaza remains on the brink of famine.

However, the ruling serves as a powerful rebuke to the Israeli government. Palestinian human rights attorney Noura Erakat wrote on X that the ruling "provided a significant tool in the continuing campaign for a cease-fire, to end the genocide, for accountability, to lift the siege, to end the occupation, to dismantle apartheid." And, she added, "the onus remains on the people of the world to birth a better world possible that we deserve."

Meanwhile, in a U.S. federal court in Oakland, Palestinians made their case against the U.S. government, charging Biden and Secretaries Blinken and Austin with the failure to prevent and complicity in Israel's genocide.

The court heard testimony from Palestinians, who detailed how Israel's bombardment has wiped out their families in Gaza, and from a Holocaust scholar, who implored the court to take this historic opportunity to stop a genocide in action. Attorneys for the Palestinian side argued that the U.S. has a legal obligation to prevent and refuse complicity in genocide, and called on the court to issue a preliminary injunction to stop the U.S. flow of weapons to Israel.

JVP in the streets.

This weekend, JVP supporters and our community gathered across the country to watch the livestream of these hearings. We sang, we mourned and held vigils in commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day, we protested, and we disrupted parades. We won't stop calling on our elected officials to demand an immediate, permanent ceasefire.

We continue to take to the streets with our Palestinian comrades, envisioning a future where Gaza flourishes, where every individual has access to the food they desire, the texts they wish to study,

and the places they want to pray. Until everyone is safe and everyone is free, we march in unwavering solidarity for Palestinian freedom.

Jewish Voice for Peace

P.S.

• The Wire. 2024/01/31:

<https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2024/01/31/defunding-unrwa-is-genocide/>