



Gaza aid crisis: UK funds for Unrwa still frozen as Australia shifts stance

Description

WORLD : The UK government said on Friday that it has no plans to follow Australia's lead by resuming funding for Unrwa, the United Nations' embattled agency for Palestinian refugees.

On Tuesday, Andrew Mitchell, a British foreign office minister, had named Australia among countries that he said alongside the UK were waiting to see interim reports on two investigations looking into Israeli allegations against Unrwa before making funding decisions.

The other countries named by Mitchell were the US, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands.

But on Friday, Penny Wong, Australia's foreign minister, said her country was reinstating its funding amid concerns about the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

"Of course, it's a prime consideration in restoring funding to ensure that Australian funding is used appropriately and we are doing that," Wong told reporters.

"I would also say it is a prime consideration to recognise that we have children and families who are starving. We have a capacity, along with the international community, to assist them and we know that Unrwa is central and vital to delivering that assistance to the people who need it."

Wong said Australia's National Security Committee made its decision after input from the UN, Unrwa, Australian government lawyers, and partners like the EU and Canada.

"The best available current advice from agencies and Australian government lawyers is that Unrwa is not a terrorist organisation," she said.

Australia joins the EU, Canada, and Sweden which have all reinstated or proceeded with funding for Unrwa this month.

But the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on Friday told Middle East Eye that its future funding for Unrwa remained paused while acknowledging that the agency had a vital role to play.

Mixed messages

Israel alleges that 12 Unrwa staff members took part in the Hamas-led 7 October attacks. Upon learning of the allegations, the agency dismissed 10 of the employees (two others were dead) in a process that the head of the agency admitted amounted to “reverse due process”.

Sources in touch with the FCDO have told MEE in recent weeks that there is a sense that many in the agency want to restore funding immediately.

A parliamentary source with direct knowledge of the matter said last week that the government has a plan in place to resume funding.

Another source who was in a meeting with Foreign Secretary David Cameron in early February said Cameron had acknowledged that the UK’s decision to suspend funding had been “too hasty” and that he was looking for face-saving measures to reinstate it.

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– Chris Doyle, Council for Arab-British Understanding

Cameron told the House of Lords last week that the allegations against Unrwa had to be properly investigated, but that if the UK wanted aid delivered, it was the “only body with a distribution network”.

Chris Doyle, director of the UK-based Council for Arab-British Understanding, said the seemingly mixed messages reflect the difficult situation that the UK government finds itself in as a result of its swift decision in January.

Instead of pausing funding, he said, the UK should have said it would review funding if an investigation determined that Unrwa was guilty of complicity.

“They’ve got everything the wrong way around and in the wrong order,” Doyle told MEE.

It remains unclear what, if any, evidence formed the basis of the decision of the UK and other countries. On Friday, the EU’s top humanitarian aid official said neither he nor anyone in the EU executive to his knowledge, had seen any evidence from Israel to back up its allegations.

“It has been since January and we are now in the middle of March and no evidence has been put in the public domain,” Doyle said. “It’s extraordinary.”

Doyle said he suspects the final decision on the matter lies with 10 Downing Street, the office of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, because the funding of Unrwa has become, “whether true or not, bound up with a focus on terrorism and extremism”. There would also, he said, be pressure to stay in line with the US.

US officials meanwhile are reportedly bracing for their funding pause to become permanent as a result of opposition in Congress.

Doyle said this was “a huge problem” and would be a return to 2018 when the Trump administration cut all funding to the agency.

“Unrwa will be begging to other donors to try to make up the difference with the loss of its largest funder,” he said. If funding had not been paused, the next British payment would be due in April.

Juliette Touma, Unrwa’s director of communications, said on Friday that the agency is currently \$380m in deficit as a result of the 13 countries whose funding remains suspended.

“Not having Unrwa fully funded will have significant circumstances on millions of people in Gaza and around the region,” she told MEE.

“Unrwa provides public services and humanitarian supplies to one of the most vulnerable communities in the world – the Palestinian refugees.”

By Dania Akkad

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