

Israel-Gaza war

Israel has not yet provided evidence to back Hamas 7 October attack claims against UNRWA, UN says

Friday 1 March 2024, by [BORGHER Julian](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2024).

Allegations against 12 employees led major donors to suspend funding to UN Palestinian agency despite hunger crisis in Gaza

Palestinian people queue for food distributed by a charity in Deir al Balah, central Gaza. Allegations against 12 employees led major donors to suspend funding to UNRWA. Photograph: Anadolu/Getty Image

A month after Israeli allegations that a dozen [United Nations](#) staff were involved in the 7 October Hamas attack, UN investigators have yet to receive any evidence from Israel to support the claims though they expect some material to be forthcoming “shortly”.

The allegations against the 12 employees of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) led 16 major donors to suspend contributions totalling \$450m at a time when more than [two million Gazans are facing famine](#). UNRWA says it is [approaching “breaking point”](#) and only has sufficient funds to continue functioning for the next month at most.

The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) launched an investigation on 29 January in the wake of the Israeli allegations initially presented to UNRWA in January, and delivered an update on its work to the UN secretary general, António Guterres, on Wednesday.

Diplomats who saw the OIOS preliminary report said it contained no new evidence from Israel since the initial presentation of the claims in January – [which were not backed by any proof](#). In summarising the findings, the UN spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, confirmed that the investigation had yet to receive corroborating material from Israel.

“OIOS investigators have reviewed the initial information received by UNRWA from Israeli authorities,” Dujarric said on Thursday. “The investigation remains ongoing. OIOS will seek to corroborate additional information and to compare the information obtained with materials held by Israeli authorities, which OIOS expects to receive shortly.”

“OIOS staff are planning to visit Israel soon to obtain information from Israeli authorities that may be relevant to the investigation,” Dujarric said, adding that the investigators had described member state cooperation as “adequate”.

He said that the investigators had consulted other member states and visited the UNRWA headquarters in Jordan to review information on UNRWA staff and operations, including electronic communications and data on the use of UN vehicles.

The [Wall Street Journal reported](#) last week that an assessment by the US national intelligence council, assessed with “low confidence” that a handful of UNRWA staffers had participated in the 7 October attack on southern Israel, in which 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed.

The Israeli mission at the UN referred queries about the investigation to the foreign ministry in Tel Aviv. The foreign minister, Israel Katz, has said that the government would “give them all the materials that prove UNRWA’s involvement in terrorism and their damage to the future of the region”.

Since the initial allegations against 12 UNRWA workers, [nine of whom are believed to be still alive](#), Israel has claimed that a total of 190 UNRWA employees, including teachers, have also been Hamas or Islamic Jihad militants. The Israeli military also said that [a tunnel had been found](#) under UNRWA’s headquarters in Gaza and that guns and ammunition had been found in the headquarters building.

The head of UNRWA, Philippe Lazzarini, said the agency “did not know what is under its headquarters in Gaza”, which he pointed out had been abandoned since an Israeli order to evacuate in October. He said that in times of relative peace, UNRWA inspected its premises every quarter, and always protested if its neutrality had been violated.

Israel has long called for UNRWA, established in 1949, to be dismantled, but with 30,000 staff, (13,000 in Gaza) it dwarfs every other UN agency, which have a combined total of about 200 employees in Gaza.

“It is a little bit shortsighted to believe that UNRWA can just technically hand over all its activities to other UN agencies or NGOs,” Lazzarini told journalists in Jerusalem on Thursday.

“It’s an agency [that’s] quite unique because we are ... primarily providing government-like services to one of the most destitute communities in the region,” he said.

“The World Food Programme itself has said that it cannot stave off starvation which is already impacting hundreds of thousands of people,” Christopher Gunness, a former UNRWA spokesperson, said. “That can only be done by UNRWA, with its 13,000 workers, its warehouses and its food distribution centres.”

“The OIOS report is a ladder on which all the defunding donors can climb down if they wish to and avoid accusations of complicity in starvation and genocide, as well as bowing to the political agenda of Israel’s far right,” Gunness said.

Parallel to the OIOS inquiry, a broader review of UNRWA’s activities and neutrality is under way, [led by a former French foreign minister, Catherine Colonna](#), and supported by three Nordic research organisations.

The Colonna review was commissioned by Guterres in January, before the Israeli allegations were made. It is expected to provide a progress report in mid-March, which could prompt a resumption of funding from major donors, before the agency runs out of money altogether, diplomats at the UN said. The review group is expected to deliver a final report in mid-April.

Julian Borger in New York

P.S.

- The Guardian. Fri 1 Mar 2024 04.46 CET:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/01/unrwa-funding-pause-employees-october-7-hamas-attack-claims-no-evidence-un>

- *Julian Borger's articles in the Guardian:*

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/julianborger>

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