

Haaretz | Israel News

Israel Blocks Work Visas From International Aid NGO Workers in West Bank and Gaza

lundi 26 février 2024, par [HASS Amira](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 25 février 2024).

The refusal has disrupted the operations of numerous agencies involved in providing medical assistance, food, and water to Gaza residents, who are primarily affected by acute hunger and dehydration. Some aid workers told Haaretz they fear political motivations are behind the decision

Palestinians carry supplies from a humanitarian aid truck in Gaza city, last week. Credit : STRINGER / Reuters

The Population and Immigration Authority is refusing to grant work visas to employees of international non-governmental organizations operating in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, precisely when the International Court of Justice is supposed to examine whether Israel is complying with its order on ensuring humanitarian aid arrives into Gaza.

The belated explanation given to the international NGO's was a rearrangement in the process of visa issuance, carried out until now together by both the Population and Immigration Authority and the Welfare and Social Affairs ministry.

UNRWA worker in East Jerusalem, last month. Credit : REUTERS/Ammar Awad

The Ministry of Social Affairs has refused since several months already to fulfill its part of the arrangement, even though it is anchored in written procedure.

Some 160 international aid [NGOs operating in the Gaza Strip](#) and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) are registered with the Department of International Relations at the Welfare and Social Affairs Ministry, which is also responsible for renewing their non-profit status annually.

On previous occasions when the visa service was not provided for various reasons - for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic - visas were extended automatically. This time, however, the immigration authority is demanding that the NGOs' employees leave immediately upon their visas' expiration, even though they have complied with the law.

Haaretz, who spoke with some of these employees, said they feared there are political motivations behind the bureaucratic complications they find themselves in.

Palestinians storm an aid truck in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, in December. Credit : AP Photo/Fatima Shbair

The refusal to grant visas to these international aid workers has disrupted the activities of dozens of organizations involved in bringing and distributing [medical care, food, and water to Gaza residents](#),

most of whom suffer from acute hunger and dehydration.

These bureaucratic measures also undermine the NGOs efforts in assisting dozens of Palestinian communities in the West Bank who have been [forcibly displaced by settler violence](#) and pressures from the Civil Administration and the IDF or are facing such violence by settlers and the authorities' pressures.

Dozens of international employees, mostly citizens of Western countries, have been forced to leave their jobs or have been unable to return from abroad to their offices in East Jerusalem and Ramallah. Others have been unable to start working in their new position in the Palestinian territory. Some have decided to stay in East Jerusalem or the West Bank, even though their visas have expired, but their movements are restricted as they live in constant fear of deportation.

Palestinians walk past building rubble following Israeli air strikes on the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday.Credit : SAID KHATIB - AFP

Population and Immigration Authority regulations, last updated in 2013, regarding international NGOs (not including UN organizations), stipulate that visa applications will be processed only if accompanied by written approval in principle (called recommendation letter) from the Welfare and Social Affairs Ministry.

The recommendation letters are sent to the employees before coming to Israel, who then enter the country on a tourist visa and then submit an application for a work visa to the immigration authority. Citizens of countries not eligible for a tourist visa upon entry have to submit the approval from the ministry at the Israeli consulate in their respective countries.

Persons already in Israel can submit a new application for the ministry's letter of recommendation about a month or two before their visa expires. The ministry is then supposed to send the letter within 14 days. The same procedure applies for family members of the international aid workers, including children in schools and kindergartens.

Fog covers buildings and tents set up by displaced Palestinians in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday.Credit : SAID KHATIB - AFP

Applications submitted for the letter between July and September 2023 did not receive a response until November of that year. Although international NGO workers have previous experience with the ministry delaying procedures, they were concerned as their visas were close to expire.

At the beginning of November, the ministry notified them that due to the state of emergency and the ministry's excess workload, the immigration authority would automatically extend their visas until February 8, 2024. The extension was not granted to persons who were abroad at the time, including persons who left because of the outbreak of war.

In January 2024, when employees of international aid NGOs sought to renew their visas, the ministry refused to give the necessary letter, both to workers located in Jerusalem and the West Bank and those abroad.

The ministry failed to provide any explanation and the immigration authority refused to process the visa requests on the grounds that there was no recommendation letter from the ministry. The immigration authority demanded that workers whose visas were expiring leave the country by February 8, the date of the visas' expiration.

A judge at the appeals' tribunal, which reviews the Population and Immigration Authority decisions

regarding entry, exit, stay and residency in Israel, rejected an appeal by a senior official at one of the international NGOs.

Palestinians walk through Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, on Saturday. Credit : MOHAMMED ABED - AFP

The appeal's rejection was on the grounds that the immigration authority had acted lawfully when it did not grant a visa, as the official's request was not accompanied by the ministry's recommendation letter. The judge added that it was not within the jurisdiction of the appeals' tribunal to review the ministry's considerations.

Yotam Ben-Hillel, a lawyer representing a forum of international NGOs, requested the intervention of [Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara](#). In a letter sent to the attorney general last week, Ben-Hillel noted that several of those unable to renew their visas were senior officials responsible for their respective organizations' activities in Israel and the territories.

"They have the mandate - as far as the directorship of their organization is concerned - to represent the organization in all dealings with the Israeli authorities, foreign missions and other international organizations residing in Israel.

They are responsible for fundraising, coordination of the [transfer of humanitarian aid](#), including to the Gaza Strip - for example, in the fields of providing food, water, sanitation, hygiene and shelter, budget management, and are the designated signatories with banks in Israel and the territories."

The responses provided to Haaretz by the various authorities are indicative of the bureaucratic tangle they have created. The spokesperson for the Population and Immigration Authority replied that the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories in the Defense Ministry and the Welfare Ministry should be contacted for an answer.

The welfare ministry referred to the « security situation » following October 7 as a reason to transfer responsibility to another governmental body, but at the same time emphasized it had asked to be relieved of this task long before October 7, because it falls beyond its expertise.

It denied there was any political motive behind the decision, and mentioned that the issue of visas for employees of international NGOs has been transferred to the National Security Council, and that after consultations it was decided to transfer the matter to the Foreign Ministry.

COGAT referred queries to the Foreign Ministry. The Foreign Ministry said that it has not been asked to deal with the issue of visas and does not expect this matter to be transferred to its purview. It promised to send an orderly response to Haaretz, but no such response has been received.

The National Security Council said that, contrary to what was claimed, the issue had not been transferred to the responsibility of the NSC, but because the Social Affairs Ministry claims that it does not have the tools to deal with it, the Security Council is coordinating staff work to examine a suitable alternative.

Haaretz also asked the justice and foreign Ministries whether they are not concerned that the ICJ will see this as a violation of the orders of the court and as proof that Israel is not making an effort to fulfill its obligations. Haaretz did not receive a response to these questions.

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P.-S.

- Haaretz. Feb 25, 2024 9:38 pm IST :
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-02-25/ty-article/.premium/israel-blocks-work-visas-from-international-aid-ngo-workers-in-west-bank-and-gaza/0000018d-e195-df79-a5cd-e1bfa8600000>