



UNRWA

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Gaza Closure Cripples UN Relief Work

Gaza – A complete closure of the Gaza Strip imposed by Israel on UN international staff has crippled the Gaza operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the largest aid agency in the Middle East.

In violation of the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the UN, Israeli's military imposed a blockade on Gaza at 19:30hrs yesterday (Sunday). UNRWA staff urgently needed by the Agency's operation in the West Bank and other parts of the region have been trapped inside the Strip, while staff normally resident in Gaza and needed on duty there have been stranded in Israel. The UN's diplomatic pouch was also prevented from leaving Gaza this morning.

The closure follows two weeks of delays, obstruction and interrogations of UN staff at the Erez crossing point into and out of Gaza. UN staff have been held for up to seven hours at the border while security checks have been carried out. Some have been forced to submit to interviews by Israel's intelligence services to secure passage, while intrusive search procedures have been increased. None of UNRWA's 7,800 Palestinian staff in the Gaza Strip have been able to enter Israel on duty for the Agency since October 2000.

Israel requested that UNRWA continue its operations in Gaza and the West Bank when the Palestinian territory was occupied by Israel in 1967. The Agency and the Government of Israel have a specific legal accord, known as the 1967 Comay-Michelmores Agreement, which sets out Israel's obligations. These include the requirement "to permit international staff of the Agency to move in, out and within Israel and the areas in question" and "to permit the free movement of UNRWA vehicles into, within and out of Israel and the areas in question".

UNRWA's protests to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence have so far had no effect.

Karen Koning AbuZayd, UNRWA's Deputy Commissioner-General said: "UNRWA understands Israel's security concerns, but the fact is that nothing has ever been found on an UNRWA international staff member to warrant the searches and procedures. I find it incomprehensible that all my staff are locked in or locked out of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli authorities must lift this closure to allow us to carry out our humanitarian mandate."

-Ends-

Note to Editors: UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) is a relief and human development agency, providing education, healthcare, social services and emergency services to over four million refugees living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

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