



UNRWA

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UNRWA suspends emergency food aid in Gaza

Gaza - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) today stopped distributing emergency food aid to some 600,000 refugees in the Gaza Strip, or approximately half of the refugees receiving UNRWA food aid in the occupied Palestinian territory, following restrictions introduced by Israeli authorities at the sole commercial crossing through which the Agency is able to bring in humanitarian assistance. Stocks of rice, flour, cooking oil and other essential foodstuffs that UNRWA provides to refugees reduced to poverty, or otherwise affected by a humanitarian crisis now in its 42nd month, have been fully depleted.

Efforts to persuade the Israeli authorities to lift the restriction on the transport of UNRWA's empty food containers out of Gaza have so far failed, forcing the Agency to suspend the delivery into Gaza of 11,000 tons of food from Ashdod Port to avoid a bottleneck which would result in prohibitive costs. Under normal circumstances, UNRWA delivers some 250 tons of food aid per day in Gaza alone as part of a wider programme of emergency assistance to refugees, initiated shortly after the outbreak of strife in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in September 2000. Since then, the Gaza Strip has been locked into a deep socio-economic crisis resulting from the prolonged closure of its border with Israel, the destruction of thousands of homes as well as of agricultural and local industrial assets. Almost two out of three households in Gaza live below the poverty line, and more than half its workforce is unemployed.

UNRWA is not alone in facing chronic obstacles to the flow of humanitarian assistance. These have been experienced by all UN agencies operating in the West Bank and Gaza, whose Agency heads in a joint statement on 26 March called, without success, on the Government of Israel to loosen the restrictions currently in force in Gaza.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen said: "The suspension of UNRWA's emergency food aid in the Gaza Strip will further distress communities already struggling to cope with unrelieved economic hardship and malnutrition. If the new restrictions in Gaza continue, I fear we could see real hunger emerge for the first time in two generations. Israel's legitimate, and serious, security concerns will not be served by hindering the emergency relief work of the United Nations. I appeal to the authorities to lift these restrictions and enable us to resume our food distributions in Gaza."

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