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Palestinian child stands in front of his UNRWA school in Gaza. The US administration's threat to cut UNRWA funding would spell disaster if carried out, including depriving Palestinian refugee children of their education. Photo: Mazen Naim/NRC

Leading Humanitarian Organizations Object to Trump Administration Plans to Cut U.S. Contributions to the UN Relief Agency for Palestinians

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Washington, D.C. – Today, the leaders of 21 leading organizations involved in international humanitarian response sent a letter to the Trump Administration objecting “in the strongest terms” to the U.S. decision to withhold \$65 million in planned U.S. contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

In the letter (attached to this press release), the humanitarian leaders write, “We are deeply concerned by the humanitarian consequences of this decision on life-sustaining assistance to children, women and men in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Whether it is emergency food aid, access to primary healthcare, access to primary education, or other critical support to vulnerable populations, there is no question that these cuts, if maintained, will have dire consequences.”

The letter was sent to United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

Eric Schwartz, president of Refugees International and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration, said, "As reflected in comments by Ambassador Nikki Haley, this decision is aimed at punishing Palestinian political leaders and forcing them to make political concessions. But it is wrong to punish political leaders by denying life-sustaining aid to civilians. This is a dangerous and striking departure from U.S. policy on international humanitarian assistance which conflicts starkly with values that U.S. administrations and the American people have embraced."

Joel Charny, director of Norwegian Refugee Council USA and co-organizer of the letter with Refugees International, added, "It has been U.S. policy for decades that 'a hungry child knows no politics,' as President Reagan stated to justify U.S. assistance to famine-affected Ethiopia in 1984. Aid to save lives and alleviate suffering should be provided solely on the basis of need and there is no justification for violating this principle in the case of Palestinians civilians."

The letter to the Trump Administration concludes: "(I)t is deeply troubling to witness such a casual disregard of principles that have been crucial to U.S. policy deliberations over many decades. We hope sincerely that you will reconsider this unfortunate decision, which we believe undermines critically important values as well as U.S. leadership around the world."

Note to editors:



For interviews with Refugees International President Eric Schwartz, please contact Gail Chalef, Senior Communication Officer at either +202-540-7026 or at gail@refugeesinternational.org.

For interviews with Norwegian Refugee Council USA President Joel Charny, please contact Basma Alloush, Advocacy and Communications Officer, at +1-617-966-0333 or at basma.alloush@nrc.no.

LETTER TO TRUMP ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS SENT ON WEDS., JANUARY 24, 2018

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable James N. Mattis

Secretary of Defense

1000 Defense Pentagon

Washington, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable Nikki Haley

U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

United States Mission to the United Nations

799 United Nations Plaza New York, NY 10017

Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster National Security Advisor

National Security Council

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Secretary Tillerson, Secretary Mattis, Ambassador Haley and General McMaster,

As leaders of organizations deeply involved in programs and advocacy surrounding international humanitarian response, we write to object in the strongest of terms to the decision to withhold \$65 million of the planned United States contribution to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

We are deeply concerned by the humanitarian consequences of this decision on life-sustaining assistance to children, women and men in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Whether it is emergency food aid, access to primary healthcare, access to primary education, or other critical support to vulnerable populations, there is no question that these cuts, if maintained, will have dire consequences.

We are particularly alarmed that this decision impacting humanitarian aid to civilians is not based on any assessment of need, but rather designed both to punish Palestinian political leaders and to force political concessions from them. This is simply unacceptable as a rationale for denying civilians humanitarian assistance, and a dangerous and striking departure from U.S. policy on international humanitarian assistance.

In 1984, in justifying its decision to provide humanitarian aid to famine-affected Ethiopia, the Reagan Administration declared that "a hungry child knows no politics," and, indeed, this sentiment has guided U.S. policy makers for decades.

This sentiment is, for example, reflected in the international Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, an inter-governmental donor forum and network that the United States helped to establish during the Administration of George W. Bush. That Initiative includes best practices that the Bush administration and subsequent administrations have endorsed, including the propositions that "humanitarian action should be guided by ... the centrality of saving human lives and alleviating suffering wherever it is found,"

and that humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations should be “solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected population.”

To be sure, application of these objectives by U.S. administrations has been imperfect, but all U.S. administrations have aspired to them, and it is deeply troubling to witness such a casual disregard of principles that have been crucial to U.S. policy deliberations over many decades. We hope sincerely that you will reconsider this unfortunate decision, which we believe undermines critically important values as well as U.S. leadership around the world.

Sincerely,	
Joyce Ajlouny General Secretary American Friends Service Committee	Abby Maxman President and CEO Oxfam America
J Ron Byler Executive Director Mennonite Central Committee U.S.	Rev. John L. McCullough President and CEO Church World Service
Sean Callahan President and CEO Catholic Relief Services	Giulia McPherson Interim Executive Director Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
Joel Charny Director Norwegian Refugee Council USA	Carolyn Miles President and CEO Save the Children
Sarah Costa Executive Director Women’s Refugee Commission	David Miliband President and CEO International Rescue Committee

<p>Halil Demir Executive Director Zakat Foundation of America</p>	<p>Eskinder Negash Acting Chief Executive Officer U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants</p>
<p>Mark Hetfield President & CEO HIAS</p>	<p>Michelle Nunn President and CEO CARE USA</p>
<p>Margaret Huang Executive Director Amnesty International USA</p>	<p>Eric Schwartz President Refugees International</p>
<p>Mohamed S. Idris Executive Director American Relief Agency for the Horn of Africa</p>	<p>David A. Weiss President & CEO Global Communities</p>
<p>Neal Keny-Guyer Chief Executive Officer Mercy Corps</p>	<p>Samuel A. Worthington Chief Executive Officer InterAction</p>
<p>Anwar Ahmad Khan President Islamic Relief US</p>	