

UNRWA

## “What’s unbelievable is that we are confronted with an artificial man-made famine”

*Interview with Philippe Lazzarini\* conducted by Pavel Tsukanov*

*In a special interview with TASS, Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provided insight into his visit to Russia, highlighted what support Moscow has provided to the agency, and addressed the motivations behind some countries’ attempts to dismantle UNRWA and undermine the interests of Palestinians.*

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*Tass: Mr. Lazzarini, I understand you have a busy schedule here in Moscow, let me thank you for your time and readiness to have this interview. Your last visit to Russia in June 2021 took place after the escalation between Israelis and Palestinians. Now the situation in the Gaza Strip is more acute than ever. Could you provide some insights into the purpose of your visit and the outcomes you expect to achieve?*

*Philippe Lazzarini:* Thank you for having me. In fact, you almost answered the question by asking it. I am in Moscow today because there is a meeting among the BRICS members on the Middle East at the level of the Deputy Foreign Ministers or Special Envoys. I received this invitation to address the BRICS as a group. I just came from New York where I was also at the Security Council. As you know, our agency is confronted with an unprecedented crisis. We already deal with an unprecedented crisis in Gaza. But on top of that, the agency is now under strain and numerous calls, including by the Israeli government, to dismantle or cease its activities in the Gaza Strip.

So my objective now is to warn the UN Member States on this platform about what the impact would be, would UNRWA be dismantled in Gaza, or in Jerusalem, or in East Jerusalem, or in the West Bank. First of all, there would be an im-



*Swiss national Philippe Lazzarini has been head of the aid organisation UNRWA since 2020. (UN Photo)*

pact on our collective ability to respond to the current unprecedented crisis. As we know, Gaza has been a little bit of all the superlative, if you look at the number of people killed, the number of children killed, the number of medical facilities and hospitals destroyed, the level of destruction, the level of displacement in the Gaza Strip and today we are even talking about an artificial famine which is looming. Now dismantling the main organization which is also the main backbone of the international response in Gaza can only weaken our collective effort to reverse this looming famine.

But secondly, I’m also warning about what the impact would be in any transition period. Let’s say we have a ceasefire tomorrow. There wouldn’t be a long time between the ceasefire and the “day after”. Or that’s what I call the “day in between”. It might last one, two, three years. During that time there will be extraordinary protracted humanitarian need. UNRWA is the only organization which is capable to provide at scale basic services such as access to primary healthcare or access to education in the absence of a functioning state. So again, my call to the Member States is to say: if we get rid of UNRWA during such a transition period we will only increase the despair of the people. We might sow the seeds of future resentment, revenge and violence, and we might also undermine any political process. One of the main objectives is to also address the countries

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constituting the BRICS. For this I'm very thankful to have received this invitation.

*Could you share your perspective on Russia's humanitarian aid efforts in the Gaza Strip, along with its stance regarding UNRWA and the ongoing crisis the agency is confronting?*

Russia, as a member of the Security Council, has always provided political support to the agency, and I think this is important. It has been the case over the last few decades, it continues to be the case, and I think this support is also shown and expressed through the invitation I received today to address the member of the BRICS.

*The UN has repeatedly drawn attention to the unprecedented scale of human suffering in the Gaza Strip. And according to the most recent statistics released by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the death toll in the Gaza has unfortunately surpassed 34,000 people in casualties. However, certain countries remain skeptical towards those numbers. How much trust do you have in these statistics?*

It's very difficult in a war situation to have precise figures. But I do believe that the amount being published gives a reasonably good idea of the scale of the number of people who have been killed in Gaza. And this is horrible. It's unprecedented when you think that in six months more than 30,000 people have been killed. We know that among them there are 13,000 children. We know that there were more children killed in Gaza in six months than in all the conflicts across the world in the last four years. So it's unprecedented in scale, as well as the level of destruction.

My point here is to say that in the past, whenever there were statistics on people killed, no one really challenged it, because we always felt that the proportion seems to be generally plausible. Today, if I look at the number of employees killed within UNRWA, 180, and I compare this to the total number of staff we have, 13,000, and then I look at the number of people killed within the broader Gaza population, next we compare it to the overall population, and we will have more or less the same type of proportion. So I think the proportion in this case is certainly something which unfortunately sounds possible.

*Could you say with high certainty that the number of 34,000 is not an overestimation?*



*Hundreds of thousands of people on the run. Displaced by bombs. They need to be provided with basic necessities. (Picture © UNRWA photo by Ashraf Amra)*

I wouldn't say it's a precise number, but I do believe that it is certainly at this scale, the number of people who have been killed. And I'm not even sure that this number captures all those who are still under the rubble, because most of the time the number of people dead are reported and recorded through hospital facilities. So I would say that the proportion given unfortunately might be close to the reality. It could even be higher or could be in disproportion. And I do believe that it's not an overestimate.

*There have been reports that Israel proposed dissolving UNRWA and transferring its personnel to another UN-affiliated organization. Could you confirm whether the World Organization has received any such documents in written form as a formal request to date?*

I am not aware of any of these documents but I am very much aware of calls by the government of Israel for UNRWA to dismantle. I am very much aware of discussions about who can replace UNRWA for which kind of activities in Gaza. That's also basically what I have discussed today, what I have discussed last week, saying we have to be careful collectively. You might remember this week we had a final report of an independent review panel which has clearly highlighted how irreplaceable and indispensable the agency is. Meaning that today, even for the acute humanitarian response, there is no agency in a position to take over the activity of UNRWA in Gaza.

UNRWA has 13,000 staff members in Gaza. The next biggest United Nations agency has maximum of around 100 staff members. Which means you cannot just step in like that. When you look just at the food assistance in Gaza, we represent more than half of the supply in the

Gaza Strip, the rest being World Food Programme and other international NGOs. But there is also no organization which can step in and provide access to primary health or access to education the way we do. Only a functioning government or administration could do that.

Remember in Gaza we had 300,000 girls and boys in our primary schools and secondary schools. If you also consider those who were in the Palestinian Authority schools, it's more than half a million girls and boys. Now, if UNRWA would go, who else would take this over in the absence of a functioning state? There is no NGO and no UN agency which is geared to provide public services the way UNRWA has done until now.

So, yes, I'm aware of the objective of dismantling UNRWA, and that's the reason why we need to shield the agency from this kind of pressure. I'm aware that there have been some discussions about who else can take over some activities of the agency, but I keep saying this is a completely short-sighted discussion, because UNRWA is much more than just a food distribution, it's primary health care, it's education, and these are government like services that no other organization can take over. And the only one who will be able to take over will be the future state of Palestine once we have a political solution.

*Do you trust that until the acute humanitarian crisis in Gaza is over UNRWA will be able to resist external pressure and will not cease to exist?*

Well, the danger is here. You might have seen over the last weekend there was a call in the West Bank and in Gaza saying that more than 80% of the Palestinians believe that if UNRWA would be dismantled it would also signal the end of a two-state solution. Now, I do believe that the effort to dismantle UNRWA will continue, but the primary objective of this effort is of a political nature. It's to try to strip the Palestinians from their refugee status, and this has been clearly articulated now by the Israel representative at the Security Council last week. He said, UNRWA is perpetuating the refugee problem. But it's not UNRWA perpetuating the refugee problem, it's the absence of a political solution which perpetuates the refugee status. It's as if you would say humanitarian assistance perpetuates a conflict. No, a conflict is perpetuated because of the absence of a political solution.

So, here again, I clearly brought on the attention of the Member States the fact that we have to push back because the real intention to dismantle the agency is of a political nature, which could in the future undermine effort leading to a political solution and to a true Palestinian state solution.

*So you would say if common sense takes the upper hand, UNRWA will continue to exist and will continue its current work and humanitarian aid?*

It depends on what common sense means. My common sense would be to have a political solution. And if there is a political solution, UNRWA can phase out. That means the state takes over. And our raison d'être is over. UNRWA was created to be a temporary organization, unfortunately a lasting one, for 75 years. Now if we are genuinely committed to a solution, in that case we can reinstate the temporary nature of the agency and we would help any transition leading to the solution.

So yes, I really hope we will be able to fulfill our role and our mandate until there is such a solution. To make it possible we will have to struggle to make it happen. I do believe that the temptation to get rid of UNRWA and to dismantle the agency will continue. There will continue to be a lot of political pressure and that is the reason why I keep now asking Member States to help us to shield and protect the agency's mandate so that we continue to fulfill what's expected from us until there is a political solution. Will it happen? I hope so. That's the struggle we are having now.

*Could you describe through what channels Israel is promoting the decision to dismantle UNRWA?*

They create many challenges for us. First, there have been a lot of smear campaigns, misinformation and allegations, and then calls to Member States to stop funding the organization. Having said that, you remember that there have been allegations about 12 staff members who might have participated in the October 7th massacre. I found these allegations so horrible that after consulting the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, I decided to terminate the contract of the 12 people and an investigation has been put in place to look at all the individual cases. And the Secretary General has also commissioned a review to look into all the risk management system of our organization and to look

at if they are fit to preserve the neutrality of the organization.

This week, this report came out and said that the agency is not only indispensable and irreplaceable, but has developed policies and systems which are more robust than any other UN agency or international NGOs, but because of the complex environment where we operate and the unique nature of the organization, we can always do more to improve our adherence. That's exactly what we will do.

So there have been a lot of smear campaigns about the agency and how little neutral we are, but in Israel there have been also a legislative effort at the parliament aiming at prohibiting the presence of the agency. We have observed the repeated call from the government of Israel to dismantle the agency and to ensure that UNRWA will have no role on the "day after" in Gaza.

We are facing administrative bureaucratic type of harassment where the visas of our staff are issued only on a monthly or bimonthly basis, not on an annual basis anymore. We have the Israeli Ministry of Finance which tries to lift our immunity and privileges when it comes to the taxes. So you have a series of activities aimed at reducing, shrinking the operational space of the agency and to make it almost impossible to operate.

Only in the Gaza Strip, you know that we have been prevented to organize convoys from the south to the north despite the fact that in the north we have the most acute hunger and starvation going on. So UNRWA was being prevented to directly access the north with its convoys.

*Is Israel trying to achieve this dismantling of the organization single-handedly or are there any other actors backing up Israel in this campaign?*

I think it's a position of the government of Israel. I'm not aware that other governments are supporting it actively, but I also do believe – and this is what I warn other member states about – we have to make sure that this issue is not just handled or tackled through a technical lens, but it also requires our political attention and vigilance. If we do not have this political attention, maybe UNRWA might operationally be weakened.

I think that Israel's intention to dismantle UNRWA has traction abroad mainly in parliaments and you have seen that recently the US Congress decided to prohibit any funding to UN-



*Without UNRWA's infrastructure, it is impossible to provide supplies. (Image © UNRWA photo by Ashraf Amra)*

RWA. So that is the kind of traction we are facing. But I know also that this discussion is also sometimes taking place in other parliaments. So there is some traction among politicians, but it is not necessarily translated into government policy.

*As you mentioned, 12 UNRWA employees were fired, but after the report was released this week, do you believe that the trust in some of them could be reinstated and that they could continue their work in the agency?*

We have 12 employees that have been fired. As of today, one employee has been reinstated because this person has been completely cleared, but the rest remain fired.

*Previous reports from UNRWA have alleged instances of torture of agency staff by Israeli authorities, as well as casualties among its personnel during this conflict. You have advocated for an independent UN investigation into these incidents. Do you believe the "International Criminal Court" (ICC) mechanism could be enacted to examine these matters?*

I don't know what the best avenue is, but it is true that I have called on the members of the Security Council that the blatant disregard and attack on the United Nations staff premises and operation be investigated and that accountability be delivered. Because if we don't do this, we will set a new low standard for future conflicts. If you look at the number of staff killed – 180, the number of our school and other premises damaged – more than 160, in which more than 400 people have been killed while seeking the protection of the UN emblem. More than thousand people have been injured when seeking the protection.

Some of our premises when they were vacated have been used for military purposes, either for the presence of the Israeli army or Hamas troops or other Palestinian fighters. We have allegations from staff members who have been arrested and after that have reported mistreatment and torture. We also hear stories about tunnels being discovered underneath our premises. All of this is blatant disregard towards the United Nations and every Member State should feel concerned about that.

So yes, we need an investigation. Yes, we need accountability. Now, what the best platform for that is, I don't know yet. Could be an ICC, could be a Board of Inquiry, could be a Commission of Inquiry. The avenue still needs to be defined and I'm sure that our experts should tell us what the best avenue is. But my call is we cannot let it go without knowing exactly what happened, why it happened, and without making those responsible accountable.

*After certain donor states have ceased their funding to UNRWA, what are your estimates on how many Palestinians in Gaza are currently not receiving assistance in the necessary scale?*

It's difficult to answer the question per se because UNRWA still has its operation going on. When the allegation came out in January, we had up to 16 countries having suspended their contribution to the agency, and at that time I had no visibility anymore beyond two weeks or three weeks.

The good news is that most of the countries who suspended have now reviewed their decision and have contributed or have re-initiated their contribution to the agency and some other reluctant countries now have a more weighted report which has been issued this week and I'm cautiously optimistic it will help us to restore the confidence with our donor base.

The only country which will not contribute to the agency is the main donor to the agency, but we know that until March 2025, there will be no contributions. We're talking about the US, so we have to find ways to fill the gap left behind by the US. And that's why I am also focusing a lot of my effort, trying to encourage current donors to increase their contribution, but also to bring on board new donors.

*The counter-argument on the part of the US government could be that they are providing certain*

*humanitarian assistance themselves. For instance, they are airdropping some humanitarian aid. Do you think that that kind of effort could fully replace the lack of funding?*

No, we know the airdropping is not compensating the absence, for example, of supply by land crossing into the Gaza Strip. And again, UNRWA is the organization being present everywhere, with staff everywhere. I do not believe that another agency can step in very quickly. The other agencies have been also very clear, we will not have the capacity. So UNRWA will remain an important partner and actor, especially during this acute response, and it should be in our common interest that the agency does not collapse because of lack of funding. And this is the reason why many donors have come back, while others exceptionally decided to support the agency. We have to find ways to compensate the absence of the US funding this year.

*It was previously reported that UNRWA will be able to maintain its operations until June with the current level of funding. Has this timeline been re-estimated?*

We are very much hands-to-mouth on a monthly basis. I can say today, with what I know, with certainty that we will cover the needs until the end of June. After that, I don't know. It all depends on if the donor will have announced contribution, if they will pay on time, if new donors are coming. Our financial situation has been very precarious since more than four years. We are the only agency operating even with a negative cash flow, which has been highly unsettling for the communities and for the staff. But I am still cautiously optimistic that we will find a way to fill the gap between now and the end of the year.

*To what extent do you believe Israel's potential operation in Rafah could exacerbate the existing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip?*

We are all extremely worried about the likelihood of an offensive in Rafah. There is more than 1.45 million displaced people already concentrated in the south. Such an operation would take place in the middle of the human sea. We believe, but not only us, the international community and all the member states have indicated that this offensive should not take place, that different avenues should be explored instead of creating an additional layer of tragedy in what is already a human tragedy unfolding under our

eyes. So Rafah is very worrisome. The idea that the ground operation might go ahead is extremely worrisome. People are very anxious because they have no idea where to go.

*Do you think that Israel will be able to provide a safe passage?*

It's very difficult to understand what is safe in Gaza. We always felt there is no real safe place in Gaza. So, safe passage to go where? To safe places? But a safe place has to be safe, which until now, over the last 6-7 months, has proven that there is no such place.

*So realistically, there is no way for a «safe passage»?*

In the Gaza Strip, there is no safe place. And if there would be a safe place, we would not have such a high number of people killed since the beginning of the war.

*Do you think that the new package of U.S. Military aid to Israel could worsen the crisis even further?*

You know, my fear right now is what the Israeli army is planning to do, whether there is military assistance or not. It seems there is a preparation for possible large-scale military intervention in Rafah. And when it comes to the impact it could have on the civilian population, the idea is just unbearable. Unbearable is the idea that people who have been displaced so many times, who live in the street, who have lost almost everything, will be again the ones having to pay the price of a large-scale military operation.

*How many people, if we are talking in numbers, could fall victim if such operation is to take place?*

I don't really want to speculate, but today we talk about 34,000 people killed for the entire Gaza Strip. That's the estimate being shared. We have every day more people killed and more children killed. There is no doubt that if such an offensive goes, we will have additional thousands of people killed. And I don't understand how after such a huge number the outrage of the international community has not yet succeeded to put an end to this killing, to this slaughter. And I don't understand why this has not yet led to a ceasefire. And a ceasefire, we all know, would mean that we can build on it. Instead of talking about further military operation, we'd rather talk about



*As long as there is no political solution, UNRWA's help is needed. (Image © UNRWA Photo by Hussein Owda)*

releasing the hostages, about scaling up the assistance, about the future.

I believe the ceasefire could save thousands of lives. And the absence of ceasefire will mean more people killed.

*Do you see that there is a foreseeable path for the Gaza Strip and its residents to regain stability and sustainable living conditions once the current escalation with Israel comes to an end or will it become a no man's land?*

You see, there is this level of destruction. And certainly, the Gaza Strip is not only destroyed but is also infested by unexploded ordnances. So this will definitely require a lot of collective effort and I think there will be a progress in reconstruction of Gaza when we have a solid time bond political solution on the table of which both Israeli and Palestinian as well as the international community feel confident. That I guess is the only way for Gaza to look towards a future. But it would take a lot of time. It will also take a lot of healing. It's not just the political solution, but we have to address the deep trauma of the Palestinians collectively but also individually. We also need to address the trauma which has been caused in Israel by the massacre of October 7th. We have to acknowledge this respective trauma. And it's only by acknowledging it that we will also be able to look at the future with more confidence. Because ultimately I believe that the Palestinians and the Israelis will have no choice than to live together as neighbors

*What lessons learnt from the current Palestinian-Israeli escalation do you think will be applied to improve the agency's performance in the future? Have you already identified any specific mechan-*

*isms that will become subject to change if it is to take place?*

UNRWA has been assessed more than once. We are certainly one of the most scrutinized organizations and the efficiency of the services that we are delivering has also been proven. But now, going ahead, I think it will be important for UNRWA to see how we can build better partnership with other UN agencies, international NGOs, and also host countries to make sure that the Palestinian refugees continue to have access to quality services. And these quality services will be delivered under the mandate of UNRWA, but not necessarily always directly by UNRWA. And I think this is something we will have to look at in the future.

It's not that UNRWA would distribute aid indirectly, but what is important is to make sure that the Palestinian refugees do have access to services. I don't think that UNRWA would ask anyone to provide education on its behalf, but if you look at food, for example, alone we cannot provide food to everybody in the Gaza Strip, and it's good that we have other organization also ready to provide food. I think it is important to keep in mind that while they do so they are also supporting the UNRWA in fulfilling its mandate.

Now I'm also going back to some of your questions. What I believe is important is that if we are genuinely committed to a political solution, we can reinstate the temporary role of UNRWA that I believe we should shield and we will be able to help the emergence of a future

Palestinian administration and state. Because our ultimate goal is to hand over and that's what we need to do.

Otherwise, the lessons learned pertain to the lack of trust in the agency by a number of partners, which have been very much related to perceptual issues such as neutrality. We should never forget that our agency relies on staff coming from the community we are supporting and these people suffer the same way as the rest of the community and they have feelings; but at the same time, they are UN employees and we expect them to behave like UN civil servants. And the report we just received this week will help us to reinforce even more our mechanism to provide the confidence to our donors that indeed UNRWA is an indispensable but also neutral organization.

*Before we finish this conversation, is there anything else you'd like to mention?*

The crisis in Gaza is unprecedented because of the scale of the suffering, taken the number of people killed compared to the population: the number of children, the number of UN workers, the number of media, the number of health workers and the overall level of destruction. And what's unbelievable is that we are confronted to an artificial man-made famine unfolding under our watch, and it can only be addressed through political will, and I really hope that collectively we will succeed to reverse this. That's it.

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