

‘Dire’ financial crisis forces UNRWA to fire 571 Gazan staff

Staff affected had originally worked in the Gaza Strip

● Affected staff have been without pay for over 10 months

● Israel has barred UNRWA from operating on its soil

● Israel had not provided conclusive evidence for its headline allegation

AFP | Geneva, Switzerland

The UN’s beleaguered agency for Palestinian refugees said yesterday that a “dire” financial crisis had this week forced it to fire hundreds of Gazan staff who had left the territory.

“On Tuesday, 571 local UNRWA staff, outside Gaza, were informed that they were being separated from the agency with immediate effect,” a spokesperson told AFP in an email.

For more than seven decades, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees has provided aid and assistance to Palestinian refu-



A man collects trash while wearing a jacket bearing the logo of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), along a street in the city of Jenin in the occupied West Bank

gees across Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

But the agency has seen the voluntary contributions it relies on dwindle as it has become the focus of increasingly harsh Israeli criticism and attacks, causing what the spokesperson

called an “unprecedented financial crisis”.

While the work UNRWA was mandated to do cost around \$880 million in 2025, the agency received only around \$570 million in contributions, the spokesperson said.

“As things stand, we expect a substantial shortfall in 2026,” they added.

All of the staff affected by this week’s announcement had originally worked in the Gaza Strip, but had managed to leave early in the war sparked by Hamas’s

deadly attacks inside Israel on October 7, 2023.

‘Intense defamation’

Most had been unable to carry out their duties remotely since leaving Gaza, but had remained on UNRWA’s payroll until last March, when they were placed on exceptional unpaid leave, the spokesperson said.

“The affected staff have been without pay for over 10 months, and it is impossible to foresee when or if they could resume their duties due to circumstances entirely beyond UNRWA’s control,” the spokesperson said.

“Recognising that UNRWA’s financial situation remains dire, the agency took a decision which at least allows them to access financial resources rapidly, including separation indemnities.”

The spokesperson stressed that UNRWA, which has seen more than 300 of its employees killed in Gaza since the start of the war, still had around 12,000 staff working inside the Palestinian territory.

Israel has barred UNRWA from operating on its soil, accusing the agency of providing cover for Hamas militants, and claiming that some of the agency’s employees took part in the October 7 attack.

A series of investigations found some “neutrality-related issues” at UNRWA, but stressed that Israel had not provided conclusive evidence for its headline allegation.

Tuesday’s decision was “extremely difficult and (came) as a result of an extremely challenging financial outlook, as well as intense defamation campaigns to undermine UNRWA and deter its donors”, the spokesperson said.



UNRWA provides critical services – including education and health-care – to nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza, running hundreds of schools and health facilities as part of its humanitarian mandate.

US seizes Russia-flagged oil tanker chased to North Atlantic

● Washington says the tanker is part of a so-called shadow fleet that carries oil for countries such as Venezuela, Russia and Iran

● Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth posted that the US blockade on Venezuelan oil was in full effect “anywhere in the world”

AFP | Washington, United States

The United States on Wednesday seized a Russian-flagged oil tanker in the North Atlantic after pursuing it from off the coast of Venezuela, in an operation condemned by Moscow.

Washington says the tanker is part of a so-called shadow fleet that carries oil for countries such as Venezuela, Russia and Iran in violation of US sanctions, and seized it despite the ship being escorted by the Russian navy.

The vessel had thwarted an



A Venezuelan navy patrol boat escorts Panamanian flagged crude oil tanker Yoselin near the El Palito refinery in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela

earlier attempt to board it last month near Venezuela, where a US raid on Saturday toppled the country’s authoritarian president, Nicolas Maduro.

“The vessel was seized in the North Atlantic pursuant to a warrant issued by a US federal court,” US European Command, which oversees American forces in the region, said in a statement

on X.

After the operation, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth posted that the US blockade on Venezuelan oil was in full effect “anywhere in the world.”

Russia’s Transport Ministry slammed the seizure, saying “freedom of navigation applies in waters on the high seas, and no state has the right to use force

against vessels duly registered under the jurisdiction of other states.”

The US military also announced a second sanctioned tanker ship had been seized in the Caribbean Sea.

Homeland Security chief Kristi Noem posted on X that both vessels “were either last docked in Venezuela or en route to it,”

and included a video of US forces roping down from a helicopter onto an unidentified ship and proceeding toward the bridge with weapons ready.

US to control oil sales ‘indefinitely’

Last weekend, US special forces snatched Maduro and his wife from Caracas and flew them to New York to face trial on drug charges.

Since then, President Donald Trump has said that the United States will “run” Venezuela and US companies will control its critical oil industry.

In Caracas, after several days of shuttered shops and intermittent public transport, the capital’s streets were again busy Wednesday with pedestrians, street vendors, cars and motorbikes.

The North Atlantic operation came despite Russia reportedly sending a submarine and other naval assets to escort the empty tanker and saying the vessel was sailing under the Russian flag.

The vessel, formerly known as the Bella-I, in recent weeks switched its registration to Russia, changed its name to the

Marinera and the tanker’s crew reportedly painted a Russian flag on the tanker.

It had been en route to Venezuela before it evaded the US blockade, and has been under US sanctions since 2024 over alleged ties to Iran and Hezbollah.

Trump said Tuesday that Venezuela said 30-50 million barrels of “high-quality, sanctioned” Venezuelan crude will be shipped to US ports, with the revenue -- perhaps more than \$2 billion at current market prices -- placed under his personal control.

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright added Wednesday that Washington will control sales of Venezuelan oil “indefinitely.”

It was not clear whether Venezuela’s new ruler -- interim president Delcy Rodriguez -- had agreed to hand over the oil, how the plan would work, or what its legal basis would be.

Rodriguez -- a long-time member of Maduro’s inner circle as vice president and energy minister -- has vowed cooperation with the United States amid fears that Trump could pursue wider regime change.