After Trump cuts aid, U.N. relief agency lays plans for rapid pullback

The United States will no longer contribute to the U.N. program for Palestinian refugees in Balata camp in the West Bank, the State Department said Friday, amid widespread international condemnation of the decision.

The announcement came nearly a week after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the U.S. would end funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, after the agency did not agree to reforms.

The U.N. program is the main provider of education and health care to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. The U.S. said in the announcement that it would redirect 80% of its funds for aid to Palestinians to other organizations.

So far, UNRWA is projecting that the cuts would lead to a reduction in services to about 80,000 — mostly from education and health care. The agency’s chief, Pierre Krähenbühl, said Friday that the aid shortfall would “destabilize and conflict across the Middle East.”

Krähenbühl said that of the 1 million people who rely on UNRWA health care, roughly 330,000 would likely lose access because of the cuts.

The loss of funds will be hard on the More than 500,000 Palestinian refugees — a fifth of whom are children, according to UNRWA — would be affected. Several million refugees are registered in the West Bank and Gaza, depending on how many are counted.

UNRWA, which provides education, health care and emergency assistance to Palestinian refugees throughout the region, has faced financial strain in recent years. It handles about 50% of the cost, with other nations covering the rest.

But the cuts come as the number of Palestinian refugees has grown at a rate of about 2,500 a year, driven by displacement in Syria and in the wake of the civil war in Yemen. The number of registered refugees is estimated to be 5.4 million, according to the U.N. agency.

It is also being driven by what officials said was a “way of doing business” that had become unsustainable.

The statement called the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, an “irredeemably flawed operation” and criticized other countries for not sharing the burden of supporting the Palestinians.

In Washington, Jeremy Ben-Ami, president of the liberal Jewish group J Street, said the move was “a blow to peace.”

“UNRWA has allowed the Palestinian national movement to continue to exist on the periphery, to expand,” Ben-Ami said. “This way of doing business has completely broken down, and it’s time for a new way of doing business.”

In Jerusalem, Hazem Balousha, head of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, said the cuts could usher in a new era of “hardline” policies.

Boulosha said that UNRWA was “the last bastion of civil society” in the region and that its removal would make it harder to implement a two-state solution.

“UNRWA’s place is more than just providing education and shelter; it is an instrument of peace,” he said.

It is expected that the cuts will hit particularly hard in Jordan, where the Palestinian population is the largest, officials said. The U.S. agency contributes about one third of a $1.1 billion annual budget for the agency, which many nations have pledged to fill.

UNRWA has also come under fire from Palestinian officials, who have accused the agency of contributing to Palestinian support for extremist groups such as the Islamic State.

“By cutting aid, the U.S. is violating international law,” Erekat said, speaking on behalf of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the official agency of the Palestinian Authority. “It is an act of aggression on the Palestinian people and an attack on international law.”

Saeb Erekat, secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said the pro-Israel bias of President Trump’s administration has disqualified it from any role in the peace process.

“The U.S. policy priorities,” officials said. The United States remained “very mindful of taxpayers’ money and that it is up to them how it is spent. But by the same token, who gave them that money? Who voted for them? They are responsible to the American people.”

Ben-Ami said that by cutting funds, the U.S. was violating its international obligation to assist and support the Palestinians.

“The U.S. has a moral responsibility to not support causing the suffering and misery of the Palestinian people,” he said.

Erekat also predicted that the potential end of UNRWA’s work in the region would be “a means to further incite the Palestinian refugees.”

“Without UNRWA, the refugees are disorganized, they are vulnerable, they are left at risk for recruitment by extremist groups such as the Islamic State,” Erekat said.

“By cutting aid, the U.S. is violating international law and will aggravate the number of Palestinian refugees reside, not a Palestinian agency” but was established by the United Nations, to Palestinian hostility toward the United States, which is seen as the ultimate obstacle to a peace plan to resolve the conflict.

The statement called the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, an “irredeemably flawed operation” and criticized other countries and organizations that match the U.S. in supporting the Palestinians.

The number of eligible refugees — as the Palestinian people who fled or were expelled from their homeland during the creation of Israel in 1948 — is a source of contention between Palestinians, who deem pro-Israel.

The Washington Post works with nonprofit organizations to provide aid to the 2 million Palestinian refugees — a fifth of which are children, according to UNRWA — who rely on the agency for education and other basic services.

The reduction in aid is likely to hit particularly hard in Gaza, where the government is already facing a severe financial crisis.

Ergal, the head of the World Bank’s Birzeit University, but will do little to change these people’s status as refugees, he said.

Ergal said that the agency was not only an instrument of peace, but also an instrument of rehabilitation. “It is the only agency that can help the refugees to develop their children’s skills and their future,” he said.

It is also being driven by what officials said was a “way of doing business” that had become unsustainable.

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