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31.01.2024

Freezing Aid to Gaza: Israel's International War against the UNRWA



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Imperilled, tormented Palestinians in Gaza had little time to celebrate the January 26 order of the International Court of Justice. In a case brought by South Africa intended to facilitate a ceasefire and ease the suffering of the Gaza populace, Israel received the unwanted news that it had to, among other obligations, ensure compliance with the UN Genocide Convention, including by its military; prevent and punish “the direct and public incitement to genocide” against the Palestinian populace in Gaza and permit basic services and humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip.

Within hours, Israel, bruised and outraged by a body its officials have decried as antisemitic and favourably disposed to Palestinian propaganda, found an excuse to flaunt

the ruling. 12 employees of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the agency responsible for distributing aid in Gaza, were accused (not found) by Israel's intelligence agency Shin Bet, of involvement in the Hamas attacks of October 7.

The response from UNRWA was swift. Contracts were terminated, an investigation was launched, including a full inquiry into allegations made against the organisation. The agency's commissioner general, Philippe Lazzarini promised, on January 27, that, "Any UNRWA employee who was involved in acts of terror will be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution."

Not content with this, Israel stormily took to the campaign trail hoping to rid Gaza of the UN agency it has despised for years. UNRWA, after all, is a salutary reminder of Palestinian suffering, dispossession and desperation, its existence a direct result of Israeli foreign policy. Foreign Minister Israel Katz was severe in laying his country's loathing for UNRWA bare. "We have been warning for years: UNRWA perpetuates the refugee issue, obstructs peace, and serves as a civilian arm of Hamas in Gaza," he stated on Shabbat. "UNRWA is not the solution – many of its employees are Hamas affiliates with murderous ideologies, aiding in terror activities and preserving its authority." Deviously and fiendishly, Katz was dismissing the entire enterprise of aid through a UN outlet as a terroristic extension, rather than the ghastly product of Israel's own ruthless, generational war against Palestinians. Leave it to us to oversee matters of aid: we know best.

Powers, many with military ties with Israel and sluggish about holding the Jewish State to account in its Gaza campaign, were relieved by the distraction. Rather than assessing their own export regime, the grant of licenses in the arms market in gross violation of human rights and the facilitation of crimes against humanity, an excuse to continue, and prolong the weapons transfers and assistance to Israel, had presented itself.

Within hours, nine states had added their names to the list suspending allocated aid. Australia, along with the United States and Canada, rushed to the podium to condemn UNRWA and freeze funding. The United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Finland followed.

The measure of rage could now be adjusted and retargeted. A spokesperson for the UK government was "appalled by allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attack against Israel, a heinous act of terrorism that the UK government has repeatedly condemned." The US State Department was "extremely troubled" and had

“temporarily paused additional funding. Canada was also “deeply troubled by the allegations relating to some UNRWA employees.”

Australia’s foreign minister, Penny Wong, despite accepting that UNRWA’s role in conducting “vital, life saving work”, “providing essential services in Gaza directly to those who need it, with more than 1.4 million Palestinians currently sheltering in its own facilities” felt a suspension of funding was wholly sensible. This, from a minister who never tires about praising international law and its profoundly sacred qualities.

The assessment by Lazzarini was one of dismay and bafflement by the speed at which the funding had been halted. “These decisions threaten our ongoing humanitarian work across the region including and especially in the Gaza Strip.”

The measure could almost be regarded as hysterical, given that a mere 12 individuals had been tarnished from a pool of some 30,000 members. Johann Soufi, a lawyer and former director of the agency’s legal office in Gaza, gave this assessment to Agence-France Presse: “Sanctioning UNRWA, which is barely keeping the entire population of Gaza alive, for the alleged responsibility of a few employees, is tantamount to collectively punishing the Gazan population, which is living in catastrophic conditions.”

Australian Greens Senator and defence spokesman, Senator David Shoebridge, also picked up on the grotesque twist the latest stifling of aid to the beleaguered residents of Gaza entailed. “The one temporary pause [Senator Wong] has been able to achieve is not the bombing or killing, or even weapons exports, it’s providing aid to [Palestinians].”

For Israel, the focus can now shift back to prosecuting the war against Palestinians collectively blanketed for terrorist tendencies. Meddlesome aid workers can also be put into the mix. Cut the aid, cut the means of survival. Along the way, international law can be blithely mocked and ignored by the principles of might. With grimmest irony, the provisional measures outlined by the ICJ order, which includes increased humanitarian aid to Gaza, are being frustrated by signatories to the UN Genocide Convention. The collective regime of punishment ushered in by Israel’s policy of murderous asphyxiation, and which so concerned South Africa’s legal team, can now continue.

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CounterPunch 30.01.2024