Belgium suspends UNRWA funds following reports of ethical misconduct

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Belgium has temporarily suspended its funding to UNRWA, following reports of a UN investigation into ethical misconduct among its senior staff, according to Israel’s Embassy in Belgium.

The embassy tweeted about the suspension on Friday, quoting from Belgian Minister of Finance and Development Cooperation, Alexander De Croo, who stated, “If the accusations are true, it’s completely unacceptable.”

The embassy also linked an article by the Belgium news magazine, Knack, on the matter. The Netherlands and Switzerland have also suspended payments pending the results of the investigation.

The Palestinian Authority’s Foreign Ministry said Thursday it regretted the decision of donor countries to suspend payments to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency that services 5.4 million Palestinian refugees.

“These vital contributions rather directly support and ensure the continuity of UNRWA’s core programs in education for children, healthcare for families, relief and social services, including for youth and women, as well as emergency assistance, including food aid to the poorest among the refugees,” the PA Foreign Ministry said. “We call on all to refrain from politicization of such humanitarian assistance.”

The ministry further urged “restraint by all stakeholders until the formal investigation is concluded and appropriate follow-up can be pursued. We call for reversal of recent regrettable decisions that would cause undue harm to the Palestine refugee community and instability across the agency’s fields of operation in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem.”

US special envoy Jason Greenblatt tweeted in response, “Instead of welcoming the investigation on UNRWA, PA’s MFA warned against ‘politicizing humanitarian aid offered by UNRWA.’ This isn’t [about] politics – it’s [about] transparency [and] accountability. It’s donor [money], not the PA’s. Donors have a right to ensure aid is ([and] was) used as intended.”

Channel 12 published on Thursday a letter from Greenblatt to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres asking that the US be informed if the UN’s Office of Internal Oversight Services found evidence of UNRWA “impropriety” with regard to US funds.

Greenblatt told Guterres that his country had contributed $2.9 billion to UNRWA in the last decade, which amounted to 28% of all contributions to UNRWA. The US halted all donations to UNRWA in 2018, a move which further pledged the agency into financial crisis.

“To date, no findings of that ongoing investigation have been shared with UNRWA, nor have any of the staff members referred to in the media been notified as subjects of the investigation,” UNRWA said on Thursday. “What is currently being circulated in the media and elsewhere represents allegations and rumors, and not the official findings of an independent investigation. In the meantime, the agency is committed to fulfilling its mission in support of Palestine refugees, despite considerable challenges and pressures.”

In spite of the reports of ethical misconduct, Kuwait on Wednesday donated $5 million to UNRWA.