UN Worker Accused of Aiding Hamas Sentenced to 7 Months

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By AFP

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A Palestinian UN worker accused by Israel of aiding the Islamist group Hamas was sentenced to seven months' jail Wednesday in a plea deal which will see him released soon.

Waheed Borsh was convicted of "rendering services to an illegal organisation without intention", his lawyer Lea Tsemel told AFP.

The Israeli justice ministry confirmed the plea deal, saying that it also included eight months' probation.

Borsh's employer, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said the deal showed there had been no wrongdoing by the organisation.

He was arrested in July and with time already served and good behaviour, is expected to be released on January 12.

The case centred on accusations that rubble in Gaza under the responsibility of the UNDP was misused by Hamas which controls the enclave.

Coming shortly after accusations against a senior employee of the World Vision NGO, the case caused a major stir in Israel, with officials accusing the UN of naivete and alleging systematic misuse of aid by Hamas.

Israel originally alleged that Borsh had been recruited by Hamas, which is considered a terrorist organisation by the European Union, the United States and Israel, and had deliberately diverted rubble to a port -- which was then used to build a military jetty.

But Tsemel stressed that her client had been convicted only of unintentionally aiding the Islamists by "moving some rubble".

"The prosecution claimed that he should have checked better as this could have helped Hamas."

The UNDP said it had "zero tolerance for wrongdoing", but that the case did not prove deliberate intent.

"This outcome confirms that there was no wrongdoing by UNDP," the body said in a statement.

- Aid wars -

Since 2008, Israel has fought three wars with Palestinian militants in Gaza.

Israel has long alleged that Hamas has sought to infiltrate humanitarian organisations and divert aid, accusations the Islamist movement denies.

Aid workers privately admit to pressure from Hamas.

But they also say materials taken into Gaza are subject to some of the strictest monitoring in the world and that the blockade is preventing needed goods from entering the impoverished enclave.

More than two thirds of the population of the Gaza Strip, which Israel has blockaded for a decade, are reliant on some form of aid, according to the UN.

The allegations against the UNDP, which were first announced in August, as well as the more serious ones against World Vision's Gaza head Mohammed al-Halabi, were trumpeted by Israeli officials.

Halabi is accused of siphoning millions of dollars to Hamas in a case still in the Israeli courts.

Danny Danon, Israel's ambassador to the UN, said at the time the cases were evidence of a "troubling trend of the systematic exploitation by Hamas".

AFP visited the site of the alleged UNDP misuse last summer and found a new-looking jetty extending around 50 metres (yards) into the sea.

Perhaps 10 feet (three yards) wide, it had wooden slats erected on one side to obscure the view.

Armed Hamas fighters were in nearby fields.

UNDP officials privately accepted that rubble from one of its projects may have been used in the construction of the jetty.

But they stressed the disposal occurred in conjunction with the Ministry of Public Works, which is run by Hamas's rivals Fatah.

Fatah leads the internationally recognised Palestinian government, and a UNDP probe concluded that there were no signs of Hamas activity in the area at the time the rubble was placed there.