**RISCH LEADS 20 COLLEAGUES IN URGING ADMINISTRATION TO CEASE ASSISTANCE TO UNRWA UNTIL REFORMS ARE SECURED**

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Jim Risch (R-Idaho), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, today led 20 colleagues in a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressing concern for the administration’s recent decision to resume U.S. foreign assistance funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The senators also encouraged the administration to cease this funding until significant reforms to UNRWA are secured.

Joining Risch were U.S. Senators Thom Tillis (R-N.C.), Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), Rick Scott (R-Fla.), Susan Collins (R-Maine), John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), Ben Sasse (R-Neb.), Rob Portman (R-Ohio), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Pat Toomey (R-Pa.), Steve Daines (R-Mont.), Roger Marshall (R-Kan.), Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Deb Fischer (R-Neb.), Bill Hagerty (R-Tenn.), John Boozman (R-Ark.), Todd Young (R-Ind.), John Thune (R-S.D.), and Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.).

“We are concerned that this administration’s decision to resume U.S. assistance to UNRWA was made in haste, without any actionable attempt to secure much-needed and meaningful reforms of the agency,” said the senators.

“Beyond its inflated and duplicative structure, there are serious concerns about the impartiality of UNRWA. Over the years the agency has employed individuals affiliated with Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization. UNRWA schools have been used to store Hamas weapons,” the senators continued. “Additionally, there have been numerous cases of UNRWA textbooks including material that is anti-Semitic, such as encouraging the destruction of the state of Israel and supporting martyrdom and/or violent jihad. It is troubling that these issues regarding the impartiality of UNRWA, including its education system, have yet to be sufficiently addressed despite this administration’s decision to restore U.S. funding.”

“Due to the significance of this issue, we urge you cease U.S. government assistance to UNRWA unless true reform as described above is secured. We appreciate your attention to this important matter,” the senators concluded.

Full text of the letter can be found here and below:

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express grave concern regarding the resumption of U.S. foreign assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). We are concerned that this administration’s decision to resume U.S. assistance to UNRWA was made in haste, without any actionable attempt to secure much-needed and meaningful reforms of the agency.

UNRWA, which was originally designed as a temporary agency to address Palestinian refugees’ needs in the aftermath of the 1948 Israeli-Arab conflict, has far outlived its mandate. Over the last 60 years, the agency has devolved into a body which provides assistance to a population that does not use the same standard definition of a refugee as the rest of the world. In fact, some of the population that UNRWA provides assistance to have citizenship in the countries of which they reside.

Beyond its inflated and duplicative structure, there are serious concerns about the impartiality of UNRWA. Over the years the agency has employed individuals affiliated with Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization. UNRWA schools have been used to store Hamas weapons. Additionally, there have been numerous cases of UNRWA textbooks including material that is anti-Semitic, such as encouraging the destruction of the state of Israel and supporting martyrdom and/or violent jihad. It is troubling that these issues regarding the impartiality of UNRWA, including its education system, have yet to be sufficiently addressed despite this administration’s decision to restore U.S. funding.

The United States has been one of the most generous donors to the Palestinian people. Our assistance is designed to be humanitarian in nature. However, UNRWA has grown into a bloated organization which does not embody the shared values between the United States and United Nations.

Prior to resuming funding in UNRWA the United States should secure the following reforms:

* Require independent verification that all UNRWA employees, employees of UNRWA partner organizations, and employees of UNRWA contracting entities are not affiliated with Hamas, Hezbollah or other foreign terrorist organizations, and
* Require independent verification that textbooks used by UNRWA do not include extremist and anti-Semitic content. This verification should be done by an organization agreed to jointly by the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and
* A policy of automatic suspension of all U.S. assistance to UNRWA if UNRWA facilities are used to house arms/ equipment involved in terrorist activity, and
* Require UNRWA to allow U.S. government to audit the organization, and
* Release publically the number of true UNRWA refugees and the number of “refugees” that have secured citizenship in the country they reside.

Due to the significance of this issue, we urge you cease U.S. government assistance to UNRWA unless true reform as described above is secured. We appreciate your attention to this important matter.