Hamas vows support for UNRWA workers staging ‘mutiny’

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A senior Hamas official on Thursday pledged the terror group’s support for employees of the UN agency for Palestinians, who have seized partial control of the agency’s Gaza headquarters in order to protest sweeping pay cuts and dismissals blamed on US funding cuts.

The director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Gaza accused the workers union of staging a “mutiny” over the job cuts, and admitted UNRWA does not have full control over its offices in Gaza City.

“I am the captain of the ship which has 13,000 sailors on it and they have basically thrown me off the bridge and consigned me to my captain’s quarters,” Matthias Schmale told AFP, referring to the number of employees in Gaza.

“They have taken over the compound where my office and other offices are,” he said, explaining that he has not been able to work from his office for over two weeks.

Last month, UNRWA announced that more than 250 staff in Gaza and the West Bank would lose their jobs, after a $300 million cut in annual funding from the United States.

UNRWA provides support for more than three million Palestinians across the Middle East, including the majority of Gaza’s two million residents.

It operates more than 200 schools in the enclave, which may not open at the start of the academic year without new funding and an end to the labor dispute.

The redundancies have prompted daily protests by the agency’s labor union in the enclave, which UNRWA’s Gaza head said have led to security concerns.

Schmale accused the labor union of multiple incidents of “threatening and intimidating other fellow Palestinian staff. For me that crosses a red line.”

“I am very concerned about the safety and security of my Palestinian colleagues,” he added.

The union denied all allegations of intimidation and is due to continue demonstrating, with a general strike expected in the coming days unless a deal is reached.

“This is a peaceful and safe sit-in inside the regional headquarters of UNRWA to demand [employees’] rights to be able to continue their work,” Amir al-Mishal, head of the UNRWA employee union in Gaza, told AFP.

He said some of those affected by the cuts had been working for the agency for more than 30 years and were seeking dialogue with the management.

### Hamas visits

On Wednesday, the protest inside the UNRWA compound was visited by Mahmoud Zahar, a senior Hamas member who pledged the group’s full support for protesters, an AFP correspondent said.

Schmale was unaware that Zahar had been inside the compound, saying any visit by a figure from Hamas — considered a terrorist organization by the US and European Union — was forbidden as it breaches the UN’s impartiality rules.

A small number of employees have begun a hunger strike against the cuts outside Schmale’s office, seeking to force management to reverse course.

Ismail al-Talaa, who worked in psychological support in a school, said he was on his fourth day without food.

He compared his salary of around $1,000 a month with what he called the huge incomes and benefits earned by Schmale and other senior UNRWA leaders, who are usually internationals.

The funding crisis was sparked in January by the United States, traditionally the largest donor to UNRWA, cutting its annual grant from $360 million to $60 million. US President Donald Trump linked the decision to the Palestinians’ refusal to speak with his administration after he recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital last December.

Last week, Foreign Policy magazine published emails revealing that Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner had pushed Jordan to revoke the refugee status of the approximately 2 million Palestinians in its territory as part of efforts to shutter UNRWA entirely.

Uniquely, UNRWA grants refugee status to all descendants of Palestinians who left or fled Israel with the establishment of the state in 1948, swelling the number to an estimated five million at present, when the number of actual refugees from that conflict is estimated to be in the low tens of thousands. In peace talks, the Palestinian leadership has always demanded a “right of return” to Israel for these millions — an influx that, if accepted by Israel, would spell the end of Israel as a majority Jewish state.

Israel argues that the Palestinian demand represents an UNRWA-facilitated effort to destroy Israel by demographic means. The Palestinians also seek an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Months of ongoing violent protests fueled by Hamas at the Gaza border with Israel were initiated under the banner of a “March of the Return,” and encouraged by Hamas leaders, with the declared ultimate goal of erasing the border and destroying Israel.

Israeli officials have indicated that an independent Palestinian state, if agreed upon in negotiations, would absorb Palestinian refugees and their descendants, just as Israel absorbed Jewish refugees from Middle Eastern and north African countries over the decades.