

Israel denies visas to UN staff as it hits back against Gaza war criticism



This UN-run school in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip is one of many that have been converted into shelters for Palestinians displaced by Israel's war in Gaza [File: Mahmud Hams/AFP]

Tel Aviv, December 25 (RHC)-- Israel will not renew the visa of a United Nations staff member in the country and will also deny the visa request of another UN employee as the country yet again expresses its displeasure of the global body, which has criticised Israel's targeting of civilians and hospitals during the Gaza war. An overwhelming majority of the more than 20,000 Palestinians killed are civilians.

"We will stop working with those who cooperate with the Hamas terrorist organization's propaganda," Eli Cohen, Israel's minister of foreign affairs, posted on X on Monday. "We will no longer remain silent in the face of the UN's hypocrisy!" he said. Israel has accused the UN of being biased.

Cohen described the UN's conduct as "a disgrace" since the war erupted on October 7 after Hamas carried out deadly attacks inside Israel, in which about 1,200 people were killed. The UN has criticised Hamas for the October 7 attacks and repeatedly called for the release of the captives taken by the group.

UN officials have criticised Israel's targeting of residential areas, schools and hospitals and its curbs on aid deliveries during a complete siege imposed on Gaza in the wake of the October 7 attacks. More than 100 journalists, about 270 medical personnel and at least 134 UN staff have been killed in Israeli strikes.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has repeatedly called for a ceasefire and decried the dire humanitarian crisis. The UN, aid groups and rights groups have warned that Palestinians are now facing hunger. The UN chief this month invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter, a move aimed at formally warning the Security Council of a global threat posed by Israel's war on Gaza.

The UN General Assembly has overwhelmingly voted for a humanitarian ceasefire several times since the war began, but votes at the UN Security Council have been vetoed and stalled by Israel's close ally the United States. It abstained in the vote on the latest resolution, allowing it to pass on Friday, but the measure has been criticised as "insufficient".

The Israeli foreign minister accused the UN chief, the UN human rights commissioner and the UN Women agency of legitimising "war crimes and crimes against humanity", publishing "unsubstantiated blood libels" and ignoring the "acts of rape committed against Israeli women" for two months.

But human rights organisations have also slammed Israel for its war tactics, calling it "collective punishment" of Gaza's 2.3 million people. Media reports have also debunked Israeli claims that Hamas ran a command centre under al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest medical facility, which was crippled by Israeli shelling. Israel has justified attacks on UN schools, universities and hospitals, saying they were used by Hamas, but it has provided no proof for its claims.

This month, Israel announced its decision to revoke the residence visa of Lynn Hastings, the UN humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, who left the country last week. "Someone who did not condemn Hamas for the brutal massacre of 1,200 Israelis ... but instead condemns Israel, a democratic country that protects its citizens, cannot serve in the UN and cannot enter Israel!" Cohen wrote on X.

Hastings had criticised Israeli restrictions on much-needed aid deliveries. "The conditions required to deliver aid to the people of Gaza do not exist," she said on December 4. "If possible, an even more hellish scenario is about to unfold, one in which humanitarian operations may not be able to respond," she said, referring to the resumption of Israel's bombardment on Gaza at the end of a one-week pause in fighting between Israel and Hamas.

On October 25, Israel's ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, warned that his country would refuse visas to UN officials after Guterres criticised Israel for ordering civilians to evacuate from northern Gaza to southern Gaza and said Hamas's attacks on Israel did "not happen in a vacuum".

"I am shocked by the misrepresentations by some of my statement ... as if I was justifying acts of terror by Hamas. This is false. It was the opposite," Guterres said without mentioning Israel's name. Besides denying visas and accusing the UN chief of being unfit to run the agency, Cohen also said this month that he had instructed the Israeli mission to the UN to oppose the advancement of the annual budget of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

The agency has repeatedly warned that aid work in Gaza is at a breaking point as the Israeli siege continues. Israel imposed a total siege in the wake of October 7 attacks, cutting off electricity, water and food. The Palestinian enclave has been called an "open air prison" due to Israel's land, air and sea blockade imposed since 2007.

UNRWA has taken in about 1.2 million civilians – two-thirds of all displaced people in Gaza – in its shelters across the strip.

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