

Canada pledges \$70 million in aid to crisis-hit Palestine refugee agency

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Ottawa, December 23 (RHC)-- Canada has pledged 90 million Canadian dollars (\$70 million U\$D) in aid to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, which has been reeling from two years of funding cuts from the United States and other donors.

Karina Gould, the Canadian minister of international development, said the aid will be distributed over three years and will “help respond to the rising needs of vulnerable Palestinian refugees” in the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The aid comes after the agency’s chief warned last month it was facing its “worst financial crisis” ever.

Known as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the organisation runs schools and provides health services as well as other humanitarian aid

to an estimated 5.7 million Palestinians with refugee status.

“The needs of Palestinian refugees are undeniable, especially during a global pandemic: they face high rates of poverty, food insecurity and unemployment,” Gould said in a statement, adding that responding to the needs of Palestinian refugees was “part of the path towards peace and prosperity in the Middle East”.

The funding will provide emergency life-saving assistance to an estimated 465,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria and Lebanon and contribute to meeting the basic education, health and livelihood needs of Palestinian refugees, the statement said.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government restored aid to UNRWA in 2016 after it had been cut four years earlier by his conservative predecessor Stephen Harper. From 2016-2019, Canada spent 110 million Canadian dollars (\$85.5 million USD) on support for the agency. It also provided 1.5 million Canadian dollars (\$1.1 million US\$) in April to help it respond to the pandemic.

Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA commissioner-general, said in November that it had run out of money to pay the salaries of its staff across the Middle East, and called for \$70 million to pay 28,000 staff in full for November and December.

Israel has long pushed for UNRWA’s closure, arguing it helps perpetuate the conflict with the Palestinians. It criticises the agency’s method of classifying Palestinian refugees since their descendants are also eligible for the status.

U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration backed Israel by cutting aid in 2018. Washington had been providing UNRWA \$300 million a year, roughly one-third of its core annual budget.

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