

ACTION ALERT: AA 18-4 PALESTINIAN REFUGEES AND UNRWA

As Quakers, we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

Sept 2018

The United States Government has decided to cut all its funding support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) within thirty days. This will have severe consequences for Palestinian refugees, some of the most marginalized people. This Alert explains why and suggests action.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)

This agency was created in 1949 to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories, and in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It now supports over 5 million refugees, under UN General Assembly Resolution 302 that authorizes such support until the refugee issue is resolved. Its annual budget is now over \$1 billion and it provides education, health and other essential services.

The US cut \$65m in January following its move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, and will cut the rest of its \$300m allocation in the next month. The US and Israel believe that the method that UNRWA uses to calculate the numbers of refugees (including children of refugees) could threaten the 'Jewish character' of Israel if their 'right to return' became a reality.

The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, has said that UNRWA "has a strong record of providing high-quality education and health and other essential services". According to Chris Gunness, a spokesperson for UNRWA, the funding cut will reduce the funds available by over \$200m within thirty days and may lead to a reduction in its workforce (mainly teachers). An appeal for extra support from other countries has so far received a positive response from Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia in the region, and also from Canada and Norway (reported by *Al Jazeera News*, 2 September).

In an interview on *ABC RN Breakfast* (3 September) Chris Gunness emphasised that UNRWA operates under the same basis as UNHCR, in that until a peace agreement has been reached, all refugees must be helped by UNRWA. The UNGA endorsed its role recently by a vote of 167 to 1 (US).

Australia and UNRWA

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) indicates on its website that Australia supports UNRWA, and in 2017-18 that support contributed to universal primary education for more than half a million Palestinian refugee children, a 99% vaccination rate for infants, over 8.3 million visits to UNRWA health care facilities, social safety net assistance (cash and food) to over 254,500 people, and micro loans to over 38,500 people. Humanitarian assistance was also given via UNRWA to over a million refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and Syria.

Under its Aid Investment Plan for 2015-19, Australia is committed to improve public financial management and a more competitive agricultural economy in the Palestinian territories, and ensure that refugees can access quality basic services. In 2018-19 the level of assistance will total \$43m.

Action

The Australian Government should be asked what action it will take to help meet the immediate crisis facing UNRWA, and what longer term plans it has to ensure that the international community will honour its commitment to resolving the refugee challenge in the Middle East. Contact the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Marise Payne, and the Shadow Minister Senator Penny Wong. Their contact emails are – Senator.Payne@aph.gov.au and Senator.Wong@aph.gov.au

Also, contact other MPs and Senators to raise the urgency of the issue.

Parliamentarians who may be especially engaged are on the following sub-committee of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade:

Members of the Foreign Affairs and Aid Sub-Committee

Mr Chris Crewther MP (*Chair*); Senator Alex Gallacher (Deputy Chair)
 Mr Nick Champion MP (*ex officio*), Ms Sharon Claydon MP, The Hon Michael Danby MP, Senator David Fawcett (*ex officio*), Senator Kimberley Kitching, Mr Andrew Laming MP, Senator The Hon Ian Macdonald, Senator Malarndirri McCarthy, Senator Jim Molan AO DSC, Senator Claire Moore, Senator Linda Reynolds CSC, Senator the Hon Lisa Singh, Senator Dean Smith, Mrs Ann Sudmalis MP, Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP, Mr Trent Zimmerman MP

Canberra
 September 2018