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Outcry erupts as Canada starts to move away from Palestinian refugee agency

By Lee Berthiaume

The government has quietly taken what many consider the first step to cutting ties with the UN agency responsible for supporting more than 4.67 million Palestinian refugees scattered throughout the Middle East. Some Jewish groups are applauding the decision to change the way Canada funds the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA, alleging strong ties between it and terrorist groups. Others, however, say those allegations are completely unfounded and argue that the change will, in fact, force average Palestinians to increasingly rely on terrorist groups.

UNRWA was established in 1949 as a temporary organization to provide help and assistance to the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees displaced by Arab-Israeli war. Its operations expanded after the 1967 war.

There are 4.67 million registered Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. UNRWA still provides emergency support like food, clothing and health services, but has also set up schools and other services for what has become a quasi-permanent population.

Canada has been a long-time donor to the organization, providing both core funding and responding to emergency appeals. A report prepared by the Library of Parliament in November said Canada was UNRWA's seventh largest donor, with about \$15 million in general fund contributions.

But officials in the offices of both CIDA Minister Bev Oda and Treasury Board president Vic Toews have confirmed that Canada's \$15 million will now be spent specifically on food security instead of supplementing UNRWA's general fund.

"Food aid," said Jean-Luc Benoît, Ms. Oda's spokesman. "Instead of providing untagged, if you want, core funding, we're just providing the same amount of money but it's directed towards food aid."

The government has been undertaking an aid effectiveness strategy, and part of that has been to identify three priority sectors for the vast majority of development funding. Food security is one of those sectors, and Mr. Benoît said that is the only reason they made the move.

"That is a need that they identified and it fits within our priorities," Mr. Benoît said. "That's why we went there."

"There are all sorts of rumours. But I think people are reinventing the wheel. There is a need, it's part of our priorities, so we said 'Fine, our \$15 million will go towards food aid....' There's nothing else there."

Close to done

However, others, both those who support the government's decision and those who oppose it, are reading much more into things. And there is a feeling Canada is one move away from cutting itself free from the Palestinian refugee agency.

Mr. Benoît would not comment on Canada's long-term plans for the agency, but Frank Dimant, executive vice-president of Jewish advocacy group B'Nai Brith, was optimistic more changes will be coming.

"This is certainly a step in the right direction," he said. "I believe it's beginning to break out of the mold and the pattern and so I believe it's a very progressive step forward."

Jewish organizations have long alleged that UNRWA has been infiltrated by groups like Hamas, which has been fighting Israel and its presence in the region for decades. They have also alleged that funds given to the UN agency are being diverted to the group, while UNRWA facilities like schools and health clinics are infiltrated and used as recruitment centres and for other activities.

Mr. Dimant repeated many of these allegations, and said that UNRWA "has become an industry unto itself."

"UNRWA has become a large business enterprise, as so many UN entities have, in fact," he said. "So while it may have done some good, I think that it is strange, to say the least, that there is a specific refugee agency just dedicated for the Palestinians and that all the millions of other refugees in the world are serviced in a different category."

B'Nai Brith and the Canada-Israel Committee have both released statements applauding the government's decision, while pro-Israel websites and media have reported widely on the change. Mr. Dimant said his organization had been advocating in favour of moving away from UNRWA for a long time.

"I believe it was a combination of factors," Mr. Dimant said when asked why previous governments have not made a similar move. "One is the bureaucracy in Ottawa was very used to dealing with UNRWA. Two, there was very little political will to change the course of action.... I think there was no desire to rock any boats, to have any confrontations with UNRWA, to have differences of opinion at the United Nations. It's business as usual, we'll just go along."

Mr. Dimant said his organization will now have to meet with Ms. Oda and other government officials to find out what the next steps are, given that money will still be going to UNRWA. But he was extremely happy.

"I think we have to look at the moral leadership that Canada is now providing the world," he said. "And I hope that this action by Canada will in fact impact on some of the other donor countries to say 'We should be assuring our citizens that we are actually delivering the charitable dollars to the appropriate end-user.'"

Allegations spark anger, rebuttals

While Mr. Benoît said the government's decision was merely an effort to bring the UNRWA funding in line with CIDA priorities, critics feel the government has in fact adopted the viewpoint outlined by Mr. Dimant and has shifted the money to food aid instead of core funding to make it easier to jettison the organization when the current project runs out. To that end, widespread anger and frustration have emerged, particularly given what opponents call the spreading of misinformation based on ideology.

For example, there is vehement opposition to suggestions UNRWA is a propaganda tool for Hamas or other terrorist movements, or that Canadian money was being used by those organizations to support anti-Israeli activity.

In a written response to the *Israel National News*, UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness called the allegations "baseless." He noted the United States and Europe, "which give serious support to the State of Israel, are UNRWA's two most generous supporters. If these baseless allegations were even halfway true, do you really think the US and [European Commission] would give us hundreds of millions of dollars each year?"

Mr. Gunness went on to cite a US Government Accountability Office audit of UNRWA conducted in May that found some problems with the UN agency, but ongoing efforts to improve its oversight and accountability.

"There are groups who seem to think that if UNRWA were de-funded and disappeared, the refugees would disappear too. This is a deluded fiction," he added.

There is a sense among those who support UNRWA that this last point is a major contributing factor in the government's decision to move away from the organization.

"There has always been a strong feeling among the more ardent supporters of Israel that you can blame the whole Palestinian refugee problem on UNRWA," said a former Canadian official who asked not to be named. "The Israeli hope and dream was that these people would be absorbed into Jordan and Syria and Lebanon. The fact is they weren't."

The fact is, the official said, if UNRWA didn't exist, Israel, as the occupying power, would be responsible for supporting the Palestinian refugees.

"Under international law, if you are occupying a territory and there are refugees from other places within the conflict zone, it is your responsibility," he said. "The international community has picked up that part of the Israeli tab. But there is a huge amount of misinformation and disinformation that is generated based on just a theory that those refugees are still around."

There have also been reports of a rivalry between Hamas and UNRWA, particularly in Gaza, because the UN agency provides an alternative to Hamas. The argument is that taking core funding away from UNRWA will simply force Palestinians to rely on such groups. NDP Foreign Affairs critic Paul Dewar said that is why Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told Canadian parliamentarians in Ottawa last year to continue supporting the agency.

"When we met with Abbas here, he was very straightforward with us. When we asked the classic question, 'What can Canada do to help?' he said 'Stick with your commitments, the commitments that you have made, including UNRWA.' He was very specific."

Mr. Dewar said officials within Foreign Affairs and CIDA, as well as those working in the field and in other governments, have said UNRWA is important. For that reason, he believes the government's decision to change its funding to UNRWA is based on ideology rather than evidence.

"It really shows the government doesn't have a clear idea of what is best for the region, what is best for a lasting peace and a negotiated settlement, and we have turned our backs on long-standing commitments in the past," he said. "Where's this decision being made and on what basis is it being made? Who provided this recommendation? It was not the diplomats, it was not the people who were working in the department."

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