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Israel's 'disinformation campaign' against Unrwa must not 'undermine' its 'life-saving mandate' - Tánaiste

Micheál Martin calls on countries, including US and UK, to resume funding Gaza aid agency

Sorcha Pollak

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Israel is carrying out a “disinformation campaign” against the UN Palestinian refugee agency, Unrwa, and one country “must not be allowed to undermine” the organisation’s “life-saving mandate” in the Gaza Strip, the Tánaiste has said.

Speaking at a press conference with Unrwa commissioner-general Philippe Lazzarini on Thursday, Micheál Martin underlined that Ireland’s support for the agency remained “steadfast” following his announcement that Ireland would give €20 million in support to Unrwa.

Mr Martin, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, called on countries who have paused funding to the agency, which include the United States, UK and Germany, to “urgently rescind this decision and resume funding”.

Unrwa, which provides healthcare, education and other services to Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and across the Middle East, is currently under investigation following allegations by Israel that 12 of its staff were involved in the October 7th Hamas-led attack on Israel which sparked the bombardment of Gaza.

“I was deeply concerned that a number of Unrwa key donors suspended their funding based on allegations against a very small number of staff that have yet to be proven,” Mr Martin said, adding that it would be inconceivable to allow Unrwa to collapse “at such a dangerous moment”.

The International Court of Justice has ordered Israel to enable the provision of urgently needed humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, but “instead, Israel has launched a disinformation campaign against Unrwa. Sufficient aid is still not reaching civilians in Gaza and that is clearly unacceptable,” said the Tánaiste.

Mr Lazzarini said the UN was currently investigating the allegations but warned that Unrwa was under “existential threat”. He noted that Israeli authorities were not fully co-operating with the investigation.

Dismantling Unrwa would have far-reaching implications, he said, not only for Palestinians caught in the Gaza Strip but for the millions of other Palestinians across the Middle East who rely on the agency for basic survival.

“Weakening or dismantling of Unrwa would also have a negative impact in any transition project,” said Mr Lazzarini, who added that 500,000 children of primary and secondary school age left traumatised by the conflict relied on Unrwa support.

“This is the most dangerous, painful, depressing period because until the day there is a proper political package there will be no significant investment in the Gaza Strip, which has been destroyed so far.”

He said Unrwa was the only organisation capable of providing services at the scale required given it was created to assist “one of the most destitute” communities across the region.

Mr Lazzarini said that if Unrwa was allowed to “disappear it would be held by the Palestinian refugees as a betrayal by the international community, as an abandonment and ultimately impact their aspiration for self determination”.

Asked if Ireland would consider restricting funding based on the findings of the investigation into the Unrwa staff members’ alleged involvement in the Hamas attacks, Mr Martin said the State would “weigh up the outcome” but that there was “no alternative to Unrwa in terms of sustaining basic services in Gaza and across the region”.

Who is going to provide for the estimated 17,000 children orphaned by this conflict or the 300,000 children no longer attending school, he asked.

“There’s a lot of rhetoric and language and noise, but we need to drill down to the reality. This is horrific, this is a catastrophe. My biggest fear is that when these hostilities end, the world needs to be allowed into Gaza to see the horrors of what has happened. I fear we don’t know the full extent of the horrors,” Mr Martin said.

On the joint call made by Ireland and Spain for the European Union’s trade agreement with Israel to be urgently reviewed by the European Commission, Mr Martin said the State was working with other “like-minded countries within the EU” to ensure human rights obligations were adhered to.

“We believe the human rights clauses have not been upheld and at this time of reckoning the European Commission cannot fudge these issues any more,” he said. “I think it’s fair and correct to raise the issue because when we put human rights into agreements we should mean them. And they’re not just add-ons to agreements but they’re integral parts of agreements such as this.”

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