

# COI Focus

## LEBANON – PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

### The UNRWA financial crisis and its impact on programmes

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Cedoca

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## List of abbreviations used

CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CMHP	Community Mental Health Programme
e-Health	electronic health information system
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EA	Emergency Appeal
EiE	Education in Emergencies
EU	European Union
GBV	gender-based violence
GMR	Great March of Return
HC	health centre
JCP	Job Creation Programme
LFO	Lebanon Field Office
MD	Microfinance Department
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
MYA	Multi-year agreement
NCD	Noncommunicable disease
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
oPt	Occupied Palestinian Territory
PHC	primary health care
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PRC	Palestinian Return Centre
PRL	Palestine Refugees in Lebanon
PRS	Palestine refugees from Syria in Lebanon
RSS	Relief and Social Services
SLM	Self-Learning Materials
SMS	Short Message Service (text message)
SSNP	Social Safety Net Programme
STC	Siblin Training Centre
TDS	The Daily Star
UAE	The United Arab Emirates

UN	United Nations
UNRWA	The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
US	United States
USD	United States dollar
VTC	Vocational/educational training centres
WFP	World Food Programme

## 1. The composition of the UNRWA budget

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of 5,7 million registered Palestine refugees in five fields of operation.<sup>1</sup> Its mission is “to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip achieve their human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.”<sup>2</sup> The General Assembly has consistently extended the agency’s mandate, most recently until 30 June 2023.<sup>3</sup>

UNRWA is confronted with an increased demand for services resulting from a growth in the number of registered Palestine refugees, the extent of their vulnerability and their deepening poverty. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions but financial support has been outpaced by the growth in needs. As a result, the UNRWA programme budget, which supports the delivery of core essential services, operates with a large shortfall.<sup>4</sup>

What does UNRWA do?:

- Free basic education for 530,000 boys and girls at over 700 UNRWA schools;
- Free healthcare and medicine for 3.5 million Palestine refugees at 150 clinics;
- Essential food and cash assistance for 1.7 million extremely vulnerable refugees;
- Dignity, human security and political horizon for 5.6 million Palestine refugees;
- Stability of the entire region amid conflict and escalating tensions.<sup>5</sup>

The biggest budget is the programme budget (General Fund), which covers expenses for UNRWA’s core programmes (see infographic in [chapter 4](#)). Over half of the 2020 Programme Budget (a requested US\$ 806 million) was earmarked for education, while 15 per cent was dedicated to ensuring that ‘refugees’ health is protected and the disease burden is reduced’. The UNRWA Programme Budget (General Fund) comprises recurrent staff and non-staff costs.<sup>6</sup> Funds for the programme budget are mainly collected through voluntary contributions from UN member states as well as the EU.<sup>7</sup>

UNRWA also provides emergency assistance to refugees affected by conflict in the Agency’s areas of operations (see infographic in [chapter 4](#)). Emergency operations have been conducted in the West Bank and Gaza since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 and in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan since June 2012 as part of the Syria Regional Humanitarian Response Plan.<sup>8</sup> The Agency requested US\$ 138 million in 2020 to cover the cost of critical emergency interventions in sectors such as food, cash-for-work, emergency cash assistance, emergency health, mental health and psychosocial support, education in emergencies, protection and water and sanitation.<sup>9</sup> The emergency budget is based on the collection of funds from the donor community through annual emergency appeals.

<sup>1</sup> UNRWA, s.d., [url](#); UNRWA, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>2</sup> UNRWA, 17/01/2017, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> The Times of Israël, 15/12/2019, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> UNRWA, *Donor Resource*, s.d., [url](#); UNRWA, 07/08/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 05/02/2020, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, *For Palestine refugees*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>6</sup> UNRWA, *Core Programme Budget*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>7</sup> UNRWA, *Core Programme Budget*, s.d., [url](#); Landinfo, 24/09/2018, [url](#)

<sup>8</sup> UNRWA, *How we spend funds*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>9</sup> UNRWA, *Emergency appeals*, s.d., [url](#)

In addition to the planned budget, UNRWA receives earmarked funds from the donor community for specific projects that donors wish to implement.<sup>10</sup>

To respond to the most urgent health and non-health needs arising from the COVID-19 emergency, UNRWA launched a separate US\$ 93.4 million Flash Appeal covering the period March-July 2020.<sup>11</sup> In September 2020 UNRWA issued a new humanitarian appeal from August through December 2020 to address the worst impacts of the pandemic on Palestine refugees. Through this appeal the agency sought US\$ 94.6 million. The funds requested in this appeal are additional to the previous UNRWA COVID-19 appeal for March to July 2020.<sup>12</sup>

UNRWA mainly receives support of UN Member States including regional governments and the European Union. Together, these sources represent over 90.04 percent of financial contributions to the Agency.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the year donor states and the EU sign contributions to UNRWA as well as during yearly pledging conferences. Following the last Extraordinary Virtual Ministerial Pledging Conference on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2020, some 75 countries and non-governmental organisations pledged \$130 million in financial commitments to UNRWA.<sup>14</sup> The meeting was held to bridge a \$400 million funding gap. Of the US\$ 130 million raised at the UNRWA virtual pledging conference, US\$ 19.5 million has been earmarked for the COVID-19 response .<sup>15</sup> The next international conference called by UNRWA is expected in April 2021.<sup>16</sup>

In November 2020 UNRWA launched a global appeal for immediate support to enable it to work on a longer plan covering the next two years based on multi-year funding instead of annual funding.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Landinfo, 24/09/2018, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>12</sup> UNRWA, 02/09/2020, [url](#)

<sup>13</sup> UNRWA, *How we are funded*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> UN News, 23/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>15</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>16</sup> Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)

## 2. The US budget cut and austerity measures taken by UNRWA

According to UNRWA, its financial crisis has become chronic since 2015.<sup>18</sup> On 31 August 2018, the United States (US) announced it would pull all funding from UNRWA. The State Department referred to what it called the "business model" of UNRWA, saying this made it an "irredeemably flawed operation".<sup>19</sup> UNRWA needed additional funds to keep schools open until the end of the year.<sup>20</sup> Additional contributions to help bridge the funding gap were confirmed by various countries.<sup>21</sup> In 2019, UNRWA again faced a budget deficit threatening the continuation of some of its programmes.<sup>22</sup>

In an article published on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2019, Al Jazeera unveiled the contents of a confidential internal report from UNRWA. The report detailed alleged abuses of authority among the organisation's senior management team. According to Al Jazeera, the report was sent to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in December 2018 and an investigation was launched.<sup>23</sup> After these revelations, several countries decided to suspend their funding to UNRWA.<sup>24</sup> On 6 November 2019, the UN Secretary-General received the first conclusions of the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services investigation. They excluded fraud or embezzlement by the Commissioner-General but highlighted management problems.<sup>25</sup> Following this, Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl resigned and the UN Secretary-General appointed Christian Saunders as head of UNRWA.<sup>26</sup> These changes at the head of the organisation led governments to resume funding for UNRWA and additional contributions were announced. New Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini took charge on 18 March 2020, just one week after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared.<sup>27</sup>

Over the last five years, UNRWA has increased efficiency and prioritized cost reduction measures, reducing \$500 million out of the budget, but thereby impacting its services.<sup>28</sup> These cuts led to staff removals, a halt on repairs and infrastructure investments, increased classroom sizes to 50 students per teacher and reduced humanitarian assistance efforts.<sup>29</sup> In 2020, UNRWA again operated under strict cost control and austerity measures, according to the Commissioner-general. As a result, the Agency reduced its 2020 programme budget by \$85 million to \$806 million.<sup>30</sup> The budget shortfall has resulted in services being adjusted to a minimum.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>19</sup> UNRWA, 03/09/2018, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> Naharnet, 04/09/2018, [url](#); UNRWA, 28/08/2018, [url](#); Al Jazeera, 02/09/2018, [url](#)

<sup>21</sup> UNRWA, 20/11/2018, [url](#)

<sup>22</sup> UNRWA, 23/05/2019, [url](#); UNRWA, 26/06/2019, [url](#); UNRWA, 29/07/2019, [url](#)

<sup>23</sup> Al Jazeera, 29/07/2019, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Al Jazeera, 01/08/2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, 02/08/2019, [url](#); De Telegraaf, 31/07/2019, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> ONU Info, 06/11/2019, [url](#)

<sup>26</sup> Le Temps, 06/11/2019, [url](#); PalInfo, 07/11/2019, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> UN News, 23/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> UNRWA Donor Communique,[mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 11/01/2021

<sup>29</sup> Al Monitor, 09/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 25/11/2020, [url](#); Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#); UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

### 3. 2020

In 2020, UNRWA faced a double crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Against the background of sustained political and economic turmoil, the agency dealt with its most “drastic” financial shortfall in its history, as the agency’s states in its donor communiqué in January 2021.<sup>32</sup> This was compounded by the global public health crisis of COVID-19, which is now, according to UNRWA, fueling a pandemic of “abject poverty”.<sup>33</sup>

In 2020, core contributions to the agency were \$50 million less than in 2019, \$300 million less than in 2018.<sup>34</sup> The 2020 needed core budget was 806 US\$ million (see infographic in 4). At the same time, needs of Palestine refugees have increased significantly as a result of conflicts and multiple socio-economic crises. In addition, the pandemic hit with a devastating toll on the most vulnerable.<sup>35</sup> Palestine refugees are among the most vulnerable communities in the region, particularly in the context of nearly ten years of conflict and a growing financial crisis in Syria, an economic crisis in Lebanon, chronic impoverishment and blockade in Gaza and an increasingly tense political environment in the West Bank as a result of Israel’s new annexation plan.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout 2020, UNRWA “struggled” to raise the funding needed to continue running all its programmes, as the agency states on its website.<sup>37</sup> According to the NGO Palestinian Return Centre (PRC), the agency faces additional burdens due to the crisis caused by the pandemic, which “distracted” donor countries through their national concerns at this stage in containing the epidemic.<sup>38</sup> According to the Commissioner-general of UNRWA, there is more pressure on the organisation to deliver more, but at the same time, the environment of donors is more complicated because they have all been impacted economically by the pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

The agency’s COVID-19 response has been operating under “extremely difficult” circumstances, as stated in its COVID-19 response summary on 29 July 2020.<sup>40</sup> The agency received only half of the COVID-19 Appeal funding.<sup>41</sup>

Between March to June 2020, most agency offices were closed and the majority of staff worked remotely from home, with the exception of a small number of front line field staff who ensured that minimal services were maintained and the most vulnerable refugees were supported.<sup>42</sup> The NGO PRC condemned a decision by UNRWA during this period to temporarily cut the wages of day workers. UNRWA’s media adviser Adnan Abu Hasana said the agency opted for such a measure owing to an “extremely alarming” financial situation. Speaking with PRC, Abu Hasana said UNRWA decided to lay off day laborers after its operations have been partly halted in its five fields of operations in line with precautionary measures taken by host countries to prevent further COVID-19 contaminations. The decision affected hundreds of day workers, including teachers and cleaning workers in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Abu Hasana said day laborers would only be paid in

<sup>32</sup> UNRWA Donor Communiqué, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 11/01/2021

<sup>32</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>33</sup> UNRWA Donor Communiqué, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 11/01/2021

<sup>33</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>34</sup> UNRWA Donor Communiqué, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 11/01/2021

<sup>35</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>36</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#); The Guardian (Holmes O.), 12/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> UNRWA, 09/2019, [url](#)

<sup>38</sup> PRC, 18/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>39</sup> The Guardian (Holmes O.), 12/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>40</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>41</sup> UNRWA, *DONOR RESOURCE*, 24/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)



return for work done in favor of the agency, as stated by the work contract struck between the two sides.<sup>43</sup>

In the beginning of November 2020, UNRWA notified its staff of 28,000 that due to budget shortfalls, it had run out of money to pay workers through November and December. Most of those affected are refugees themselves.<sup>44</sup>

This was the first time that UNRWA reached the cliff's edge with no money on hand nor confirmed pledges to cover two months of salaries. It did get the funds to pay the November salaries, but a few weeks late and only by borrowing from a special UN fund.<sup>45</sup> UNRWA was indeed compelled to secure an additional 20m Dollar CERF (UN Central Emergency Response Fund) loan – the last one according to Emergency Relief Coordinator Marc Lowcock - to help with cash flow and cover part of the November payroll.<sup>46</sup> This measure adds additional financial liabilities to the agency in 2021.<sup>47</sup> "UNRWA is stretched beyond capacity and about to crash", the Commissioner-General stated on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2020.<sup>48</sup>

UNRWA launched an appeal in November 2020 for immediate support to enable it to "bridge the current deficit gap".<sup>49</sup> Since then, the agency received US\$ 33 million in additional pledges.<sup>50</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the European Union (EU) signed an additional contribution of EUR 4.6 million to the 2020 Programme Budget of UNRWA.<sup>51</sup> On 10 December 2020, the Government of India contributed US\$ 2 million.<sup>52</sup> On 19 December 2020 Spanish officials announced an additional contribution of EUR 5 million from the Government of Spain in support of Palestine refugees.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this, UNRWA was not able to pay in full the December salaries of the staff providing essential education, health and social protection to the refugees.<sup>54</sup> Donors agreed, exceptionally, to employ funds that were earmarked for purposes outside the program budget to enable UNRWA to pay salaries for the month of December, with the requirement that the amount be paid with the first payments that reach the agency at the beginning of 2021. The full amount however was not available according to a UNRWA spokeswoman.<sup>55</sup> The December salaries are still not fully funded.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>43</sup> PRC, 30/03/2020, [url](#); PRC, 18/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> Al Monitor, 09/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>45</sup> L'Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>46</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> UNRWA, 25/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>48</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>49</sup> Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>50</sup> UNRWA Donor Communique, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 11/01/2021

<sup>51</sup> UNRWA, 22/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>52</sup> UNRWA, 10/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>53</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>54</sup> UNRWA Donor Communique, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 11/01/2021

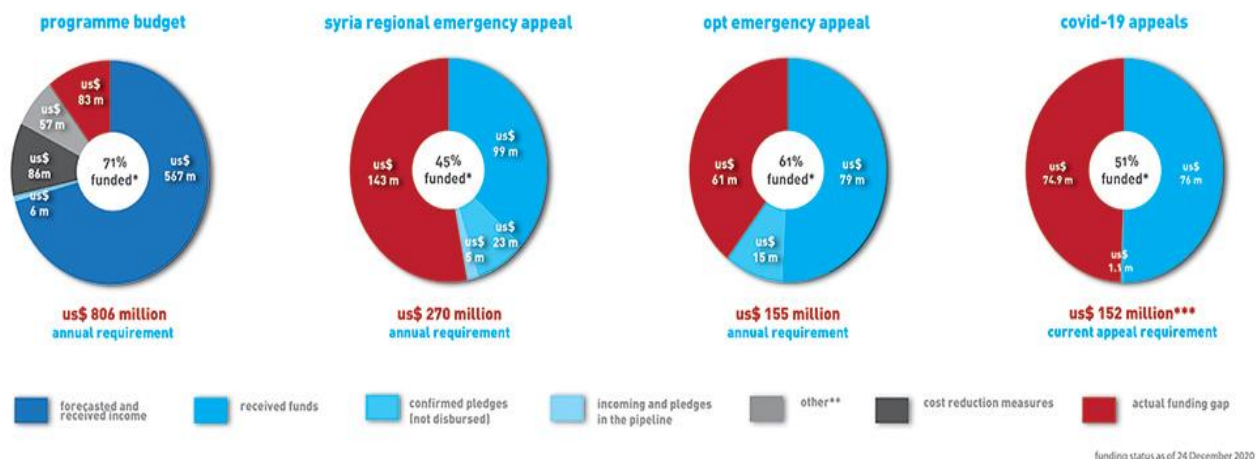
<sup>55</sup> Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>56</sup> L'Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#)

## 4. Budget shortfall

UNRWA closed 2020 with a budget deficit and only half of the funding needed for its planned COVID-19 response.<sup>57</sup> It has received only 61 % for the emergency budget to respond to the acute humanitarian needs in the Occupied Territories, where Palestine refugees often live in abject poverty.<sup>58</sup>

The budget gap by the end of 2020 as presented on UNRWA’s Donor Resource page:



\* Percentage of confirmed, non-disbursed pledges and received funds against the annual requirement.  
 \*\* **Other:** includes miscellaneous income such as programme support costs income.  
 \*\*\* US\$ 94.6 million is needed for the COVID-19 Appeal needs through December 2020. The previous COVID-19 Flash Appeal that run from March to August required US\$ 93.4 million and was 62 per cent funded. The Appeal overview includes pledges confirmed and received for both Appeals and since the onset of the emergency in March 2020.  
**Projects Portal:** US\$ 57 million have been pledged for 2020 project funding including US\$ 39 million for priority projects.

### UNRWA Funding portals 2020<sup>59</sup>

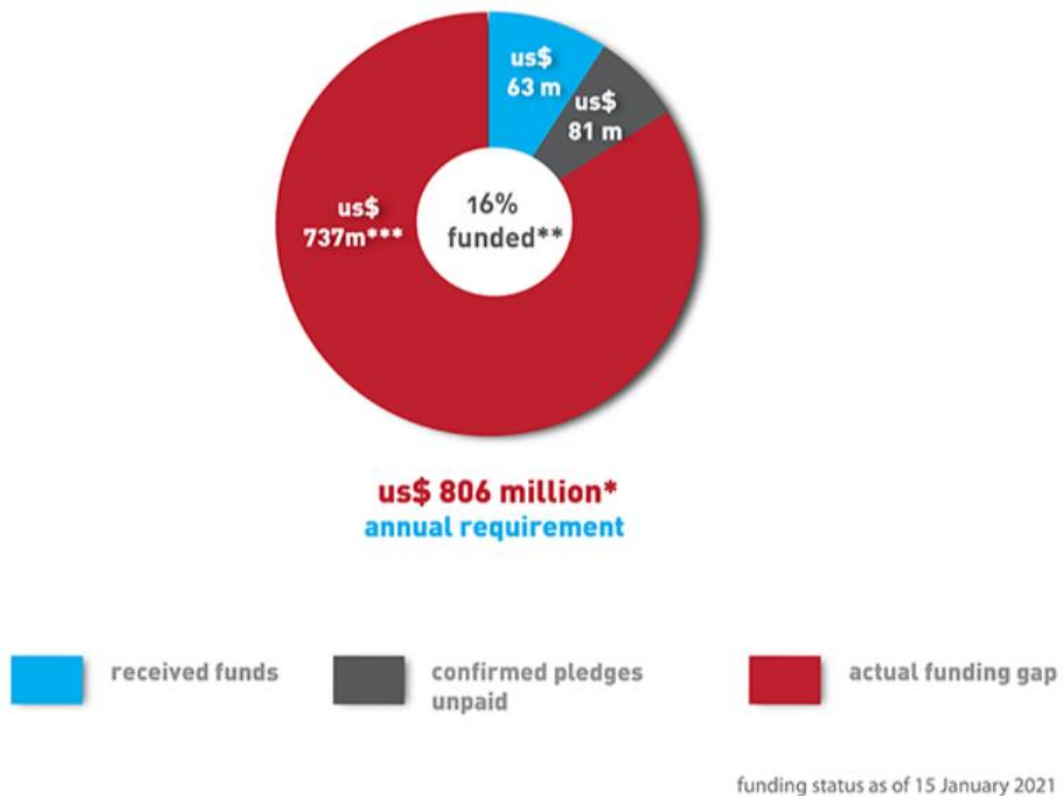
UNRWA states that the budget for its services in 2021 is similar to the budget of last year - \$1.4 billion (\$806 million to cover the basic services)- but there has been great difficulty in mobilizing the financial resources for it, leading to a “dangerous financial situation.”<sup>60</sup> According to the director of UNRWA operations in Gaza, the salary crisis will continue for two or three months until the international conference called by the UN agency is held, which is expected in April 2021.<sup>61</sup>

Failure to pay salaries will disrupt UNRWA’s operations, according to the Commissioner-General.<sup>62</sup> “Loss of access to UNRWA services, at a time of increasing despair and distress in the camps, when Palestine refugees expect a stronger UNRWA to help cope with increasing challenges, will fast spread disarray, anger and have a destabilizing effect on host countries and the region”.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> UNRWA, *DONOR RESOURCE*, 24/12/2020, [url](#)  
<sup>58</sup> UNRWA, 21/07/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, *DONOR RESOURCE*, 24/12/2020, [url](#)  
<sup>59</sup> UNRWA, *DONOR RESOURCE*, 24/12/2020, [url](#)  
<sup>60</sup> UNRWA Donor Communiqué, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 01/02/2021; Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)  
<sup>61</sup> Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)  
<sup>62</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)  
<sup>63</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

Most of UNRWA’s staff come from the Palestinian community and face similar health and other challenges.<sup>64</sup> Today’s threat to salaries happens at a time when UNRWA staff is fighting the spread of COVID-19 in the region. Among UN agencies, UNRWA staff report the highest number of COVID-19 cases because they are at the frontline of the response and are themselves from the refugee community.<sup>65</sup>

The current funding situation as presented on UNRWA’s Donor Resource page:



\* 2021 requirement includes US\$806m for the current year and US\$75m of carryover from 2020.  
 \*\* Percentage of confirmed, non-disbursed pledges and received funds against 2021 requirement.  
 \*\*\* Funding gap includes carryover from 2020 <sup>66</sup>

New US president Joe Biden has said he will restore US aid to Palestinians, but he has not said when or whether the UNRWA funding would return to its previous level.<sup>67</sup> Biden's win was met with jubilation and hope for a better future among many of the thousands of Palestinian refugees. But the reality may not be as rosy, with many other domestic and international priorities far higher on the new administration's list, and limited funds according to Special Correspondent Leila Molana-Allen.<sup>68</sup>

On 28 January 2021, UNRWA declared it expects a funding crisis as of March 2021, and on a larger scale, the expected deficit may lead to the financial collapse of the agency. The agency takes into

<sup>64</sup> UNRWA, 25/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>65</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>66</sup> UNRWA, *DONOR RESOURCE*, 15/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>67</sup> Al Araby, 26/01/2021, [url](#); L’Orient Le Jour (Khatib S.), 28/01/2021, [url](#); L’Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#); Times of Israel (Tandon S.), 06/01/2021, [url](#); TDS, 20/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>68</sup> PBS (Allen L.M.), 20/12/2020, [url](#)

account the prospect of re-engaging the new US administration, thus expecting a slightly higher income than in 2020, but “this slight increase in income will not be able to cover the huge liabilities of the agency”. The agency expects a deficit of more than \$200 million for 2021.<sup>69</sup>

Due to its financial crisis UNRWA no longer has any working capital for its core services, which challenges its ability to ensure the continuity of services.<sup>70</sup> Despite this, as the agency reports on its website, UNRWA services continue to be delivered.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> UNRWA Donor Communiqué, [mailinglist], UNRWA Representative Office to the European Union, 01/02/2021; L’Orient Le Jour (Khatib S.), 28/01/2021, [url](#); Roya News, 28/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>70</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 25/11/2020, [url](#); Arab News (Baloushe H.), 03/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>71</sup> UNRWA, s.d., [url](#)

## 5. Region-wide implications

### 5.1. Healthcare services

The budget deficit has had an impact on healthcare services. Retired doctors are not automatically replaced. In addition, it is not possible to hire any new full time doctors. Instead, UNRWA hires daily paid doctors, which has a negative impact on the quality of health services.<sup>72</sup> The doctor-patient ratios increase and doctor-patient consultation times are reduced.<sup>73</sup> (In 2018, the number of medical consultations per doctor per day being 82)<sup>74</sup>. On average, the patient consultation time is three minutes, which include time for medical treatment and diagnosis. In most cases, 'quick fixes' are given in the form of medicine and/or antibiotics. With regards to secondary and tertiary treatment, UNRWA contracts certain hospitals across its fields where Palestine refugees can have part of the cost reimbursed. However, such reimbursement is also at stake with a continuous financial deficit. As for procurement of medication, non-chronic medications have been procured. However, medicine for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is at risk, which could impact more than 270,000 patients receiving care for NCDs.<sup>75</sup>

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Agency managed to shift the way it works in the initial weeks of the pandemic to help prevent a much dreaded outbreak and outspread of the virus in densely populated Palestine refugees camps. It did this by switching to distance-learning, telemedicine and food delivery, among other measures.<sup>76</sup>

UNRWA Health Department is leading on the Agency's COVID-19 response. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) procurement started on 29 February, and early action was taken to train staff on the safe use of this equipment (including face masks, eye protectors/ face-shields, gowns and gloves) and on infection prevention guidelines and protocols. Stocks were procured to cover two to three months' supply for frontline health workers in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and for six months' supply for Gaza. Procuring sufficient PPE supplies of good quality proved challenging in the face of global shortages and limited local alternatives.<sup>77</sup>

Home deliveries of two to three months' supplies of medications for elderly patients and patients with NCDs, such as diabetes and hypertension, were carried out on a large-scale and the procurement of medicines was also accelerated. The new home delivery initiative (in Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza) provided a lifeline for refugees most at risk of contracting the virus – the elderly, people with disabilities and those suffering from NCDs. The e-Health (electronic health information system) that UNRWA built in-house has proven to be critical in facilitating this initiative.<sup>78</sup>

Most health facilities remained opened but with reduced services, which resulted in an overall reduction of 50-60 per cent in patient visits. A triage system to screen patients with respiratory symptoms was established in all health centres in early March to minimize contact between these patients and others, and to reduce the risk of potential transmission of respiratory diseases, and in particular COVID-19, among those seeking health care. Appointment systems were introduced in most health centres using hotlines to reduce foot traffic and over-crowding when health centres resumed more services in June.<sup>79</sup> Toll-free hotline services (telemedicine) provided refugees with a link to health staff, and in particular

<sup>72</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>73</sup> UNRWA, 09/2019, [url](#)

<sup>74</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>75</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>76</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

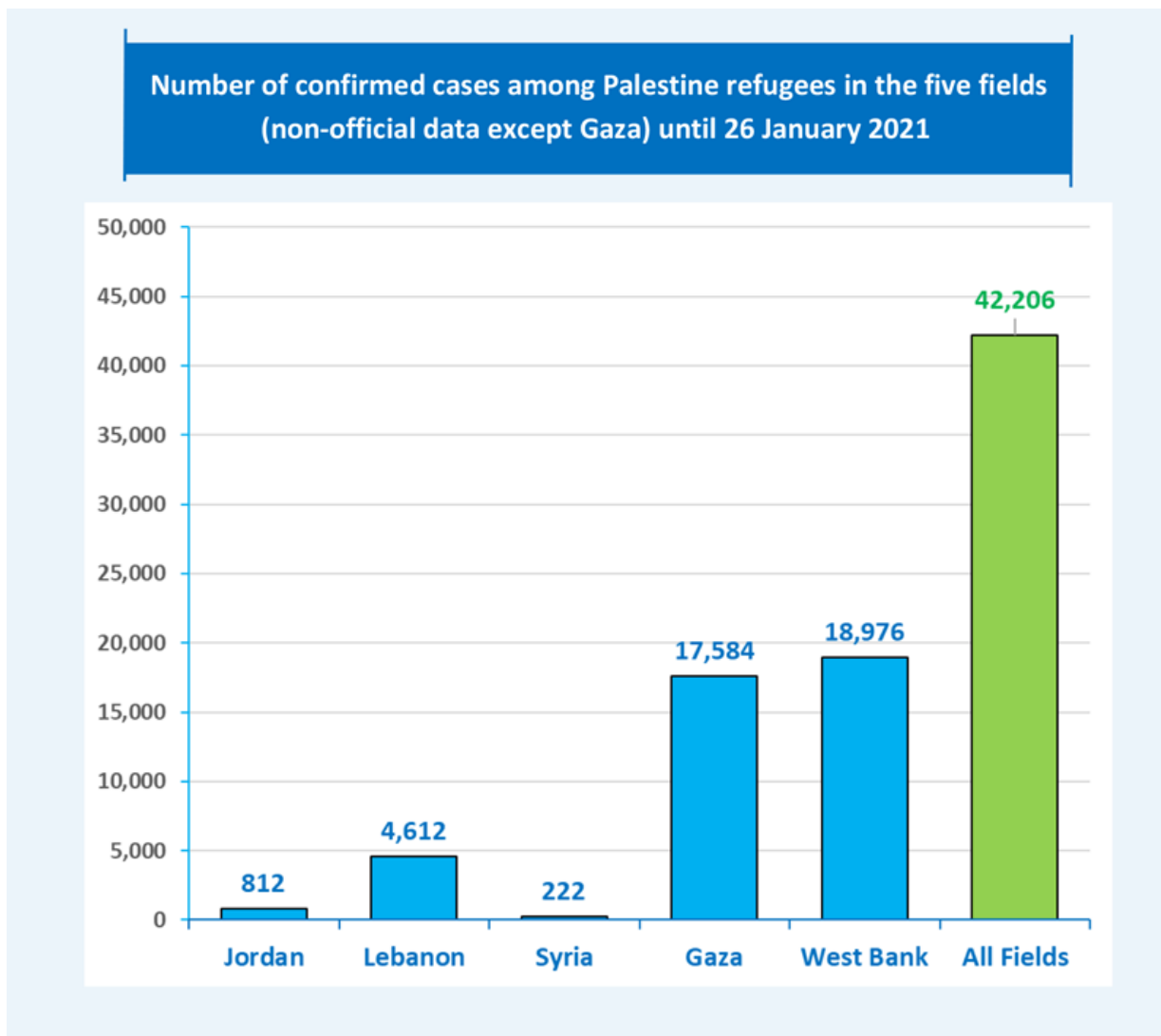
<sup>77</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>78</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>79</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

to doctors who offered medical consultations over the phone and carried out home visits for emergency cases.<sup>80</sup>

The current number of confirmed cases among Palestine refugees across fields as of 27 January 2021:

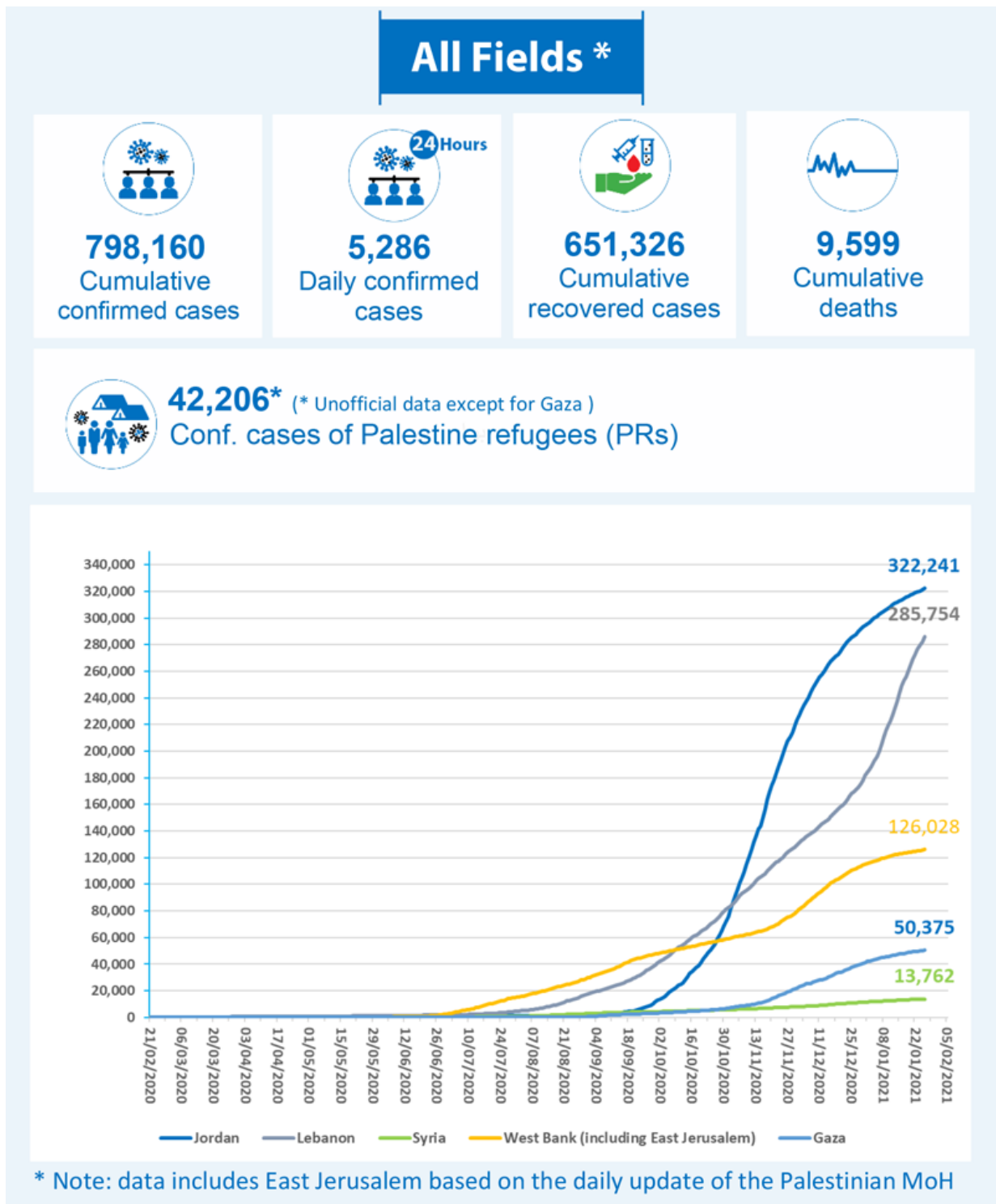


Number of confirmed cases among Palestine refugees in the five fields (non-official data) until 27 January 2021<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>81</sup> UNRWA, 27/01/2021, [url](#)

The current number of cases across all fields as of January 27 2021:



All fields <sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> UNRWA, 27/01/2021, [url](#)

## 5.2. Educational services

Because of the budget cuts, UNRWA is not hiring new teachers on long-term contracts, as the cost of this includes, for instance, pension and sick leave. UNRWA is hiring daily paid staff but the number of needed daily paid teachers continues to increase as the budget shortfall continues. Daily paid teachers do not receive training or educational support, as they are not considered staff. Another challenge and consequence of budget shortfall is the overall class size. The top 10 % in terms of numbers of students per class was 45 students before the US budget cuts; this has increased to 50 students.<sup>83</sup> Children are missing out on school as classes are cancelled due to lack of teachers and no funds to replace them.<sup>84</sup>

With a continued budget shortfall, UNRWA predicts a reduction in school attendance rates, a decrease in the number of students passing their exams and an increase in dropout rates, with the consequence that the number of students completing basic education will decrease. Student achievement levels will stagnate or decrease.<sup>85</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of all UNRWA schools and education institutions in the five fields from mid-March in line with host government decisions. A total of 709 schools, eight vocational/educational training centres (VTC) and two teacher training facilities were closed, affecting 533,342 school students.<sup>86</sup> Self-learning materials (SLMs) were distributed to students in all fields through e-mail, online platforms and social media; hard copies were also printed and distributed with a special focus on students facing connectivity issues.<sup>87</sup>

Indications to date are that the overall enrolment has increased across the Agency from 533,342 (2019/20) to a projected 541,649 (2020/21). This is understood to be due to the economic challenges that are being faced in all fields leading to parents perhaps moving their children out of private schools.<sup>88</sup>

There are no Programme Budget funds for any additional teachers to ensure a COVID-19 socially distanced model of learning. Social distancing in classrooms is achieved by the field education programmes through approaches such as reducing the number of subjects taught and increasing the amount of time students spend learning remotely.<sup>89</sup>

## 5.3. Relief and Social Services (RSS)

UNRWA's RSS Programme has historically focused its services on food assistance and was initially based on de facto universal provision of services to persons displaced and affected by the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. Over the years, UNRWA has implemented a number of changes to its relief services to enable better targeting of the most vulnerable and has shifted towards a more needs-based approach.<sup>90</sup> UNRWA implemented a poverty-based service delivery approach in all its fields and moved from food services to cash services – except for Gaza, where the food delivery services were maintained while cash contributions were also introduced. Through its relief services, UNRWA is

<sup>83</sup> Al Monitor, 09/11/2020, [url](#); Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>84</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>85</sup> UNRWA, 09/2019, [url](#)

<sup>86</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>87</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>88</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>89</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>90</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)



providing a minimum lifeline. UNRWA stated in March 2020 that the cash assistance does however not cover the actual needs of the beneficiaries and is insufficient for survival.<sup>91</sup>

As a consequence of the budget shortfall, there is a freeze on the intake of individuals who meet the criteria to receive cash assistance from UNRWA. Since 2013, the cash assistance programme in Jordan, the West Bank and Lebanon has been frozen for new intakes. In the West Bank, 60,000 individuals yearly receive USD 130 per person, and in Lebanon, 60,000 people receive USD 130 per person per year. In Gaza, new intakes were accepted until February 2020 when a general freeze was announced and is ongoing.<sup>92</sup>

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, RSS Programme offices were closed throughout the lockdowns and regular social work interventions suspended in all five fields. This has proved exceptionally challenging for RSS staff who are tasked with supporting the most vulnerable refugees, particularly refugees with disabilities, the elderly and families registered with the Social Safety Net Programme (SSNP).<sup>93</sup>

Phone hotlines were established in all five field offices to enable refugees to phone in for information on Agency services. Hotline operators were trained on how to manage distress calls and offer basic information. Social workers followed-up individual cases through phone calls and WhatsApp to provide health, hygiene and nutrition advice and to give support and information on emergency services.<sup>94</sup>

In response to in-person registration services being temporarily suspended, a new on-line registration system was established to enable refugees to directly update their own personal files. The Agency aims to continue this system although refugees who are registering for the first time will still need to do so in person (registration offices started to reopen in June).<sup>95</sup>

## 5.4. Infrastructure and Camp Improvement

UNRWA's Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme is largely project-funded and therefore overall not directly impacted by the budget shortfall.<sup>96</sup> However, UNRWA foresees that as a consequence of the budget shortfall, fewer substandard shelters will be rehabilitated/reconstructed, and UNRWA installations and environmental infrastructure will be inadequately maintained and repaired and will become dangerous for refugees.<sup>97</sup>

Construction and maintenance works at UNRWA schools and other installations have been delayed from the tendering process through to implementation due to COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>98</sup>

Environmental health operations continued throughout the lockdowns/curfews in all 58 recognized Palestine refugee camps and in many informal gatherings in cooperation and coordination with host authorities to enable staff to travel between locations. Sanitation services, including the cleaning and disinfection of streets and alleyways in the camps, solid waste collection and disposal, and the washing of garbage containers were all carried out. These services were increased during Ramadan in May 2020. Daily spraying of diluted chlorine was undertaken to disinfect Agency facilities that remained open, such as health centres and sanitation offices, and food distribution trucks, compactors and other equipment were also disinfected along with areas surrounding solid waste containers.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Meeting with UNRWA, HQ/Amman Amman, 03/03/2020, DIS 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>92</sup> DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>93</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>94</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>95</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>96</sup> DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>97</sup> UNRWA, 09/2019, [url](#)

<sup>98</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>99</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

Over 400 additional daily-paid sanitation labourers were hired across all field offices, as well as some drivers in Gaza, utilizing project funds to fill existing gaps and to cover extra workloads.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

## 6. The field

### 6.1. Gaza

#### 6.1.1. UNRWA assistance in Gaza

UNRWA's emergency assistance in the occupied Palestinian territories is under-funded (see infographic in [chapter 4](#)). In 2020 it received only 61 % of the necessary US\$ 155 million.<sup>101</sup>

The US contribution for emergency programming being no longer available, UNRWA was forced to take mitigating measures. In implementing these changes to its emergency interventions in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, UNRWA's humanitarian responsibility dictates that it gives priority to refugees with the most critical needs, protecting core services including education, health and relief for the millions of Palestine refugees in need of such services.<sup>102</sup>

Operating through approximately 12,500 staff in over 300 installations across the Gaza Strip, UNRWA delivers education, health and mental health care, relief and social services, microcredit and emergency assistance to registered Palestine refugees.<sup>103</sup>

Facts and figures regarding UNRWA activities in Gaza according to the latest update on the agency's website (31 December 2019):

- 1.46 million registered refugees out of 1.9 million total population (approximately 73 per cent);
- 8 refugee camps;
- Almost 11,977 staff;
- 275 schools for over 272,000 students;
- 22 health centres;
- 16 relief and social services offices;
- 3 micro-finance offices;
- 11 food distribution centres for almost 1 million beneficiaries.<sup>104</sup>

UNRWA's emergency programmes and key projects, operating with large shortfalls, are funded through separate funding portals (see infographic in [chapter 4](#)). UNRWA attempts to keep essential work going by prioritising food distribution, downscaling other components such as community mental health and cash for work (job creation) and advancing money from UNRWA's core budget.<sup>105</sup> Given the severe funding shortfall, UNRWA re-prioritized emergency interventions in line with the agency's humanitarian mandate to assist those refugees with the most critical needs. With poverty and unemployment rates at very high levels and almost one million refugees depending on food aid from UNRWA, providing food assistance is considered by the agency an absolute humanitarian necessity and a priority. This included review and adjustments of other emergency interventions, such as the Community Mental Health Programme, the Job Creation Programme and transitional shelter cash assistance.<sup>106</sup>

The community mental health programme continues, albeit at reduced capacity and cost. As of September 2018, mental health activities were largely embedded within the health and education

<sup>101</sup> UNRWA, *DONOR RESOURCE*, 24/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>102</sup> UNRWA, 27/07/2018, [url](#)

<sup>103</sup> UNRWA, *Where we work: Gaza Strip*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>104</sup> UNRWA, *Where we work: Gaza Strip*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>105</sup> UNRWA, 28/07/2018, [url](#); UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>106</sup> UNRWA, 31/01/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 16/07/2018, [url](#)

departments instead of a standalone programme.<sup>107</sup> These measures have had an impact on staff members who lost their jobs and others for whom part-time arrangements were necessary. This was the case particularly in Gaza, where unemployment rates are extremely high and alternatives very difficult to find.<sup>108</sup> In July 2018, this resulted in the loss of just over 100 jobs in Gaza and related services to the community.<sup>109</sup>

In 2019, the agency was only able to avoid a disruption of food aid in Gaza by exceptionally advancing funds from its programme budget and by securing a loan from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, poverty in Gaza increased. The high dependency on social assistance has been driven by the extreme volatility of its economy, characterized by short periods of growth followed by prolonged and deep recessions.<sup>111</sup>

UNRWA provides a food basket with a value of USD 11-18 per person every three months. UNRWA covers 15 % of food imports into Gaza contributing to stabilising basic food commodity prices.<sup>112</sup>

### 6.1.2. Current situation and measures

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, more than 68 per cent of Gaza households reported experiencing severe or moderate levels of food insecurity.<sup>113</sup> The unemployment rate stood at 45.5 per cent during the first quarter of 2020, one of the highest rates of joblessness worldwide; in such conditions, many Palestine refugees remain dependent on the assistance provided by UNRWA to meet their basic needs.<sup>114</sup> Since the declaration of the pandemic in March 2020, thousands of refugees have reported increased financial hardship due to government lockdowns that limit their access to jobs.<sup>115</sup>

Financial constraints remained a cause for concern for the implementation of UNRWA emergency operations in Gaza. The UNRWA oPt Emergency Appeal (EA) remained largely underfunded. Out of the US\$ 145 million requested for the Gaza portion of the oPt EA, US\$ 54 million had been received as of 30 June 2020. In these challenging circumstances and in order to avoid a break in the delivery of lifesaving assistance, the agency had to seek recourse to CERF for an emergency grant to cover one quarter of food commodities and distribution, and fill critical funding gaps in its emergency interventions through an advance from its programme budget. Prioritised emergency interventions included supporting the food and nutritional needs of over one million vulnerable Palestine refugees, providing short-term employment opportunities to over 5,000 individuals and continuing psychosocial services.<sup>116</sup>

During 2020, UNRWA provided emergency food assistance to 1,043,173 Palestine refugees in Gaza. To mitigate any risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, at the end of March 2020 UNRWA adjusted its food operation to a home-to-home delivery modality to avoid overcrowding at distribution centres.<sup>117</sup>

As of 1 January 2021, UNRWA is moving into universal food aid in Gaza, a direct consequence of 13 years of blockade.<sup>118</sup> A continuous rise in the level of poverty in Gaza has affected most of the Strip's

<sup>107</sup> UNRWA, 27/07/2018, [url](#)

<sup>108</sup> UNRWA, 16/08/2018, [url](#)

<sup>109</sup> UNRWA, 16/08/2018, [url](#)

<sup>110</sup> UNRWA, 31/01/2020, [url](#)

<sup>111</sup> UNRWA, 31/01/2020, [url](#)

<sup>112</sup> DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>113</sup> UNRWA, 31/01/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 11/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>114</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>115</sup> UNRWA, 11/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>116</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>117</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#); MEMO, 27/08/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>118</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

population. Traditional ways of assessing poverty and responding to different levels of need no longer apply. Consequently, the UNRWA food assistance now covers all registered Palestine refugees in Gaza. UNRWA wants to ensure that all those who need it will get a food basket (based on the current basket for the absolute poor with an additional 10 kg of flour). New decisions applicable as of 2021 include adding newborn children to those who will receive assistance and removing those with a guaranteed and stable income – such as UNRWA and government employees – from the list of recipients, in an act of solidarity towards those who have lost their livelihood. Details on how exactly to identify those to be excluded are under discussion.<sup>119</sup>

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the UNRWA microfinance programmes operating in Gaza and the West Bank were suspended in March 2020. These loans provide sustainable income-generating opportunities for refugees and other poor and marginalized groups. With local economies shut down, and given the growing financial difficulties most clients were facing, loan repayments were deferred during April and May in Gaza and in the West Bank for three months up to June. No new loans were processed during this period up to 31 May. This has proved exceptionally challenging for the Microfinance Department (MD) in terms of losing income from operations taking into account that the programme is self-financing and covers operational costs from the income earned on interest. All microfinance branches were closed. Staff continued to work remotely from home on a number of projects and loan officers kept in touch with clients to ask about their wellbeing and provide business counselling and follow-up on plans for future loan disbursements.<sup>120</sup> The Microfinance Department Gaza reopened its three branches from 31 May, although staff are working on a rotation basis.<sup>121</sup> In October 2020, offices were again partially opened after renewed COVID-19 measures ended.<sup>122</sup>

Through the Agency Job Creation Programme (JCP) 5,524 refugees, including 1,949 women, benefitted from short-term work opportunities.<sup>123</sup>

As a consequence of the budget shortfall, there is a freeze on the intake of individuals who meet the criteria to receive cash assistance from UNRWA. In Gaza, new intakes were accepted until February 2020 when a general freeze was announced and is ongoing.<sup>124</sup>

In July 2020, UNRWA provided a one-off multi-purpose cash assistance to 14,831 poor refugee families, who were identified through a weighted system of all vulnerable groups including households headed by females, older persons, persons with disability, persons with chronic diseases, orphans and large families. Based on this targeted approach, US\$ 40 per individual was distributed to 47,413 individuals to help them cover their essential needs during this difficult time of crisis.<sup>125</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the burden on an already overstretched health system in Gaza, struggling with chronic shortages of medical supplies and equipment, electricity rationing and a salary crisis affecting medical personnel.<sup>126</sup> Starting in March 2020, services provided at the 22 UNRWA health centres were limited to critical interventions only.<sup>127</sup>

In response to the COVID-19 emergency, UNRWA introduced new health and safety measures to mitigate the risk of a spread of the virus. Twenty-two new dedicated medical points for patients with respiratory symptoms were opened in UNRWA school buildings, contributing to reduce overcrowding in health centres, and separating patients with respiratory symptoms from other patients, thus

<sup>119</sup> UNRWA, 13/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>120</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>121</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>122</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>123</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>124</sup> DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>125</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>126</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>127</sup> MEMO, 27/08/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

minimizing the risk of exposure to the virus. Telemedicine was introduced through hotlines set up in all health centers to provide medical consultations and/or to book appointments for receipt of medicines, to minimize the patient footprint in UNRWA clinics and avoid crowds. Patients at higher risk due to pre-existing health conditions and/or of older age were provided with their prescribed medications through a new home delivery service. All UNRWA health staff at HCs and medical points were provided with the required PPE.<sup>128</sup>

During the summer of 2020, all health centres were working and most services resumed except for NCD screening.<sup>129</sup> After new COVID-19 measures were imposed on 24 August, in-person health services were resumed on 5 October 2020 but with reduced appointment slots for antenatal care, preconception care, children’s growth monitoring and vaccinations. Other services were resumed on 7 October 2020, including NCD services except screening, laboratory services for maternal and NCD cases and physiotherapy services for critical cases. Dental services for emergency cases were resumed on 13 October.<sup>130</sup>

Through a programme budget advance, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services remained available to Palestine refugees at UNRWA schools and health centres until March 2020 and continued through remote modalities once the schools were closed and in-person visits to health centres were limited to the most urgent services. Secondary and tertiary health care was extended to abject poor patients in a critical condition.<sup>131</sup>

Additional water supplies were provided in Gaza through the operation of nine water wells in three camps (Khan Younis, Rafah and Jabalia) to supply water to around 18,800 refugee households.<sup>132</sup> Shelter reconstruction/rehabilitation activities and construction works were temporarily suspended.<sup>133</sup>

In line with the authorities’ decision to contain the spread of COVID-19, 276 UNRWA schools were closed on 5 March 2020 and remained closed until the end of the school year. To ensure the continuity of education of 282,360 students in UNRWA schools, the agency rolled out its Education in Emergencies (EiE) approach adjusted to the specific context of COVID-19.<sup>134</sup> The EiE programme provided the continuity of learning for students in schools and vocational training centres. 81 per cent of TVET students in Gaza (80.7 per cent males, 82.5 per cent females) participated in the self-learning process.<sup>135</sup>

While schools in Gaza were re-opened on 8 August 2020 for a one-month catch-up period ahead of the 2020/2021 scholastic year, these were subsequently closed on 24 August, following the identification of local transmission cases in Gaza.<sup>136</sup> School reopening was postponed until 24 October.<sup>137</sup> On 24 October schools started with remote learning. Students’ textbooks and self-learning materials were distributed between 20-26 October.<sup>138</sup> However, the material support (e.g. school materials) that UNRWA had planned to distribute to all students at the beginning of the school year could not be provided due to funding constraints.<sup>139</sup>

UNRWA is the largest employer of Palestinian refugees in Gaza and also directly provides the bulk of education, food aid, and health care services for the nearly 2 million people in Gaza. These services

<sup>128</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>129</sup> UNRWA, 20/08/2020, [url](#)

<sup>130</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>131</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>132</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>133</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>134</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>135</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>136</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>137</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>138</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>139</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

may now be interrupted if the agency cannot pay its staff.<sup>140</sup> Dozens of Palestinians employed by UNRWA demonstrated on November 23 2020 against salary reduction in Gaza City.<sup>141</sup>

## 6.2. West Bank

### 6.2.1. UNRWA assistance in the West Bank

Facts and figures regarding UNRWA activities in West Bank according to the latest update on the agency's website (31 December 2019):

- 858,758 registered Palestine refugees;
- 19 camps;
- 96 schools, with 48,956 pupils;
- 2 vocational and technical training centres;
- 43 primary health centres;
- 5 community rehabilitation centres;
- 13 women's programme centres.<sup>142</sup>

Since 2013, the cash assistance programme in the West Bank has been frozen for new intakes due to funding shortages. In the West Bank, 60,000 individuals receive USD 130 per person per year.<sup>143</sup>

In 2018, UNRWA completed a re-assessment of its emergency caseloads in the West Bank and identified 65,610 Palestine refugees (16%) living beneath the abject poverty line of US\$ 1.79/day.<sup>144</sup> Owing to the absence of emergency funding, UNRWA discontinued its Cash for Work activities in the West Bank effective 31 July 2018. However, households assessed in the two previous years as "abject poor" were transitioned to the Social Safety Net Programme (SSNP), a core programme of the agency. Food voucher activities continued until the end of 2018, at which time households who had been assessed in the two previous years as abject poor were transitioned to SSNP<sup>145</sup>.

The Community Mental Health Programme (CMHP) was discontinued effective 31 August 2018. Finally, mobile health clinics were discontinued effective 31 October 2018.<sup>146</sup> As a result of all these measures, 154 staff members hired against depleted emergency funds didn't have their contracts renewed in 2018 upon reaching their expiry date<sup>147</sup>.

<sup>140</sup> Devex (Lieberman A.), 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>141</sup> Xinhua Net, 24/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>142</sup> UNRWA, *Where we work: West Bank*, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>143</sup> DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>144</sup> UNRWA, 31/01/2020, [url](#)

<sup>145</sup> UNRWA, 26/07/2018, [url](#)

<sup>146</sup> UNRWA, 26/07/2018, [url](#)

<sup>147</sup> UNRWA, 26/07/2018, [url](#)

### 6.2.2. Current situation and measures

According to the UNRWA Commissioner-General, the current situation in the West Bank is “tense, cantonized and economically suffocated”.<sup>148</sup> Regulations implemented by the Palestinian and Israeli authorities to contain the COVID-19 outbreak have progressively limited movement into and within the West Bank. Increased unemployment related to movement restrictions and curfews has negatively affected refugee livelihoods and resulted in increased food insecurity.<sup>149</sup>

In the West Bank, 31,200 Palestine refugees directly affected by the socio-economic ramifications of COVID-19 (e.g. loss of job opportunities due to movement restrictions) were provided with food vouchers.<sup>150</sup> The agency also ensured that isolated Bedouin and other herder communities were supported and, in coordination with WFP, started on 10 June 2020 to distribute food parcels to remote communities. Food and non-food items (NFIs) were also delivered to families under quarantine in the West Bank.<sup>151</sup> 13,077 families who had to undertake home quarantine were provided with in-kind food parcels.<sup>152</sup> However, the agency still faces a funding gap to cover distribution and logistics costs.<sup>153</sup>

As was the case in Gaza, the UNRWA microfinance programme in the West Bank was suspended in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. With local economies shut down, and given the growing financial difficulties most clients were facing, loan repayments were deferred during April and May for three months up to June. No new loans were processed during this period up to 31 May.<sup>154</sup> In June 2020, the Microfinance Department in West Bank reopened its eight branches. All staff are provided with face masks and sanitizer gel.<sup>155</sup>

During 2020, UNRWA delivered emergency assistance in a context of shrinking resources and increased operational constraints, which were exacerbated due to the COVID-19 outbreak. During the first half of 2020, UNRWA supported 24,218 abject poor Palestine refugees across the West Bank with emergency cash assistance through the e-card modality (which provides cash to vulnerable refugees through bank debit cards in partnership with the Bank of Palestine). Emergency cash assistance was also provided to 155 Palestine refugee families affected by displacement or security operations. Funds received for the provision of emergency cash assistance through e-cards could only cover one round of distribution (25 per cent of the yearly requirements). To avoid a suspension in this activity, the agency had to cover the second round through an advance from its programme budget.<sup>156</sup> Since September 2020, no more funding has been available for emergency cash assistance and the agency has been unable to provide any emergency cash assistance to refugees severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>157</sup>

Moreover, and as a result of the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the economy, a significant increase was noted in the number of new applications submitted to UNRWA by poor and vulnerable refugee households requesting regular assistance through the social safety net and/or the emergency cash assistance programme. These applications have not been fully processed yet since home visits by social workers have been put on hold due to COVID-19 precautions. However, given the current

<sup>148</sup> UNRWA, 23/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>149</sup> UNRWA, 02/09/2020, [url](#)

<sup>150</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>151</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>152</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>153</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>154</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>155</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>156</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>157</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)



funding constraints, the agency states it is unlikely that it will be able to increase the caseload for this intervention.<sup>158</sup>

For protection needs, only 44 per cent of 2020 requirements were covered, jeopardizing the capacity of the agency to sustain its monitoring, advocacy and assistance efforts to victims of possible violations of humanitarian law and human rights law. Finally, no funding was received for capacity and management components, placing further pressure on the agency's internal resources.<sup>159</sup>

In order to mitigate the risk of exposure of health centre teams to COVID-19, resulting in further patient contamination and/or service discontinuation, UNRWA in the West Bank recruited daily paid health staff (112 out of the total 636) for the implementation of a rotation system to replace teams in cases of exposure and infection, allowing for the continuity of services. The mechanism for medical appointments was strengthened and a triage system was applied for all outpatient visitors. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was procured for all frontline staff.<sup>160</sup>

UNRWA also hired 138 additional daily paid sanitation labourers to overcome access challenges due to lockdown and to cover regular staff on sick leave or in quarantine. Hygiene kits were distributed to refugee households under home quarantine or with one or more individuals self-isolating at home.<sup>161</sup>

During the period of school closure, from early March 2020 until the end of the school year, UNRWA ensured continuity of learning for Palestine refugee students in its 96 schools through the self-learning approach.<sup>162</sup> The new school year began on 6 September 2020 with a phased approach to blended learning, with grades 1-4 students being admitted first and grades 5-10 following them from 20 September.<sup>163</sup> Forty agency schools, including East Jerusalem, out of 96 (41 per cent) were closed from 6 September to 18 October due to the rapid increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, including confirmed cases in schools among students, teachers and non-teaching staff. In East Jerusalem, UNRWA schools in Shu'fat camp reopened with blended learning for grades 1-4 students on 19 October. Classes for grades 5-9 in the boys' and girls' schools in Shu'fat remained closed in line with Israeli COVID-19 school regulations, which also apply in East Jerusalem, and self-learning continued. Self-learning materials were distributed to students in isolated Bedouin communities.<sup>164</sup>

## 6.3. Lebanon

### 6.3.1 UNRWA assistance in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the agency's core programmes and services encompass education, health care, Social Safety Net Services (SSNP), infrastructure and camp improvement, and protection activities. In June 2016, Lebanon Field Office transitioned from the provision of food to the provision of E-vouchers and E-cash (ATM cards) to existing Social Safety Net recipient families.<sup>165</sup> UNRWA provides financial

<sup>158</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>159</sup> UNRWA, 29/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>160</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>161</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>162</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>163</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>164</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>165</sup> UNRWA, Department of legal affairs | unrwa hq (Jerusalem), e-mail, 16/06/2016

assistance to 61,672 people assessed against poverty indicators (the programme being frozen for new intakes<sup>166</sup>).<sup>167</sup>

Basic primary and secondary education is made available free of charge and benefits over 36,960 students at 65 schools throughout the country. The agency also operates one vocational training center on two campuses with 1,143 students annually.<sup>168</sup> UNRWA runs 27 primary health care facilities in Lebanon to enable free access to comprehensive basic primary health care to Palestine refugees and refers Palestine refugees to specialized protection services such as child protection, gender-based violence (GBV) and psychosocial support with partner organisations. The agency also financially assists refugees with the partial coverage of the costs of secondary and tertiary health care serviced at Palestinian Red Crescent Hospitals, private hospitals and select government services.<sup>169</sup> Through the infrastructure and camp improvement programme, UNRWA aims to improve the living conditions of Palestine refugees in Lebanon living in camps, with shelter rehabilitation, construction, maintenance and environmental health activities designed to meet the most urgent needs of Palestine refugees that are otherwise not addressed in the absence of government authority within the majority of camps.<sup>170</sup>

As stated by UNRWA, all of these services face potential further cutbacks unless more funding is found.<sup>171</sup> Education, health, infrastructure and relief and social services for Palestine Refugees in Lebanon (PRL) are primarily funded under the agency's Programme Budget for activities requiring recurrent funds.<sup>172</sup> Programmes may also receive contributions from other funding streams, including emergency appeals such as the agency's response to the Syria regional crisis and special projects.

In addition, the agency undertakes special and emergency projects on the basis of identified needs and subject to funding. For example, in 2007, following the destruction of Nahr el Bared Camp in Northern Lebanon, UNRWA was engaged in assisting in the reconstruction and recovery of the camp and provided relief assistance to 27,000 displaced persons from Nahr el Bared. This project is ongoing.<sup>173</sup> Thirteen years after the camp's destruction, UNRWA still needs funds to complete its rebuilding.<sup>174</sup>

This report addresses UNRWA assistance to PRL.<sup>175</sup> It does not address UNRWA assistance to Palestine refugees from Syria in Lebanon (PRS), funded under the Emergency appeal for PRS.<sup>176</sup>

<sup>166</sup> DIS, 06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>167</sup> L'Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#); TDS (Zaatari M.), 13/11/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, *Where we work, Lebanon* [last update: 31/12/2019], [url](#); UN, 01/07/2020, [url](#); The Daily Star (TDS), 02/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>168</sup> UNRWA, *Where we work, Lebanon*, [last update: 31/12/2019], [url](#); TDS (Zaatari M.), 13/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>169</sup> TDS (Zaatari M.), 13/11/2020, [url](#); NRC, [url](#); UNRWA, Department of legal affairs | unrwa hq (Jerusalem), e-mail, 16/06/2016; UNRWA, s.d., [url](#);

<sup>170</sup> UNRWA, Department of legal affairs | unrwa hq (Jerusalem), e-mail, 16/06/2016 ; UNRWA, s.d, [url](#)

<sup>171</sup> UN, 01/07/2020, [url](#); The Daily Star (TDS), 02/07/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, Department of legal affairs | unrwa hq (Jerusalem), e-mail, 16/06/2016; UNRWA, s.d., [url](#)

<sup>172</sup> UNRWA, s.d, [url](#)

<sup>173</sup> This included at the time rental and food assistance and 100% health coverage (no co-payment) for those displaced. In 2013, due to increasing difficulties in raising the funds needed for reconstruction and humanitarian assistance of this special project, UNRWA prioritised the ongoing provision of housing assistance and harmonised health and food assistance with the coverage provided to other Palestine refugees in Lebanon. Vulnerable families continued to receive food assistance through UNRWA's regular relief programme. Rental assistance was maintained for those displaced as reconstruction continued.

<sup>174</sup> USDOS, 11/03/2020, [url](#); The New Arab (De Stone R.), 11/06/2019, [url](#)

<sup>175</sup> "Registered" refugees ("Palestine refugees"), which are registered with UNRWA and the Lebanese authorities. UNHCR, 23/02/2016, [url](#)

<sup>176</sup> UNRWA, 04/06/2018, [url](#)

### 6.3.2. Current situation

Over the past year, Lebanon has experienced a deteriorating social, economic and health crisis. The explosion that shook Beirut on 4 August 2020 is the latest in a series of events that have plunged Lebanon in the most serious existential crisis of its recent history, and comes on the heel of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis on people’s health and livelihoods.<sup>177</sup> While the harbour explosion did not have a major physical impact on Palestine refugee camps and UNRWA installations, the overall effect on the country affects the vulnerable communities most.<sup>178</sup>

Palestine refugees are amongst the most vulnerable in the country, many of them largely depending on emergency cash assistance that they receive from the agency to be able to feed their families.<sup>179</sup> Palestine refugees in Lebanon face restrictions on their right to work and own property. The majority of the over 200,000 Palestine refugees currently present in the country live below the poverty line, with their situation made worse by the economic crisis and the restrictive measures triggered by the pandemic as UNRWA states in its September 2020 newsletter.<sup>180</sup> The status of Palestine refugees as a marginalized and disadvantaged group in Lebanon has been compounded by the ongoing socio-economic crisis and COVID-19 restrictions on movement.<sup>181</sup>

Palestine refugees’ ability to purchase basic food and other essential goods has further diminished in 2020 due to the rapid devaluation of the local currency and a lack of employment opportunities, placing even basic goods out of reach for many.<sup>182</sup> The Ministry of Labour’s procedures towards non-Lebanese citizens coupled with the collapse of the local currency has left Palestinian workers, most of whom are labourers employed on a day-to-day basis, in financial turmoil. According to Adnan Al-Rifai, a member of the camp’s Popular Committee in Ein El-Hilweh, the effect of the pandemic has been to increase the unemployment rate amongst Palestinian workers from 60 to 90 per cent.<sup>183</sup>

Philippe Lazzarini, the commissioner-general of UNRWA, stated the following during an interview on November 2, 2020:

“When we hear that by World Bank estimation 50 percent of the Lebanese population is living below the poverty line, this percentage goes up to 90 percent in the Palestinian camps. Abject poverty has now become a reality in the camps. With all that happened in the country, expectations are rising that UNRWA delivers even more, especially more when it comes to social safety net. Those people just do not have income anymore – the majority of people in the camp are daily workers and they do not have the minimum income they used to have. So they turn to UNRWA. This is taking place at a time when UNRWA experiences a financial crisis.”<sup>184</sup>

Between the negligence and disinterest of the government and the weakness of UNRWA, the Palestinian refugees are left with minimal support, according to Hala Nouhad Nasreddine for the Middle East Monitor.<sup>185</sup>

UNRWA planned a one-time cash assistance in an effort to mitigate the double crisis affecting Palestine refugees stemming from Lebanon’s severe financial, political and economic crisis as well as the impact

<sup>177</sup> UNRWA, 07/08/2020, [url](#)

<sup>178</sup> UNRWA, 07/08/2020, [url](#)

<sup>179</sup> UNRWA, 07/08/2020, [url](#)

<sup>180</sup> UNRWA *Newsletter september 2020*, [mailinglist], 02/09/2020,

<sup>181</sup> UNRWA, 02/09/2020, [url](#)

<sup>182</sup> UNRWA, 02/09/2020, [url](#)

<sup>183</sup> MEMO, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>184</sup> Executive Magazine (Schellen T.), 02/11/2021, [url](#)

<sup>185</sup> MEMO, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

of COVID-19 confinement measures.<sup>186</sup> The Palestinian factions have voiced their disappointment and discontent with UNRWA, especially with regards to this planned financial aid provided for refugees (112,000 Lebanese pounds)<sup>187</sup>. Initially, the agency sought to confine this assistance under its Social Affairs programme. However, the factions rejected this because the financial situation of all Palestinians has deteriorated.

After months of delay, UNRWA began to distribute the promised aid.<sup>188</sup> But since the payment process began immediately after four days of total lockdown in the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several logistical issues led to some chaos and delays in the distribution process and as a result many beneficiaries were unable to collect their payments.<sup>189</sup> The process ground to a halt in June 2020 because of operational difficulties. According to Al-Rifai, the reason for this was that the number of recipients far exceeded UNRWA's expectations. This could be because most official statistics do not represent the real number of Palestinian refugees for political reasons. This forced the agency to suspend the distribution process and to search for secure ways to verify the beneficiaries' identities.<sup>190</sup>

As of 31 July 2020, a total of 89,003 families (334,106 persons) had received their cash assistance. The number of assisted PRL exceeded the target by 78,114 persons. As the UNRWA registration system does not offer accurate information of in-country populations, due to its voluntary nature, it appeared that the number of Palestine refugees claiming cash assistance was larger than anticipated as a result of the discrepancy between the number of actively service-seeking persons and those on the registration system. UNRWA is now exploring the introduction of a biometric verification process to verify and authenticate all in-country populations for future interventions.<sup>191</sup>

### 6.3.3. COVID-19 measures and impact

UNRWA, in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), supported the establishment of two isolation centres, one in Sammouh School in Ein El Hilweh camp and a 96-bed facility in the Siblin Training Centre (STC) near Saida. At the STC Isolation Centre, trained UNRWA staff provide operational and logistical support, including all laundry, food and cleaning requirements, while MSF supports the management of the facility and maintains a permanent presence of medical and nursing staff on site to ensure the proper monitoring of patients and timely referral of complex cases.<sup>192</sup>

UNRWA Siblin isolation center has received both confirmed COVID-19 patients and persons who are required to quarantine but have not tested positive. In addition, some refugees are first isolated in the Lebanese Rafik Hariri Hospital and only transfer to Siblin isolation center when they no longer need the hospital's additional medical supervision.<sup>193</sup> The quarantine centre in Siblin can accommodate 100 patients.<sup>194</sup>

From February to May 2020, the monthly average of UNRWA's daily medical consultations decreased by 57 per cent as compared to January 2020, before the introduction of COVID-19 risk mitigation measures. UNRWA HCs continued to provide first assessments for newborns; vaccination services for children were also maintained, upon appointment. Reproductive health services continued for high-risk pregnancies and for the first assessment for new antenatal care patients.<sup>195</sup> A family health team

<sup>186</sup> UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>187</sup> TDS, 19/05/2020, [url](#)

<sup>188</sup> MEMO, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>189</sup> TDS, 19/05/2020, [url](#)

<sup>190</sup> MEMO, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>191</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>192</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 29/07/2020, [url](#)

<sup>193</sup> UNRWA, 13/08/2020, [url](#)

<sup>194</sup> MEMO, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>195</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

has been assigned, since 16 March 2020, to work with patients with flu-like symptoms on a two-week rotation basis. All 27 Health centers (HCs) continued to operate from 8.30 a.m. to 1 p.m.<sup>196</sup> All 311 health centre staff were provided with PPE.<sup>197</sup> All health centers have been implementing triage to separate patients with respiratory symptoms from those who have other medical concerns.<sup>198</sup> Patients are required to make an appointment by phone before coming to the health centre.<sup>199</sup> Only urgent cases are referred to hospitals. Hospitalisation responses remain limited to life-saving and tertiary care referrals that affect morbidity.<sup>200</sup> The support provided by UNRWA for the hospitalisation of COVID-19 cases was complemented by a contribution from the Palestinian Embassy in Lebanon.<sup>201</sup>

Shelter rehabilitation, installation management and infrastructure work resumed in June 2020.<sup>202</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic placed an additional strain on the environmental health services provided by UNRWA in the 12 Palestine refugee camps in Lebanon. In response, additional sanitation labourers were hired to support solid waste collection and disposal and to conduct disinfection campaigns inside the camps. All 450 sanitation labourers were provided with PPEs including protective masks, gloves, and suits, in addition to cleaning supplies, sanitizers, and hygiene kits. Additional water pumping capacity from the water wells was also provided to support the continued implementation of essential hygiene practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>203</sup>

On 7 January 2021 Lebanese authorities imposed a countrywide total lockdown until at least the 8 February 2021 as the country grapples with its most severe surge of the coronavirus.<sup>204</sup>

Dr Hassan Mneimneh, a former minister and the Chairman of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, is seriously concerned about the difficulty of maintaining social distancing and limiting the spread of the virus in the Palestinian refugee camps. "Social distancing is impossible due to overcrowding in the camps," he states. In Burj Barajneh camp, for example, the population density is 80,000 people/km<sup>2</sup>, meaning that camp residents share rooms with at least five and up to ten others. Conditions are similar in Ein El-Hilweh camp, where seven to eight people live in small two-bedroom apartments, according to Adnan Al-Rifai, a member of the camp's Popular Committee. "The danger is overwhelming and frightening, and the prospect of the virus spreading in the camps is truly catastrophic... our medical and healthcare facilities are limited," he told The Applied Research Institute Jerusalem.<sup>205</sup>

To ensure the continuity of learning for students impacted by school closures, UNRWA Lebanon Field Office (LFO) Education Programme, in alignment with the agency Education in Emergencies (EiE) strategy, made available a remote Self Learning-Programme (SLP). In order to support families and encourage children's participation in SLP, the agency covered the costs of internet connection fees for families with two or more children enrolled in UNRWA schools. This reached 11,158 families of students enrolled in UNRWA schools and 66 families of trainees enrolled in the agency's TVET centre.<sup>206</sup> However, low levels of technological access meant that many students were not able to participate consistently in remote learning.<sup>207</sup>

<sup>196</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>197</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>198</sup> UNRWA, 13/08/2020, [url](#); UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>199</sup> UNRWA, 13/08/2020, [url](#)

<sup>200</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>201</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>202</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>203</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>204</sup> L'Orient Today, 07/01/2021, [url](#)

<sup>205</sup> MEMO, 14/10/2020, [url](#)

<sup>206</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>207</sup> UNRWA, 19/11/2020, [url](#)

School counsellors engaged children and families to encourage participation in a summer accelerated online catch-up programme. Tutoring support to students participating in the accelerated summer learning programme were being provided by 150 university-aged tutors who had been recruited to support the children’s academic development.<sup>208</sup> The programme, which supported 26,508 students to review materials from the previous school year, ended on 10 October.<sup>209</sup> The start of the school year was postponed from 19 October to 2 November. A phased approach to blended learning was adopted.<sup>210</sup>

At the end of the year 2020, teachers received layoff notices from the UNRWA administration, stating the special needs classes they run would be cut at the end of the month; nearly 250 teachers face losing their jobs. The employment UNRWA provides is just as essential as its schooling and health services. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are banned from most white-collar jobs that could earn them a good salary. UNRWA is one of the only employers that will hire them for professional work.<sup>211</sup>

The potential closure of the learning support program in UNRWA schools, coming on top of shortages in school supplies and teachers, the increased difficulties many Palestinian families have faced with online learning during the COVID-19 crisis, and growing levels of poverty and unemployment amid Lebanon’s economic crisis, have pushed frustration in some communities to a boiling point. According to teachers and students, the loss of the learning support program is likely to exacerbate the difficulties for the most vulnerable students.<sup>212</sup> The level of learning is falling off. No textbooks have been handed out during the first trimester of the 2020/2021 school year, and online lessons are sometimes disrupted by electricity cuts. On 14 December, residents of Ain al-Hilweh closed down the UNRWA schools and other facilities in the camp and in neighbouring Saida in protest over the cuts.<sup>213</sup> Since May 2020, UNRWA has not had the funding to continue the one-time payments of LL112,000 to respond to the growing economic pressure due to lockdown measures. The lack of aid has stoked resentment.<sup>214</sup>

<sup>208</sup> UNRWA, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

<sup>209</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>210</sup> UNRWA, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

<sup>211</sup> PBS (Allen L.M.), 20/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>212</sup> L’Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>213</sup> L’Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#)

<sup>214</sup> L’Orient Today (Sewell A.), 16/12/2020, [url](#)

## Summary

Cash flow crises and structural under-funding are permanent features of the agency's funding model. Every year, the needs of the refugees grow and at the same time UNRWA receives less funds for its core budget. As of 2020, UNRWA has been facing a double crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Against a background of sustained regional and political and economic turmoil, the agency is dealing with its most serious financial shortfall in its history. This has been compounded by the global public health crisis of COVID-19.

Palestine refugees are among the most vulnerable communities in the region, particularly in the context of an economic crisis in Lebanon, chronic impoverishment and blockade in Gaza and an increasingly tense political environment in the West Bank as a result of Israel's new annexation plan. In 2020, UNRWA received funding and pledges that only covered 71% of its programme budget and 51 % for its planned COVID-19 response. It has received only 61 % for the emergency budget to respond to the acute humanitarian needs in the Occupied Territories, where Palestine refugees often live in abject poverty.

In November 2020, UNRWA has for the first time in its history reached the cliff's edge, with no money on hand nor confirmed pledges to cover two months of salaries for its staff of 28,000. To enable UNRWA to pay salaries, donors agreed to exceptionally employ funds that were earmarked for purposes outside the program budget, with the requirement that the amount be paid with the first payments that reach the agency at the beginning of 2021. The full amount however was not available. According to UNRWA the salary crisis will continue for three months until the international conference called by the UN agency is held, which is expected in April 2021.

US president Joe Biden has said he will restore US aid to UNRWA but he has not said when or whether the UNRWA funding would return to its previous level.

UNRWA's services continue to be delivered although the budget deficit has had an impact on healthcare, educational services and RSS across different fields. It has resulted in services being adjusted to a minimum and fears of not being able to deliver services in the future.

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