

Israel blocks the head of the U.N. agency for Palestinians from visiting Gaza.

Image



Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA's commissioner-general, said Israeli authorities had denied him entry to Gaza Strip, at a news conference in Cairo, on Monday. Credit...Mohamed Abd El Ghany/Reuters

Israel denied the chief of UNRWA, the United Nations agency that supports Palestinians, entry to the Gaza Strip on Monday, according to the agency and the foreign minister of Egypt.

Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA's commissioner general, [said on social media on Monday](#) that Israeli authorities had blocked him from making a visit that was "supposed to coordinate & improve the humanitarian response." UNRWA, formally the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, is the largest aid group on the ground in Gaza and a critical lifeline for more than 2.2 million people struggling to survive under a near-total Israeli siege.

The Israeli defense ministry's agency that oversees policy for the Palestinian territories, known as COGAT, [said on social media](#) that Mr. Lazzarini's request for entry to Gaza "was not submitted by the necessary coordination processes and channels."

“This is another attempt by UNRWA to blame Israel for their own mistakes,” the agency said. COGAT did not immediately respond to questions about the decision.

Juliette Touma, the director of communications for UNRWA, said COGAT’s explanation was “not accurate.”

Mr. Lazzarini’s trip was approved by Israel on Sunday night, she said, adding that he was the only person among a team of UNRWA workers to be denied access on Monday morning, even though all of their requests for entry were submitted as a group.

She described the denial as a “last-minute change” that came as Mr. Lazzarini was set to fly from Cairo to El Arish, Egypt, before traveling to the border and crossing into Gaza.

At a news conference with Mr. Lazzarini in Cairo, the foreign minister of Egypt, Sameh Shoukry, expressed dismay over Israel’s denial.

The denial came on the same day that [a new report](#) from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification global initiative projected that a full-scale famine will take hold in northern Gaza anytime between now and May.

Mr. Lazzarini — who had planned to visit northern Gaza as part of the trip, according to Ms. Touma — said on social media that “this man-made starvation under our watch is a stain on our collective humanity.” Averting the famine was a matter of “political will,” he added.

Israel has long argued that UNRWA is biased against Israel and influenced by Hamas, allegations that the agency strongly denies. In January, Israel [accused 12 of UNRWA’s 13,000 employees in Gaza](#) of participating in the Oct. 7 attacks or their aftermath, leading to several donor nations [suspending funding](#). Israel Katz, the foreign minister, has called on Mr. Lazzarini to resign.

Mr. Lazzarini has said that the agency was facing a “deliberate and concerted campaign” to undermine its operations at a time when its services are most needed. Some countries [have since resumed their donations](#) to UNRWA, citing its role in mitigating the humanitarian crisis.

— [Anushka Patil](#) and [Adam Rasgon](#)