

U.N. Agency Suspends Food Aid After Protest in Gaza

April 5, 2013

By Jodi Rudoren

New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/06/world/middleeast/un-agency-suspends-services-after-violent-protest-in-gaza.html?_r=1&

JERUSALEM — The United Nations Relief and Works Agency has indefinitely suspended food distribution in the Gaza Strip after protesters angry over the cancellation of a cash assistance program for the poor stormed the agency's main compound in Gaza City on Thursday, an official said Friday.

“There will be no food tomorrow,” said Adnan Abu Hasna, a spokesman for the agency, which provides nutrition, education, health and other services to 815,000 Palestinians who are refugees and their descendants, nearly half of Gaza's population. “The food distribution centers and the relief offices will be closed in the coming days unless there's a real security being provided to the life of our staff, because there is a great concern about their safety.”

The agency provides three-month rations of flour, oil, sugar, rice and other staples to about 25,000 people a day through scores of centers scattered throughout Gaza's refugee camps. Though the centers and the relief offices that provide psychological and other support are shut, the 246 schools and 21 health clinics that the United Nations runs in Gaza will operate as usual.

Ismail Haniya, the Hamas prime minister of Gaza, told reporters Friday that his government would pursue “urgent and quick talks” with the agency in hopes of restoring the food distribution and other services “in a state of security and stability.”

But Abu Ahmad al-Massri, 42, a father of seven who lives in the Beach refugee camp in Gaza City and participated in the demonstration Thursday, said he would continue to protest the ending of the cash program. A former clothes manufacturer, Mr. Massri is unemployed and said he had been relying on the grants since 2004. He said his aid had been reduced over the years to about \$80 every three months from \$250.

“They want to make reductions, they should reduce the costs they spend for their bodyguards,” Mr. Massri said of the agency. “I am ready to die in defending the food of my family. If I lost one of my kids it's easier for me than losing my food.”

The violent protest Thursday followed days of smaller demonstrations after a decision Monday to cancel the cash program, which has provided 21,000 families, totaling 100,000 people, with about \$4 million in direct aid per year — \$10 per person every three months. The agency said that the program had been ended because of a \$67 million deficit and that the agency had offered recipients three-month jobs instead. Though the jobs pay double the cash grants, refugees are concerned that they will not last.

After several smaller protests at offices of the agency throughout the week, about 100 people joined a demonstration Thursday organized by the Palestine Liberation Organization's committee for refugees. They carried signs and banners, including one that read, "Don't deprive our children of their rights in life." After some of the refugees broke into the compound, the police eventually dispersed the demonstrators.

"They have the right to demonstrate peacefully and to protest any decision," said Mr. Abu Hasna, the agency spokesman. "But to reach that level is really unacceptable. They jumped over the walls. They stormed the gates. They began to scream and to threaten, also. What happened yesterday is crossing all the red lines."

In a statement, the P.L.O. refugee committee blamed the agency for the protest. "What happened yesterday was a result of a state of anger and boiling in the refugees," it said, adding that the agency "has neglected our warnings."

Though unrelated, the protests over the elimination of the cash assistance came amid days of unrest in Gaza and the West Bank over a Palestinian prisoner who died of cancer in Israeli custody, and the killing by Israeli soldiers Wednesday night of two teenagers who approached an army post during a demonstration.

Israeli and Palestinian security forces were on high alert Friday for protests after the noon prayers, and access to Al Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City was limited to women and men over 50 to prevent clashes that have become routine there in recent months.

A spokeswoman for the Israeli military said one Palestinian was injured in the northern Gaza Strip on Friday evening when Israeli soldiers, after firing warning shots, fired at a group of stone throwers approaching the border fence. Another Palestinian was hurt by a rubber-coated bullet fired by soldiers near the West Bank Jewish settlement of Beit El, the spokeswoman said, and an Israeli soldier was lightly wounded by rocks near Beit Laqia earlier in the day.

Tony Blair, the international Middle East peace envoy, issued a statement Friday morning expressing concern "about the deteriorating security situation on the ground."

“The situation in the West Bank is very volatile,” Mr. Blair said. “I am deeply troubled by the loss of life and call on the government of Israel to exercise maximum restraint in dealing with the demonstrations in the West Bank. I also call on all sides to avoid public statements that could further fuel the tensions.”