# unrwa accuses israel of abusing staff amid gaza conflict



The United Nations agency responsible for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, has made serious allegations against Israel, accusing it of abusing more than 50 of its staff members, including teachers, doctors, and social workers, during the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, disclosed that these staff members had been detained and mistreated since the start of the 18-month-long war. He stated on X that the detainees experienced "beating, use as human shields, sleep deprivation, humiliation, threats of harm to them and their families, attacks by dogs, and forced confessions." These abuses reportedly occurred both in Gaza and in Israeli military detention facilities.

While the Israeli military has not responded directly to these specific accusations, it has historically denied widespread abuses in its detention centres and among its troops. Nevertheless, it has opened investigations into the alleged maltreatment by individual soldiers and the use of detainees as human shields, with some soldiers facing charges.

In a related development, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) announced the release of a medic who had been held since a controversial Israeli attack on ambulances in southern Gaza on 23 March. The attack resulted in the deaths of eight PRCS staff members, six from the Gaza civil defence agency, and one UNRWA employee, according to the UN humanitarian office OCHA. This incident sparked international condemnation and raised concerns about possible war crimes, notably voiced by UN high commissioner for human rights Volker Türk.

Relations between Israel and UNRWA have deteriorated significantly following a surprise attack by Hamas militants on southern Israel in October 2023, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and the capture of 250 hostages. In response, Israel banned all cooperation with UNRWA activities in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, alleging that Hamas had infiltrated the agency—a claim UNRWA strongly contests.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), the UN's highest judicial body, is currently reviewing statements from numerous countries and organisations concerning Israel's humanitarian obligations to Palestinians. A key issue under consideration is the legality of Israel's ban on UNRWA's operations in Palestinian territories. Israel, which is not participating in the ICJ hearings, has dismissed the proceedings as politically motivated persecution. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar described the hearings as "another attempt to politicise and abuse the legal process to persecute Israel," asserting that "it is not Israel that should be on trial," but rather criticising the UN and UNRWA for what he called being "rotten, anti-Israel, and antisemitic."

The hearings occur amid intensified Israeli bombardment of Gaza, which local health authorities report has killed at least 27 Palestinians in the past 36 hours alone. Since Israel ended a fragile ceasefire in mid-March, Palestinian health officials state that more than 2,151 people, including 732 children, have died from the offensive. Israeli military sources claim their airstrikes have targeted and killed three militant commanders.

Israel has maintained a strict blockade on Gaza for almost two months, preventing food, fuel, medicine, and other essential supplies from entering the territory. This blockade is declared by Israel as a measure to compel Hamas to release hostages, while also accusing the group of misappropriating humanitarian aid. However, international rights groups have criticised the blockade as a "starvation tactic" that endangers the civilian population, potentially constituting a war crime. Humanitarian agencies warn of critically low supplies, with many residents surviving on one meal or less daily. The World Food Programme and UNRWA have reportedly exhausted their last reserves of flour and basic food items, and medical personnel are increasingly concerned about malnutrition.

Meanwhile, Hamas continues to hold 59 hostages, with an estimated 24 alive, after most others were released through ceasefire agreements and negotiations. Families of deceased hostages have urged for the return of remains amid fears that ongoing conflict and difficult conditions may cause many bodies to be lost or unidentifiable. Bar Godard, whose parents died during the 2023 Hamas raid and because his father's body remains in Gaza, expressed concern: "After everything we went through on that day and since, it cannot be that my father’s body will also disappear from the face of the earth."

Efforts to negotiate a new ceasefire appear to have stalled amid conflicting reports, with no immediate breakthrough expected. Some analysts point to a forthcoming visit by former US President Donald Trump to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates in May as a possible catalyst for renewed US diplomatic pressure on Israel, which could influence future peace efforts.

The conflict has resulted in significant loss and displacement. According to Gaza’s Health Ministry, over 52,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, have been killed during the Israeli offensive. Extensive bombardment and ground operations have destroyed large areas of the territory and displaced about 80% of the population, many of whom have been uprooted multiple times.

Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has pledged to continue military operations until all hostages are returned and Hamas is either eliminated or agrees to disarm and leave the region.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.timesofisrael.com/unrwa-report-accuses-israeli-forces-of-abusing-staffers-detained-in-gaza/> - This article reports on UNRWA's allegations that its staff members and other detainees were subjected to severe beatings and forced to strip naked by Israeli forces in Gaza.
* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/13/after-the-unrwa-report-more-accounts-of-israels-torture-in-gaza> - Al Jazeera provides additional accounts corroborating UNRWA's report, detailing instances of Palestinian detainees being subjected to beatings, sleep deprivation, and other forms of abuse by Israeli soldiers in Gaza.
* <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/unrwa-staff-harassed-obstructed-israel-west-bank> - This article discusses the harassment and obstruction faced by UNRWA staff in the West Bank, including incidents where staff were beaten at military checkpoints and their facilities were used during military raids.
* <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-797613> - The Jerusalem Post reports on UNRWA's claims that its staff and other detainees in Gaza were subjected to ill-treatment, including severe beatings and forced nudity, by Israeli forces.
* <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/israeli-troops-abuse-unrwa-staff-palestinian-detainees-report-17814427> - TRT World highlights UNRWA's report detailing the abuse of its staff and other detainees by Israeli troops in Gaza, including beatings and forced nudity.
* <https://www.newarab.com/news/unrwa-chief-calls-probe-attacks-staff-premises> - This article covers UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini's call for an independent investigation into attacks on staff and premises, including instances where UNRWA staffers have been arrested and tortured.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/29/unrwa-says-israel-has-abused-detained-staff-and-used-some-as-human-shields> - Please view link - unable to able to access data