

**Government Response to
the Petition of David Cumin
on
Funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for
Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)**

Presented to the House of Representatives

In accordance with Standing Order 380

Government Response to the Petition of David Cumin on Funding for UNRWA

Introduction

- 1 The government has carefully considered the Petition Committee's referral of the petition entitled "*David Cumin: Do not fund UNWRA[sic]*". The petition requests "*that the House of Representatives does not appropriate funds that could go towards [UNRWA].*"
- 2 The Petitioner's reasoning for its request stated:
 - 2.1 "*I believe there is evidence of repeated transgressions by UNRWA school staff in teaching a curriculum that violates UN [United Nations] values, UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation] standards, and UNRWA's supposed "zero-tolerance" policy for discrimination or incitement to hatred and violence. I believe numerous reports have highlighted egregious antisemitism, glorification of terror, rejection of peace, and incitement to violence and that there is also ongoing evidence of UNRWA staff inciting violence on social media.*"
- 3 The government welcomes the Committee's referral of this petition and thanks the petitioner for bringing this matter to the government's attention.
- 4 The government responds to the report in accordance with Standing Order 380.
- 5 The government has considered the petition as it pertains to New Zealand's foreign policy, humanitarian, and development settings, and zero tolerance for hate speech, violence, or incitement. The government is unable to respond positively to the request "*that the House of Representatives not appropriate funds that could go towards [UNRWA]*".
- 6 New Zealand's International Development Cooperation (IDC) programme, from which New Zealand's financial support for UNRWA is derived, is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (herein the Ministry) and overseen by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Results from this expenditure are reported on annually to Parliament. The government's view is that it remains appropriate for the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry to continue to make decisions on the allocation of the appropriation, including taking decisions on funding UNRWA, informed by foreign policy and other considerations.

Recommendations and government response

- 7 Petition recommendation: "*that the House of Representatives does not appropriate funds that could go towards [UNRWA].*"
- 8 Response: New Zealand's IDC programme is an integral pillar of our foreign policy. It reflects our network of international relationships and commitments, and is an expression of our values. New Zealand delivers international development cooperation, to help improve sustainable development and

reduce poverty in developing countries, with a strong focus on the Pacific. Our humanitarian action saves lives and relieves suffering in natural disasters and protracted crises. We seek coherence across development, diplomatic, trade and economic, climate change, environment, and security objectives to ensure we deliver sustainable progress in developing countries, and advance New Zealand's interests and values. It remains appropriate that IDC expenditure decisions, including whether to fund UNRWA, continue to rest with the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the advice of, or delegated to, the Ministry.¹

International Development Cooperation funding

- 9 Through the annual budget process, Parliament, including the House of Representatives, appropriates funding for New Zealand's IDC programme (a non-departmental appropriation within Vote Foreign Affairs). The Ministry manages the IDC programme, disbursing funding provided under this appropriation through a range of delivery partners (including UNRWA).
- 10 IDC spending is guided by government priorities, including foreign policy considerations, and key policies such as New Zealand's *International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable Development* policy statement, and the *New Zealand Humanitarian Action Policy*. Decisions are underpinned by robust business processes including due diligence, risk management and quality assurance processes.
- 11 Where spending falls within the Ministry's financial delegations but is sensitive then the Ministry consults or seeks the agreement of the Minister.

New Zealand support for UNRWA

- 12 UNRWA was established by a United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) on 8 December 1949 "to carry out [...] direct relief and works programmes" for Palestinian refugees following the 1948 Arab-Israel conflict. UNRWA has a humanitarian and development mandate to provide assistance and protection. Its mandate has been continually extended by United Nations member states and was last renewed in late-2022 out to 2026.
- 13 Today, 5.9 million refugees are eligible for UNRWA assistance in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. UNRWA's services include: education; primary health care; relief and social services; camp improvement; microfinance; and emergency assistance, including in situations of armed conflict. A salient example of UNRWA's emergency response role is the lifesaving assistance the Agency is currently providing in Gaza in response to the Israel-Hamas conflict.
- 14 New Zealand has supported UNRWA since its establishment through engagement on its mandate and financial contributions. It has been a long-held view of the New Zealand government and partners, that in the absence of a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine, UNRWA plays a unique and

¹ Noting that approvals exceeding NZ\$25 million require Cabinet approval by way of the financial delegations framework in place.

essential role in ensuring the humanitarian, development, and protection needs of Palestinian refugees are met. UNRWA is an important stabilising force for peace in the region and New Zealand's support for the Agency is an extension of our support for the Middle East Peace Process, the United Nations, and broader multilateral system.

- 15 UNRWA operates in a complex and challenging political context. Allegations occasionally arise related to the conduct of UNRWA or its staff inconsistent with UN values, such as tolerance and non-discrimination, or humanitarian principles (humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence). Some allegations are substantiated. UNRWA has been clear that it takes all allegations of neutrality and other breaches seriously, investigates these fully and takes appropriate actions based on the outcomes of investigations (including disciplining staff up to termination). It has also made clear that in this context - zero tolerance does not equate to zero risk.
- 16 UNRWA has assured New Zealand (and other donors) repeatedly that the Agency adopts a zero-tolerance approach to hate speech, incitement to violence and discrimination. It takes specific actions to manage this:
 - 16.1 **Breaches of neutrality at UNRWA facilities:** UNRWA's 1,300 facilities (for example schools, health centres and administration offices) are neutral and inviolable under international humanitarian law. UNRWA undertakes regular facility assessments to ensure adherence. Breaches occasionally occur (for example violent incursions), and when they do, UNRWA notifies donors and relevant authorities, and reminds parties of their obligations under international law.
 - 16.2 **UNRWA services (including education), breaching neutrality, or not aligning with United Nations values:** In accordance with best practice in refugee settings, UNRWA uses education materials produced by host authorities across its five sites of operation. A small amount of Palestinian Authority-produced education materials have been found to not be aligned with United Nations values such as tolerance and non-discrimination. In response, UNRWA does not teach the very concerning content and adopts a 'teacher-centred approach' where it provides detailed guidance to teachers on how to teach problematic content in a way that adheres to United Nations values.
 - 16.3 **Staff glorifying or inciting hate and violence, including online:** In response UNRWA has taken a number of actions to ensure staff adherence to values and principles including neutrality courses, vetting and due diligence measures. Upheld allegations against staff relate to a very small percentage of UNRWA's over 33,000 staff.
- 17 The New Zealand government, including in its implementation of the IDC programme, does not tolerate hatred, violence, anti-Semitism or incitement. The Ministry has made New Zealand's position very clear to UNRWA. Allegations of breaches of United Nations values and humanitarian principles are taken seriously by the government and other donors. The Ministry has previously assessed that UNRWA has systems in place to deliver education

and other services, in a way that aligns with United Nations values and humanitarian principles, and to investigate and respond to allegations as they arise. The Ministry continues to follow UNRWA's responses to allegations, investigation outcomes and engage on neutrality issues with the Agency and other donors.

- 18 On 26 January 2024 very serious allegations from Israel were made public that twelve UNRWA staff had participated in the 7 October 2023 Hamas terror attacks. The United Nations has a response to these allegations underway that New Zealand is following closely. The United Nations' response includes: an independent Office of Internal Oversight Services investigation to establish the facts; an external review led by Catherine Colonna, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, to assess whether UNRWA is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations of serious breaches when they are made; and a series of internal UNRWA initiatives to strengthen accountability and oversight. New Zealand is engaging with the United Nations (including UNRWA directly) and other donors on the allegations and related responses.

Conclusion

- 19 UNRWA plays a unique and essential role in ensuring the humanitarian, development, and protection needs of Palestinian refugees are met, this is especially important in the context of the current Israel-Hamas conflict.
- 20 IDC spending decisions are informed by robust decision-making processes. There is a high degree of oversight over such spending. Where spending may be sensitive then the Ministry consults or seeks the agreement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.
- 21 In the case of UNRWA, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has been responsible for approving New Zealand's annual core contributions on advice from the Ministry. Such decisions are informed by foreign policy, development, humanitarian, and other considerations. The government is of the view this decision-making approach remains appropriate.
- 22 Therefore, the government is unable to respond positively to the Petition's request that the House of Representatives not appropriate funding that could go to UNRWA.
- 23 Allegations of breaches of values or principles by UNRWA, or misconduct by organisations funded by New Zealand's IDC programme are taken seriously by the government. The Ministry and our funding partners put relevant safeguards in place to mitigate risk, and respond as appropriate when allegations arise.