



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

MAR 5 2009

Dear Mr. Garrett:

Thank you for your February 11 letter regarding U.S. Government funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The Department of State shares your concern about terrorists, including those affiliated with Hamas, deriving benefits directly or indirectly from U.S. contributions to international organizations. The Department continues to be vigilant about complying with U.S. laws designed to prevent potential support to terrorists. In this connection, the Department has taken significant steps to ensure that UNRWA remains effective, neutral, and impartial, including, but not limited to, monitoring UNRWA's compliance with Section 301 (c) of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act.

We continue to value UNRWA as an instrumental counterweight to extremism in the region by providing assistance and services that would otherwise not be met or, more likely, would be met by extremist groups. Operating in a volatile region in which the main victims of ongoing conflict are civilians, UNRWA's programs have been an essential lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. This is particularly true in Gaza, where UNRWA provides 70 percent of the population with emergency assistance and basic education and health services.

Significantly, UNRWA continues to prioritize education in Gaza, which we view as a critical investment in the human capital of a future Palestinian state – educated young people are less susceptible to Hamas recruitment and more invested in a peaceful future for their people. Resisting significant pressure from Hamas, UNRWA-Gaza successfully has maintained gender equality in its schools, strengthened its tolerance education program, introduced a pilot human rights curriculum program, and implemented the Gaza Summer Games program. Less than one week after the end of recent hostilities, UNRWA worked to quickly reopen its schools—which had served as emergency shelters for 50,000 displaced persons at the height of the conflict—for 200,000 children.

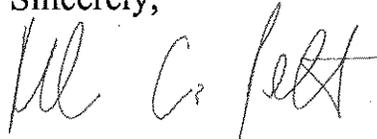
The Honorable
Scott Garrett,
House of Representatives.

We believe UNRWA acts swiftly and takes all possible measures to address violations of the Agency's own policies designed to ensure its neutrality. For example, UNRWA required its staff who sought to run in the January 2006 elections to resign from their positions, consistent with UNRWA's policy that staff may not, under any circumstances, engage in political activity. UNRWA's recent decision to condemn Hamas and halt imports into Gaza following Hamas' seizure of its humanitarian goods until the goods were returned and assurances provided that this would not happen again demonstrates UNRWA's commitment to adhere to 301 (c) obligations and maintain its neutrality in undertaking its humanitarian mandate.

The Department is cooperating fully with the current engagement by the U.S. Government Accountability Office on UNRWA, which includes reviewing UNRWA's cash assistance programs and its internal control mechanisms. Based on our ongoing monitoring of UNRWA, we do not have reason to believe that the Agency has violated its obligations under 301 (c). Furthermore, due to UNRWA's irreplaceable role in Gaza as the largest provider of emergency assistance and services to Palestinians, we believe a moratorium on support would run counter to USG interests in countering Hamas and ensuring that the urgent humanitarian needs of Gazans are addressed.

We hope this information is useful to you. Please do not hesitate to contact us again if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael C. Polt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" being the most prominent part.

Michael C. Polt
Acting Assistant Secretary
Legislative Affairs