

Israel's Parliament Votes To Ban UNRWA

Why In News

- Israeli parliament has approved two controversial bills to ban the **United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)** from operating on Israeli territory and areas under Israel's control.
- The legislation, passed, risks **collapsing the already fragile aid distribution** process at a moment when the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is worsening and Israel is under increased pressure to allow in aid supplies.



What Is The UNRWA

- UNRWA was **established in 1949** to provide aid to about 700,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes during the **1948 Arab-Israeli war**.
- **UNRWA began operations on May 1, 1950**. It operates in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, as well as in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan — where Palestinian refugees took shelter after their expulsion.



- According to the UNRWA's website, **it runs education, health, relief and social services, microfinance** and emergency assistance programmes inside and outside refugee camps in these areas. An estimated 5.9 million Palestinian refugees — most of whom are descendants of the original refugees — currently access the UNRWA's services.
- The **UN agency is funded mostly by voluntary contributions** from donor states such as the United States, Germany, the European Union, etc. It also gets a limited subsidy from the UN, which is used only for administrative costs.
- UNRWA **employs some 30,000 Palestinians**. More than 200 of its staff members have been killed in Israeli attacks over the past year.

Why Has Israel Acted Against The UNRWA

- **Israel has argued for decades that the UNRWA's role** is obsolete, and its work to aid Palestinian refugees and their descendants has been an impediment to a peace settlement.
- However, **critics have blamed Israel's own actions**, such as not meaningfully recognising the foundation of a Palestinian state, as having perpetuated the longstanding territorial conflict.



- Israel has also accused some of **UNRWA's 13,000 employees in Gaza of participating in the October 7, 2023 attacks on Israel** by Hamas that triggered the war. Israel has given the US a dossier identifying 12 UNRWA staffers who it says took part in the October 7 attacks. According to Israel, most of these alleged attackers worked as teachers in UNRWA schools. It claims to have evidence that UNRWA employed 190 Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants.
- **Although UNRWA fired nine employees after an investigation**, it has denied that it aids armed groups on purpose — the agency has been sharing the list of its employees with Israel for a long time.



What Does The New Israeli Law Mean

- One of the Bills **bars UNRWA from operating** any representative office, providing any service, or conducting any activity, directly or indirectly, in Israel's sovereign territory.
- The **second Bill cuts all ties between government** employees and UNRWA, and takes away the legal immunities of the agency's staff.



- Together, the **Bills are likely to stop UNRWA from operating** in Gaza and the West Bank as Israel controls access to both these Palestinian territories. They could also force the agency to relocate its headquarters from East Jerusalem, according to a report by the Associated Press.
- **The Bills were passed by overwhelming majorities** in the 120-member parliament. Lawmakers from at least two centrist parties joined Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition in voting for the Bills, demonstrating broad support for the measures.

Impact Of These Measures

- Most of the provisions in the Bills will take effect after three months.
- Since the **beginning of the war**, almost all of Gaza's 2 million people have been reliant on UNRWA for basic necessities, including food, water, and hygiene supplies.
- Along with the **Palestinian Red Crescent**, UNRWA handles almost all UN aid distribution in the territory.



- The UN agency also recently helped implement an emergency polio vaccination campaign in Gaza to prevent the infectious virus that can cause paralysis from spreading.
- In the **West Bank**, **UNRWA** currently provides services for **19** refugee camps, more than 90 schools, and several health services, including prenatal care.
- In a post on X, UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini that the ban set “a dangerous precedent” and would “only deepen the suffering of Palestinians”.

