UNRWA finds attack tunnel under one of its Gaza schools

June 6, 2021

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The Jerusalem Post

<https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/unrwa-finds-attack-tunnel-under-one-of-its-gaza-schools-670262>

A tunnel used by Palestinian militants in Gaza was discovered under one of the schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency last month.

The [UNRWA](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/unrwa-continued-teaching-hate-after-claiming-it-dropped-content-659345) Zaitoun Preparatory Boys’ School “A” and Elementary Boys’ School “A” was one of two of the organization’s facilities damaged during the 11-day Gaza war that ended on May 21.

At the end of May, UNRWA found what “appears to be a cavity and a possible tunnel, at the location of the missile strike,” the organization reported over the weekend.

“The depth of the cavity is approximately 7.5 meters below the surface of the school. UNRWA discovered the existence of a possible tunnel in the context of the investigation of the fired missile,” it explained in a statement to the media.

UNRWA said that the tunnel was not connected to the school. There is no “indication of the existence of any entry or exit points for the tunnel within the premises,” it added.

The organization condemned both Palestinians who built the tunnel and the IDF for its attacks, which it alleged caused damage to the school.

“UNRWA condemns the existence and potential use by Palestinian armed groups of such tunnels underneath its schools in the strongest possible terms. It is unacceptable that students and staff be placed at risk in such a way,” the organization stated.

But it also took issue with IDF activity, noting that the school was an emergency shelter and should have been immune from attack.

“The Agency’s installations, like all United Nations facilities, are marked as such and fly a United Nations flag on the roof. UNRWA shares the coordinates of all of its installations periodically with relevant Israeli authorities and in times of conflict, the coordinates of designated emergency shelters are shared daily,” UNRWA noted.

Such actions by Palestinian arms groups and the IDF violate UNRWA’s “inviolability and neutrality” which must be respected at all times, the organization stated.

“UNRWA demands that all parties desist from any activities or conduct that put beneficiaries and staff at risk and undermine the ability of UNRWA staff to provide assistance to Palestine refugees in safety and security,” UNRWA stated.

UNRWA’s call for safety at its facilities followed an announcement by its Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini Thursday that he had asked the organization's Gaza Director [Matthias Schmale](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/palestinians-declare-unrwa-gaza-director-persona-non-grata-669915) to exit the Strip and come to Jerusalem after threats were issued against him.

“UNRWA strongly protested and contested the position conveyed by the De Facto authorities in Gaza that they could no longer guarantee the safety and security of our staff. Regrettably, such a position left the Agency with no other choice than to ask the staff to leave the Gaza Strip as their security is of paramount priority to UNRWA,” Lazzarini said.

Threats were issued after Schmale gave an interview to Israel’s N12 television on May 22, in which he said he did not dispute Israel’s assertion that its air strikes were “precise.”

Schmale has apologized for his remarks in which he was commenting on the ferocity of the air strikes and said: “... precision was there but there was unacceptable and unbearable loss of life on the civilian side”.

An UNRWA official told Reuters that Deputy Commissioner-General Leni Stenseth would temporarily lead the Gaza team.

“UNRWA has unequivocally condemned the killing and wounding of all civilians, including Palestine refugees, and has consistently called on all parties to ensure the protection of civilians during the recent hostilities in Gaza and the recent escalation of violence in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem,” Lazzarini said.