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USAid Freeze Is 'Punishing' Disabled Children In West Bank

Under pressure from the US Congress following the Palestinian statehood bid, USAID has unilaterally and without warning cut funding for several independent Palestinian Christian NGOs.

This action by the US government's aid arm has affected vital programmes which assist some of the neediest people in the West Bank, including disabled and other vulnerable children.

The chief executive of BibleLands has called this decision a scandal and unconstitutional.

USAID has denied that its budget has been frozen, but a number of Palestinian Christian NGOs, partners of BibleLands, have already been negatively affected:

The Princess Basma Centre for Disabled Children on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem learnt two weeks ago that USAID funding totalling \$100,000 for an excellent community-based rehabilitation programme for disabled children in the West Bank would not be disbursed as promised. The Centre comes under the auspices of the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. BibleLands had previously agreed to part-fund this outreach project, which provides for Princess Basma medics and therapists to train staff in community centres for disabled children in Ramallah, Nablus, Tulkarm and Jenin, but diverted funds to other projects in the West Bank when the USAID grant was agreed.

The Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation (BASR), a local Christian NGO, had attracted USAID funding for a psycho-social intervention programme with vulnerable and disadvantaged children, including training and capacity-building for child professionals and awareness-raising on child rights and child protection. USAID had also agreed to support BASR's strategic planning process. This funding has been withdrawn in the last week without any notice or reason. Again, BASR passed on other opportunities to fund these important projects because it assumed USAID funding was secure.

A Washington analyst has attributed the USAID decision to strong pro-Israeli lobbying. Lara Freedman, Director of Policy and Government Relations for Americans for Peace Now (APN), has said:

"The narrative that says that 'the-Palestinians'-decision-to-go-to-the-UN-is-a-form-of-diplomatic-terrorism-that-cannot-go-unpunished,' cultivated for months by the AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee),

Israeli diplomats, and most of the American Jewish and right-wing Christian community, has firmly taken root." [1]

Commenting on these reports, Jeremy Moodey, Chief Executive of BibleLands said:

"This is a scandal. There cannot be any sense or justice in the US Congress 'punishing' disabled children in the West Bank just because their President had the temerity to ask for UN recognition of the Palestinian state. These are vital projects helping some of the most vulnerable children, and other NGOs including BibleLands were willing to provide funding, but stepped back when USAID grants were secured. US law-makers should perhaps take a look at their own Eighth Amendment, which guarantees proportionality between punishment and crime. This appears to have been ignored when it comes to disabled children in Ramallah and Nablus."

Mrs Maha Tarayra, Deputy Director of the Princess Basma Centre, added:

"This decision will deprive so many disabled children in the West Bank of the quality care they desperately need. Disabled children will not go away, even if USAID funding does. America should think again."

Rima Canawati, Director of Program Development at BASR, added:

"We were shocked that USAID funding towards development programs targeting vulnerable groups of the Palestinian population including those with disabilities was suspended without prior notice following the Palestinian statehood bid in the UN! It seems that the Palestinian people are doomed to suffer injustice, oppression and humiliation just because they are demanding their inalienable rights. Perhaps this is a new form of US preached democracy in disguise!"

[1] Quoted by Jim Lobe of Inter Press Service, 7 October 2011 (<http://ipsnews.net/>)

Our partners in the Middle East are continuing to reach out to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in society, and BibleLands are proud to be involved in this work.

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