

Commissioner-General's Speech
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UNRWA and Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Challenges and Opportunities

Excellencies, distinguished guests:

I am pleased to join you in Warsaw this afternoon. I look forward to sharing and exchanging views with you on a topic that has for decades inspired keen interest in students and practitioners of international relations. I thank the Centre of International Relations for their invitation and hospitality.

In 1948, an intense armed conflict between Arab states and the newly declared State of Israel triggered a refugee crisis, one of the first and largest in the post-World War II era. At the heart of that crisis were over 750,000 people of Palestine. For these freshly dispossessed, the conflict, in addition to inflicting trauma and bereavement on a large scale, also precipitated the loss of livelihoods, land and a territory they had for millennia called home.

A central plank of the international community's response was the creation of UNRWA in 1949 to stem the suffering of the refugees and ease the emergency situation towards more [stable] humanitarian conditions. UNRWA's lifespan was initially set at three years because in the normal course of things, refugee status is, by definition, transient. In international relations and in law, conflicts causing displacement or refugee flows must be amenable to peaceful resolution. In accordance with international precepts, land, property and homes lost can - and should - be restored or compensated for, and those who flee will be able to return to

their places of origin if they so choose, to restore ties and re-build their lives.

Since 1948, the Palestine refugee condition has challenged these assumptions and expectations, confronting the international community with the most protracted refugee predicament it has faced, and a conflict which, thus far, has proved resistant to negotiated settlement.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has no parallel in terms of the duration and size of its refugee issue and the geo-political and security questions it triggers regionally and internationally. In 2008, Palestinians marked the sixtieth year of their dispossession and exile. This year, UNRWA commemorates the sixtieth year of its creation. This afternoon, it is fitting that we turn our attention to ponder a few of the challenges and opportunities faced by UNRWA and the Palestine refugees we serve.

Allow me briefly to introduce UNRWA and to outline, from the refugee and human rights perspective, the situation facing Palestine refugees in the Middle East. I will also discuss, from UNRWA's vantage point, a few of the pressing questions which Israelis, Palestinians and the international community must address going forward. As the title of my statement suggests, UNRWA recognizes the formidable challenges that confront Palestinians and Palestine refugees. Yet we believe there are opportunities to be grasped.

UNRWA's mandate and operational contours

UNRWA's mandate is to assist and protect Palestine refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, until such time that their plight is justly resolved. Over the years, UNRWA's work has been influenced by changing refugee needs and by developments in its volatile operational environment. With a refugee population that has grown five-fold to its

current size of some 4.7 million, some 40% of whom are below 30 years of age, UNRWA's work currently blends humanitarian and human development functions in a portfolio of five main programme areas. These are primary education, primary health care, social safety-net services, infrastructure and camp improvement and microfinance. In addition to these programmes, UNRWA performs emergency response functions during and after armed conflict and situations of humanitarian stress. This role, which was most recently in evidence in Gaza at the beginning of this year, draws on the expertise and experience of our five programmes, ensuring, as far as possible, a seamless integration of both humanitarian and human development components of UNRWA's work.

Unique among UN agencies, UNRWA offers its services directly to refugees. While we coordinate – and harmonize – our functions with those of host countries and authorities, UNRWA's programmes are implemented by some 29,000 of the Agency's own staff, almost all of whom are Palestine refugees themselves. The breadth of UNRWA's field presence and operational scope flows from this *modus operandi* of direct service delivery.

To illustrate, we have some 16,000 teachers in 683 elementary and preparatory schools; 138 health clinics receiving several million patient visits a year; 65 community run women's centers; and 10 vocational and technical training centers, producing graduates sought after by employers for their skills. UNRWA's food aid programmes benefit approximately a million and a half people, the majority of whom reside in the occupied territory.

UNRWA's direct service provision thus imparts to it the character more akin to a quasi-governmental agency than to a traditional UN entity. This high public profile is sharpened by how closely the people of the Middle

East identify with the plight of Palestine refugees. For them – as well as the refugees themselves - UNRWA and its services are a valued aspect of the international community's interest in the region.

For this reason, and also as a result of six decades of delivering services that are public in nature and essential to human development, UNRWA has acquired a special status among Palestine refugees and in the communities and countries that host them. An aspect of this status is a relationship of trust and confidence. Our focus on helping those most in need with innovative, high-impact services, has established the Agency as a reliable humanitarian and human development partner.

UNRWA's uniqueness takes nothing away from its core identity as a UN agency operating under the guidance of the General Assembly and in harmony with the principles and purposes of the UN Charter. Accordingly, we promote values of neutrality, impartiality, tolerance for diversity, non-violence and respect for the human rights of all. And we inform our work with progressive developments in international law and practice, including human rights and international protection.

UNRWA's protection obligations entail action and advocacy regionally and internationally. We take seriously our duty to remind States and political actors of the need to expedite the achievement of a solution to the plight of Palestine refugees - a solution that is consistent with the law and practice of international protection. And we take every appropriate opportunity to highlight the importance of ensuring that Palestine refugee issues and the views and preferences of refugees are taken into account in the shaping of a just and lasting solution to their plight. I will return to this point later.

Field highlights

Allow me at this stage to briefly sketch the highlights of the situation in the countries and territory in which UNRWA operates.

The governments and people of Jordan and Syria extend extraordinary hospitality to Palestine refugees, offering them rights and freedoms equal or approximate to those of citizens. These countries host over 2.2 million refugees in stable political environments, free from large-scale violence or armed conflict. However, the constraints on refugee lives are largely economic in nature, with many of them vulnerable to poverty and poor living conditions. Socio-economic opportunities remain out of their reach, not least because UNRWA lacks the resources needed to assist them towards self-reliance.

Lebanon has a chequered history in relation to the approximately 400,000 Palestine refugees it hosts. It should come as no surprise that a country with such a complicated ethnic, confessional and political complexion, would approach with some wariness a population of Palestine refugees which has volatile issues of its own. For many years, refugees were excluded from the mainstream of employment and education. Since 2005, the government has made welcome efforts to ensure for refugees freedom of movement and employment. Concrete progress is slow, but we trust that with support from successive governments, the fortunes of refugees in Lebanon will continue to improve in tandem with the country's stabilization.

In addition to the task of raising the standard of living in all camps in Lebanon, the major pre-occupation for UNRWA is the reconstruction of Nahr El Bared camp. In the summer of 2007, the camp was destroyed in an armed confrontation between the government and a militant group which had infiltrated the camp, displacing all 30,000 residents. Our appeal for Nahr El Bared now stands at \$277m. Pledges have been received, allowing

UNRWA to begin rebuilding, thus realizing the refugees' right to a decent standard of living, while also contributing to the security and stability of the surrounding Lebanese communities.

In the occupied Palestinian territory, Palestine refugees, who comprise nearly half of the population, confront grave threats to their lives, liberty and livelihoods. These threats, which have intensified over the course of the past three years, emanate chiefly from Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank since 1967, the policies Israel executes towards Palestinians in the context of that occupation, the recurrent cycles of armed conflict, and the closure regimes currently imposed on the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinians and Palestine refugees exist in a state of precariousness that is anything but normal.

West Bank

In the West Bank, violence and restrictions on freedom of movement constantly intrude on Palestinians' lives and livelihoods, with increasingly adverse effects on their present and future well-being. Violence originates from the occupying forces in the form of the demolition of homes, particularly in East Jerusalem, and frequent armed incursions, often accompanied by arrests and detention of young men. Israeli settlers on Palestinian land are another source of vicious attacks, while the conflict between Hamas and Fatah also contributes its own quota of bloodshed.

As regards closures and movement restrictions, Palestinians contend with a dizzying catalogue of measures, policies and physical obstacles which must be seen to be believed. The most visible is the separation barrier, with its associated regime of checkpoints – both fixed and mobile – permits, prohibited security zones, roadblocks and earth mounds. These are reinforced by the security apparatus protecting the Israeli settlements built on Palestinian land.

The cumulative impact of these measures must be reckoned in the suffering and humiliation Palestinians endure in being compelled daily to negotiate these obstacles and in the choking of commerce, economic activity and normal social interaction. As well, the fragmenting of West Bank land has progressively corroded its viability as the economic and political heart of a putative Palestinian state.

Gaza

Gaza, home to a million and a half Palestinians, 70% of whom are refugees, has become the byword for adversity and the privations of armed conflict. This grim reputation was reinforced in the conflict which ended on 22 January this year. Gaza sustained ferocious air, land and sea attacks. Over 1,400 were killed, including over 300 children and some 5,300 people were injured, many of them seriously. 52,300 homes were damaged or destroyed along with schools, health facilities and other public infrastructure. Factories, industrial estate and commercial buildings were also badly hit. UNRWA's main warehouse, situated on its Field Office compound, was destroyed, along with its six month supply of food and medicines.

Israel maintains a tight blockade of Gaza's borders, now in its 25th month. What is allowed in - some basic commodities, health supplies and goods for UNRWA and sister UN agencies - is wholly inadequate for the needs of the civilian population. Prior to the blockade, there was a minimum daily inflow of 500 trucks of goods into Gaza. Today, an average of 75 trucks a day manage to get in during a good week.

Items prohibited from entering Gaza include books, paper for textbooks, crayons, light bulbs, candles, matches, musical instruments, clothing, shoes, mattresses bed sheets, blankets, tea, coffee, chocolate and nuts.

Hair conditioner is banned, while shampoo is not. No petrol or diesel has been allowed through the official crossings into Gaza since November 2008. Gaza's power plant receives only 70% of its weekly fuel requirements and only half of the cooking gas needed.

With construction materials also excluded, UNRWA is prevented from implementing its plans to help Gazans recover from the devastation of the recent conflict. Schools, public buildings, mosques and industrial properties cannot be repaired. Even the entry of currency is forbidden, further paralyzing Gaza's private sector, already functioning at barely 5% of its pre-2006 level. Exports are non-existent and very few Palestinians are allowed into and out of Gaza.

The consequences of the isolation of Gaza are grave and mounting - the creeping threat of malnutrition, especially among the young, the collapse of public services and the private sector and artificial conditions of isolation and imposed poverty. The underground tunnels at Rafah in the south of Gaza have become the lifeline by which the people retain a superficial and fictitious semblance of normality. However, the activity of the tunnels cannot mask the 40% unemployment rate, nor can it conceal that 80% of Gazans receive some form of humanitarian assistance.

The travesty is that the blockade of Gaza does more long-term damage than can be physically observed. It has become the ally to those rejecting compromise and peaceful means of ending the conflict. It provides justification for the forces of militancy and extremism, bolstering their recruitment drive – in Gaza and throughout the region.

Challenges and opportunities Messages for the international community

Excellencies, distinguished guests:

My brief summary of UNRWA's role and operational environment provides pointers to areas where opportunities exist alongside challenges. One such area is support for the humanitarian and human development work being done by UNRWA and a variety of other UN, governmental and non-governmental agencies. UNRWA's chronic funding shortfalls have for many years hampered its capacity to deliver the full quality and scope of services to refugees. This means that refugees do not receive the care they need and deserve, leaving far too many of them languishing in poor living conditions and poverty. This year, for example, we anticipate income of \$ 458.4 million against a regular budget of \$ 565.5 million – a deficit of \$107.1 million, which excludes funds required for emergencies and projects. In terms of day-to-day running costs for such items as staff salaries and supplies for schools and clinics, the shortfall translates to \$39.3 million. UNRWA will continue stressing to the donor community the vital importance of its role, particularly as regards long-term human development goals and the stability and calm that effective UNRWA services help to cultivate across the Middle East.

Another area demanding urgent attention is the easing of the blockades and closure regimes that cause so much avoidable suffering. International instruments recognize the right of everyone to “an adequate standard of living ...including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions”. The blockades and closures openly aim at achieving the opposite effect. The misery they create is impossible to reconcile with these and other human rights and international legal obligations. On grounds of principle and international law, Gaza's borders must be opened, and kept open, to allow, with appropriate security safeguards, two-way freedom of movement for people, goods and cash. In the West Bank, steps must be taken to ease the rigid

closure regime, and to bring an end to the demolition of Palestinian homes and the construction of settlements on Palestinian land.

A further cluster of challenges and opportunities relates to the importance of enforcing international humanitarian law in the context of armed conflict in the occupied Palestinian territory. The history of this conflict is one of the disregard or non-observance of the rules protecting civilians, with both Israel and Palestinian combatants appearing to ignore, with apparent impunity, their legal obligations in that regard. Following the recent conflict in Gaza, the international community has taken some crucial first steps towards reversing the decades of failure in this respect. We have seen a series of fact-finding missions to establish the veracity – or otherwise – of allegations of breaches of international law. I refer to these as “first steps” as it remains to be seen whether the political will may be found to seek judicial enforcement of the findings of these missions.

A fourth area for attention is the re-doubling of the international community’s efforts to begin a credible, inclusive process towards a negotiated solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Visible, meaningful progress in tackling underlying political questions is necessary to complement and facilitate human development work. Credible negotiation processes must begin with reconciliation among Palestinians and restoration of the integrity of the occupied Palestinian territory. Negotiations must be inclusive and balanced, allowing for refugee representation, and they must address, along with other final status matters, the question of Palestine refugees in a manner consistent with their interests, choices and rights.

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests:

The issues raised by Palestinian and Palestine refugee questions are quintessentially international in nature, as are their solutions. That international character translates into a shared responsibility among States and other international actors to do whatever is possible to address the four areas of action I have outlined.

There are many States, which, like Poland, have experienced and overcome armed conflict and occupation, emerging unified and prosperous from the task of nation-building. We ask these States to bring their experience to bear on the Palestinian issue and to contribute to building international consensus around tackling these areas.

We have no illusions about the magnitude of the impediments along the path to action. The structures and measures oppressing Palestinian lives are not incidental or flimsy. They are systemic and meticulously designed to be effective and durable. They are cemented by centuries of profound existential assumptions and unequivocally backed by State power. The instruments of Palestinian distress will not be lightly reversed or removed.

Yet UNRWA has always held firm the conviction that the principles demanding protection for the human dignity of Palestinians and the rules of international law in which they are enshrined will ultimately prevail. In this vein, the recent pronouncements of President Obama, notably his speech in Cairo, have produced a tide of optimism, rekindling in many a belief in the possibilities for peace. The US President's statements suggest a refreshing inclination, welcomed by Palestinians thirsting for an end to the conflict, to address the issues with even-handedness and on the basis of principle and international law. They also convey a readiness to show recognition and respect for Palestinians and their plight.

Sentiments alone – timely and uplifting as they may be - are insufficient to the task of restoring to Palestinians and Palestine refugees the dignity and freedoms so long denied them. We look forward to a time when bold statements will be followed by spirited, decisive action.

In the meantime, UNRWA will continue striving for excellence in the humanitarian and human development mission it has pursued for the last sixty years. We will ensure that we remain – for Palestine refugees, for the communities in which they live and for the international community – a dependable source of principled assistance and support. And we will keep the faith as long as a just and lasting solution to the refugee plight remains elusive and our presence is required by those we serve.