

# **Speech of UNRWA Commissioner-General to the 4<sup>th</sup> Committee**

## **(Special Political and Decolonization Committee)**

2 November 2016

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

It is an honour to address this session of the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly, to present my annual report for 2015 and update Member States about significant developments in 2016 that impact the Palestine refugees and the work of UNRWA .

To begin with, I express the deepest appreciation to Member States for their support, following UNRWA's establishment by the General Assembly in 1949. I wish also to convey my profound appreciation to the host countries and the donors who make it possible for us to carry out our daily work.

As a witness to the historic injustice that they suffered, and mandated to assist and protect them, UNRWA has a responsibility to sound the alarm on behalf of the community of Palestine refugees that is sinking into the abyss under our very watch.

This is happening at a time when the Middle-East is reeling under the effects of multiple armed conflicts with catastrophic consequences in human terms: extensive loss of life, destruction of livelihoods and infrastructure and displacement of people on a scale not seen since World War Two.

With so many pressing issues to deal with, I am asked every now and then why the world should continue to care about the fate of Palestine refugees.

The world should do so:

Because the conditions facing the 5.3 million Palestine refugees are now in many ways worse than at any time since 1948, something that I believe we should all reflect on.

Because the absence of a political horizon is draining them of resolve and creativity.

Because fifty years of occupation and ten years of blockade in Palestine, happening in full view of the international community, are etched painfully into the soul and identity of the refugee community.

But maybe even more importantly:

Because a young generation of Palestine refugees is growing up and losing faith in the value of politics, compromise and international diplomacy.

Because, once the dust has settled from the crises of the region - and settle it ultimately will - the scars of Gaza, Hebron, East Jerusalem and Nablus, as well as the pain and suffering of Ein El-Helweh, Nahr El-Bared, Yarmouk and others, and the abuse and despair of Palestine refugees, will continue to stare the world in the face, and with greater intensity.

Allow me to focus for a moment on these scars and this despair. In Syria, over 60% of the 560,000 refugees resident when the conflict broke out in 2011 have been displaced and we estimate that 120'000 have fled the country altogether.

Most of the camps where the refugees sheltered since 1948 have sustained significant damage. Palestine refugees struggle to survive in the devastated landscapes of Aleppo and Yarmouk, in the battlegrounds of Khan Eshieh and Dera'a, exposed to the destructive violence of opposition armed groups and the effects of governmental artillery fire .

Young Palestine refugees from Syria, now understand in their hearts the fear and trauma that their families went through in 1948 and 1967.

In Gaza, the population is marked by the effects of repeated wars. Children as young as nine have lived through three highly violent conflicts over the past eight years alone. 2 million

people - of which 1.3 M are Palestine refugees - see every facet of their lives defined by the illegal blockade imposed on them.

Freedom of movement is virtually inexistent. For example, some 90% of UNRWA's 260'000 students in Gaza have never left the Strip in their lives. Unemployment has reached world-record levels, with jobless youth at a truly staggering 60-to-65 %.

While you can map out the physical consequences of successive wars in Gaza and the progress - or lack thereof - in terms of reconstruction by comparing before-and-after photographs, there is no way to properly map out the psychological scars, the depth of despair among young people deprived of opportunity and the reasons behind an unprecedented increase in the rate of suicides.

No one in Gaza is spared the denial of rights and dignity. The older generation of business people, who were pro-peace in orientation because of their ability to travel and connect to the outside world have seen their businesses crumble one after the other because of the extreme import and export restrictions resulting from the blockade. Instead of the dignity of being self-sufficient, they have now been driven into poverty and joined the 930'000 people in Gaza receiving food assistance, a truly shameful figure in a context where people are highly educated.

While the world focuses on the ravages of wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the situation in Gaza is being very seriously underestimated and I must tell you that I cannot see how anything happening there - under our collective watch - is reconcilable with human dignity or the security of anyone in the region.

In the West Bank including East Jerusalem, you see a different version of despair among Palestine refugees. Military rule and occupation define every aspect of public and private life: from military incursions, to restriction of the movement of people and goods, punitive house demolitions and continued and illegal settlement expansion which reinforces this trend.

The Secretary-General, referring to military occupation as “a potent incubator of hate and extremism”, as something against which oppressed people will react, condemned all violence targeting civilians in his address to the Security Council last January, including acts of violence inflicted on Israeli civilians in the wake of protests that broke out in October of last year.

There’s no way to quantify the cumulative human toll of this occupation on Palestinians. The economic toll deserves attention, and the figures are staggering. The UN has estimated conservatively that in the West Bank Area C alone \$4 billion in Palestinian income is lost each year as a result of the Israeli military occupation. In 2010, Palestinian economists estimated annual losses at \$6.8 billion for Gaza and the entire West Bank including East Jerusalem,

This vastly exceeds the generous sums received in humanitarian and development funding through all donor channels; sovereign, UN, and non-governmental. Despite the generosity of the donors, Palestine's economic base is being continually eroded limiting drastically any scope for sustainable economic growth and job creation.

These trends are all the more preoccupying as a majority of young Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip and West Bank (including East Jerusalem) were born after the Oslo peace accords. They were told by the world that if they embraced negotiations and a sense of compromise, a just and lasting solution would be found, in the form of a Palestinian State living side by side with Israel, in peace and security. This has not happened and the risk is big of losing an entire generation to the idea that political processes and diplomacy work.

And yet, nothing would today be more important than seeing the international community act decisively to recreate a much needed political horizon.

Jordan is the only field where UNRWA can count on stability, enabling it to focus on its core activities. In Lebanon, very high rates of poverty and unemployment are the leading challenge for UNRWA, and a source of extreme hardship for the refugees. While many factors influence the set of unique difficulties, one main cause is exclusion of Palestine refugees from much of Lebanon's formal employment sector and their lack of access to most public services. In coordination with UNSCOL, UNRWA advocates directly for refugee labor rights and maintains a productive and strong relationship with the Government of Lebanon.

When I look at the region, I sense the risks of radicalization of desperate young people are huge. Extremists are on the constant lookout for new recruits. To date, few young Palestinians have answered the calls of groups like *Daesh*. Efforts by all parties including the international community will hopefully be taken to reduce the sense of deep insecurity felt by Palestinians and reaffirm commitments to help meet the development and humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people. UNRWA's own human development and emergency work is an indispensable asset.

I turn my remarks to UNRWA, which must navigate this complex and deeply unstable environment as it delivers directly its core education, health, and poverty mitigation services, and in addition mounts large emergency operations to 1.3 M people in the occupied Palestinian territory and Syria.

As a quasi-governmental service provider, we maintain on an ongoing basis stable delivery of essential services directly to the refugees throughout 59 official camps and refugee-majority communities in our fields. To give you a sense of the scale of our responsibilities, there are 500,000 children in our school system, which would make it the third largest in the US, after New York City and Los Angeles.

Our size, reach and targeting are unique in the UN system and we bring an important measure of stability to a people exposed to cycles of denial of rights and harsh crises. Within the Middle East's worst conflict zones, UNRWA remains a determined development actor and adaptive to the most severe challenges on the ground. We are a hybrid; in so far as we are concerned, there is no humanitarian-development gap to bridge as we can carry out both functions separately or simultaneously through existing infrastructure and staff.

In Syria we are running our core education, health and poverty mitigation programmes, while reaching 95% of the refugees in need of cash assistance as part of our emergency intervention. The access we have secured to provide life-saving assistance in various locations in Syria has been cited as an example by the UN Country Team and during the London Conference on Syria in February of this year.

I am very pleased to report that we are also increasing attendance in our schools in Syria following a sharp drop in the first years of the conflict. Today, 50,000 students are in our schools, an increase of about 28,000 over the low point in 2012; our pre-conflict enrollment high point was 66,000. That we are able to continue schooling for these children is possible only because of the agility of the Agency and the perseverance of our staff.

We are so committed to the goals of No Lost Generation and including in the post-conflict period that in Qabr Essit, previously on the front line of conflict, two destroyed UNRWA



schools, were rebuilt, and children are now back in the classrooms despite the warfare that continues to haunt them.

In Yarmouk I was very moved to see UNRWA help extract 120 students to sit for the national exams this summer. One can hardly find a more fitting symbol of our ability to protect the right to education for highly vulnerable individuals, and maintain a semblance of normalcy in situations of extreme conflict.

UNRWA's education system has been analyzed extensively by various stakeholders, and recently the World Bank validated its quality through a special report that found, amongst other things, that UNRWA schools outperform by a year the national schools systems where we operate.

Amidst these extraordinary challenges facing UNRWA in the field, I took the difficult decision last year to front-load the major reforms in our Medium Term Strategy for 2016-2021, by rolling them out in the first half of year one – 2016 – rather than staggering them over the entire 6 year MTS period of 2016-2021.

UNRWA felt the risks, and frontline colleagues in the fields this Spring faced extraordinary pressure from beneficiaries, refugee representatives and other actors. We forged ahead with the reforms out of a sense of deep responsibility to all stakeholders and most certainly to the

Palestine refugees, and I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that the reforms moved forward and showed the Agency's strength and resolve to adapt.

I would like to acknowledge with deep appreciation the role of the Hosts, with whom we engaged at all levels, and who took key steps to facilitate the reforms. Allow me to briefly highlight one of these, very relevant in the context also of the World Humanitarian Summit's Grand Bargain.

In April, our "food to cash" transition was rolled out in three fields - Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank. In place of bulk food distribution to the most vulnerable refugees, which had been UNRWA's practice since 1950, we switched to electronic "E-cards" and distributed to some 160,000 eligible refugees.

This transition was swift and has been of huge significance. For one thing, I wish to recognize that any change in services or delivery triggers intense stress in the refugee community, even changes for the better. We understand this well since they have had to face so many broken promises since 1948.

There is also an anxiety related to the fact that food aid in particular is overlaid with historic symbolism for the refugees. However, we have stressed to all interlocutors that this change is ultimately empowering, not only because it is a more dignified means of achieving food

security, but because it allows for choice by the refugees themselves. We hope the new system will enable us to mobilise more resources and cover a larger number of food insecure refugees.

Throughout this presentation, I hope to have been able to demonstrate that UNRWA works in a landscape rife with political and security tensions affecting all host governments, as well as other governments in the region. At every turn UNRWA must constantly assess and consider the scale and complexity of operational challenges that this situation imposes on us, and I ask you to do the same.

Amidst these challenges, UNRWA's leadership has taken robust, difficult steps to control and where possible reduce costs, demonstrating our commitment to lowering expenditure to a bare minimum without cutting our fundamental core services. My Special Report of September 2015 and Update of September 2016 lay out the steps which reduced our shortfall in 2016 by \$54 million and produced a zero growth budget.

Despite the range of internal measures taken and these significant budgetary results, UNRWA's financial situation remains a cause for serious concern. You will recall that a year ago, it almost led to the postponement of our school-year sending shock-waves through the refugee community. It deeply saddens and worries me that despite the extent of that crisis, despite UNRWA's robust management measures and reforms, we are still - a mere eight weeks from the end of the year - carrying a shortfall of 74 M USD.

It has now become clear for all to see that we need new mechanisms to put UNRWA on a more stable financial footing. Grateful as we are - and we are immensely grateful - to our donors and to hosts for the remarkable support received, the current system is not managing to bring the needed predictability of funding. It is putting at further risk the stability of the Middle-East and the extraordinary results in human development of Palestine refugees achieved over decades with your support.

The humanitarian, political and security priorities of UNRWA stakeholders are not being served by the financial crises, nor by the annual process of bridging the gaps. In light of the special role played by the General Assembly in establishing UNRWA and its mandate, I believe it has a critical role to play in finding means to stabilize UNRWA financially.

One means is through increased support from the UN regular budget. UNRWA currently receives about \$28 million annually for international staff salaries. The host countries are engaging the membership on UN financial support for UNRWA. They are doing so out of support to UNRWA but also of exasperation at the cycles of anxiety and instability triggered by our funding crisis.

It is important for me to emphasize that UNRWA has been investing significant time to explore different avenues to achieve financial stability. In coordination with the Secretary-General and donor partners, major outreach has been undertaken with non-traditional donors in the last year and a half. We are also in senior-level contact with the World Bank about partnering in ways

that may give access to Trust Fund financing for education. And in recent years we have invested significant amounts to tap into private, charitable and foundation resources. UNRWA is leaving no stone unturned in the quest for broad and diverse support.

In that regard it was very encouraging to see the commitments made by Member States in the New York Declaration. In light of its affirmation that UNRWA requires sufficient funding to be able to carry out its activities effectively and in a predictable manner, I suggest that UNRWA's crippling financial situation, and the many discussions about how best to address it, present a timely opportunity to begin acting on the Declaration in relation to Palestine refugees.

I am aware that not every avenue I have listed here - and I refer particularly to the possibility of increased UN program budget contributions - enjoys universal support among members states. I take note of that but wish to be clear that collective action is required by our partners to find concrete ways to live up to the commitment made to Palestine refugees. UNRWA is not a self-declared actor and we need the UN General Assembly's mobilization.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to conclude with a word about one part of the Palestine refugee community that I think and worry about more than any other - and that is youth. About half of the refugees registered

by UNRWA are children and youth aged 25 and below. As I mentioned earlier, their political and personal horizons are essentially closed.

Beyond the 9 to 10 years of education received by 500'000 boys and girls in our schools, very few are can today contemplate real opportunities in life. This is unacceptable and should be a matter of grave concern to us all in an environment where there are currents of extremism sweeping the region, in search of footholds in vulnerable communities. We have a collective responsibility to protect Palestine refugee youth from such risks.

One remarkable institution in our education system that I have started to interact with more decisively are UNRWA's school parliaments. School parliamentarians in our five fields are democratically elected young students, who have a lot to teach us.

While not yet recognized citizens of a state of their own, no one can take away from them the fact of being citizens of the world. Five of them - Hadeel, Majd, Aya, Kenda and Rahad- recently addressed an UNRWA senior management meeting. They said: "we know we are refugees but we do not want to be seen as victims. We do not want to be pitied. We want our rights to be respected, our skills to be recognized and our motivation to contribute to be nurtured."

The activities carried out independently by UNRWA's young student parliamentarians reveal a spirit of civic responsibility rare in children at this stage in their lives.

My interaction - and that of my colleagues- with them has also focused on establishing a “parliament of parliaments” connecting refugee student parliamentary representatives from all five fields of operation, and giving them responsibility for shaping their terms of reference and setting agendas including for the meetings that I have with them. They are already proving themselves.

During the last visit to Gaza by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, in June this year, we organized a meeting for him with the Gaza central school parliament, representing 260'000 students in Gaza and whose president is a formidable 15-year old girl, Razan.

The Secretary-General spoke of his own youth in Korea after the war. He encouraged them to study hard and to learn about human rights. At that moment, one of the students, Ahmed, took the floor and said: "Secretary-General, we are passionate about human rights, we study about human right in the UNRWA schools, but I have one question for you: why do they not apply to us?"

No question could better exemplify the maturity of these students and the plight they face. They also understand better than we sometimes do ourselves that education provided in UNRWA schools is not an act of charity, it is the exercise of a right.

Thank you.