



Press Release

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IN MESSAGE TO GENEVA CONFERENCE ON NEEDS OF PALESTINE REFUGEES,

SECRETARY-GENERAL APPEALS FOR REINFORCEMENT OF PARTNERSHIPS WITH UNRWA

Following is the message by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the conference: "Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Building Partnerships in Support of UNRWA", delivered today in Geneva by Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA):

I am pleased to have an opportunity send my greetings to this important conference, which has been called by UNRWA and the Government of Switzerland, on behalf of the more than 4 million Palestine refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. I would like to thank the Government of Switzerland, whose generosity has made this conference possible.

We meet at a difficult time in the Middle East. The Palestine refugees continue to struggle to cope with increased socio-economic hardship, and are grappling with painful uncertainty about the future. This is far from the first time that the Palestine refugees have found themselves in adverse conditions. Hardship and uncertainty have been enduring features of their historical experience. Thankfully, they are a resourceful people, a quality that has helped them to sustain their communities in the face of persistent challenges and conflict.

Since September 2000, the number of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip who rely on UNRWA for food aid has risen from 130,000 to 1.1 million – an almost ten-fold increase. In that same time period, the percentage of Palestinians living below the poverty line has tripled, from 20 percent to 60 percent. There has also been a substantial rise in the number of people making use of the Agency's primary health services.

As if this sharply growing distress was not enough, recent months have seen a deeply troubling upsurge in violence. Indeed, at times the conflict has appeared at risk of spiralling out of control, necessitating a clear response from the international community. This was apparent last month in Rafah, where the widespread demolition of Palestinian homes by the Israeli army, accompanied by a significant loss of Palestinian life, led to the adoption of United Nations Security Council [resolution 1544](#), which called on Israel to respect its obligations under international humanitarian law, and in particular its obligations not to undertake demolitions of homes contrary to that law. The resolution also called on the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to immediately implement their obligations under the Quartet's [Road Map](#), which provides a phased, performance-based mechanism addressing the needs of the parties at every level – political, security, economic, humanitarian, and institution building. The Road Map continues to offer a way to reach a comprehensive settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, including, in the words of the Road Map, a "just, fair and realistic solution to the refugee issue."

UNRWA continues to make an invaluable contribution to the well-being and stability of the refugee community – as do the host authorities, whose support has been essential to the Agency's programme of work. A Palestine refugee child born today is more likely than at any time in the past, and more likely than his or her non-refugee peers in the region, to survive infancy in good health. The same is true of the pre- and post-natal health of his or her mother. Few will succumb to the communicable diseases that all too often afflict low-income groups and other refugee populations. Moreover, today the Palestine refugees, both female and male, are universally literate.

These achievements, many of them realized by the end of the 1960s, placed social indicators for Palestine refugees ahead of much of the developing world, including those indicators which the international community has recently committed itself to achieve by the year 2015 through the Millennium Development Goals. However, with socioeconomic and demographic pressures growing – the refugee population has increased by 500 percent since UNRWA began operations – and with resources made available by donors failing to keep up with needs, UNRWA faces a difficult task in sustaining these achievements.

We are already seeing the consequences of under-funding of the Agency's budget in over-crowded classrooms and clinics, and in decaying UNRWA infrastructure. There is real concern that if these trends continue, the key human development strengths of the Palestine refugee population will begin to unravel. After more than two generations of sustained productive investment in their human capital, this would be a tragic and worrying development.

The Palestine refugees have shown admirable resilience and a strong commitment to making a better life for themselves. As the overwhelming majority of the Agency's teachers, doctors, social workers and other employees, they have also been the backbone of UNRWA's enterprise. The dedication of the staff in the occupied Palestinian territory, who have kept operations going in the most difficult of circumstances – and nine of whom have been killed in the past three years – has been exceptional.

Therefore I appeal to all participants to embrace the aims of this Conference, and reinforce the partnerships with UNRWA that you have so generously nurtured since 1950. Thank you again for your support, and please accept my best wishes for a successful conference.

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