
UNRWA Commissioner-General makes keynote speech at Dubai International Humanitarian Aid & Development Conference

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Dubai

The Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Filippo Grandi, has delivered the opening speech at the eighth Dubai International Humanitarian Aid & Development Conference (DIHAD). In his address, Grandi applauded the conference's focus on technological progress, but drew attention to its relationship with human needs. "As we reflect on how to strengthen our response to multiple and often catastrophic crises through the use of technology, it is crucial to remember that investing in human capital and in sustainable development is the key to prevent or mitigate them." UNRWA, he said, was working to incorporate these advances into its educational work with young Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

Grandi stressed that technology is essential in helping organisations such as UNRWA to serve their beneficiaries more effectively; it also helps to promote a sense of identity and dignity among a dispersed population, such as the Palestinian refugees. As an example, UNRWA would soon be linking its own electronic refugee registration system to a more ambitious project: the preservation of some 18 million refugee documents spanning the last 62 years, representing "a priceless record of their origins, history and identity."

He said technology also played an important role in providing education and creating new opportunities for young people – "a key demand of the young in the region". With new courses merging mechanics, electronics and computing, he said, UNRWA was working to equip its graduates with the skills to enter job markets, and to seize the opportunities available to them. A glowing example of this work, said Grandi, was the success of three girls from an UNRWA school in the West Bank, who invented a groundbreaking electronic cane for the blind. The students won a global prize for their efforts from Intel Corporation, the world leader in micro-processing technologies.

Grandi concluded by calling on the international community to match the technological advancement under discussion at the conference with comparable political progress with regard to the Palestinians.

"Palestinians – refugees and non-refugees alike – are the living proof that a population long affected by injustice and distress can nevertheless demonstrate a remarkable ability to rise above their circumstances, when afforded the freedom and tools to do so. UNRWA is a first-hand witness to the thirst for knowledge, the intellectual capabilities and the talent for creative innovation that are waiting to be tapped.

"Information and communication technology is being used today by resourceful but frustrated youth to call for political rights, a more equitable share of economic prosperity, and above all for dignity. One such context – and one which must not be forgotten – is that of the decades-old conflict which affects Palestinians.

"We must work together to intensify our efforts towards a peaceful end of the conflict, including a just and lasting resolution of the plight of refugees, and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state."

The three-day conference began on Monday 28 March under the patronage of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the United Nations and the UAE Red Crescent Society. This year, the theme of the conference was modern technology and its impact on humanitarian operations and development.

For the past seven years, the international event has attracted prominent specialists and executives in the field of relief to Dubai to share their ideas and experiences, and to contribute to the creation of solutions that would raise the standard of living of affected communities. The conference also aims to strengthen humanitarian organisations' capacity to respond quickly to disasters, as well as to attract attention to crises afflicting people the world over.

Opening the event, UN Peace Envoy Princess Haya of Dubai took a tour around the exhibition, in which institutions, charities, government bodies and NGOs were advertising their work. Visiting an area about the work of UNRWA throughout the last 62 years, she expressed her admiration for the Agency's role in enabling human development for Palestine refugees in the Middle East.

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Background information

UNRWA provides assistance, protection and advocacy for some 4.8 million registered Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the occupied Palestinian territory, pending a solution to their plight. The Agency's services encompass education, health care, social safety-net, camp infrastructure and improvement, community support, microfinance and emergency response, including in times of armed conflict.

UNRWA is funded almost entirely by contributions from States. The Agency's core budget for 2010-2011 stands at \$1.23 billion. In 2009, emergency appeals for the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon amounted to \$827.4 million.

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