

**BERNADOTTE: HIS LEGACY TO PALESTINE REFUGEES  
SPEECH BY CHRIS GUNNESS, UNRWA SPOKESPERSON,  
ON BEHALF OF THE UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL  
AT AN EVENT IN JERUSALEM TO COMMEMORATE  
THE SIXTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF COUNT BERNADOTTE**

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

Allow me to begin with some words of apology and some of thanks. The Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Filippo Grandi, sends his regrets at not being able to attend this commemoration of a life that was and is so central to UNRWA's contemporary mandate; the commemoration of a man whose prescience and courage bequeathed to the refugees and the Agency that serves them a rich diplomatic and political framework – a framework that remains relevant today in more ways than many of us are allowed to announce. Indeed, despite the vagaries, injustices and cruelties of geopolitics, many of the concepts bequeathed to us by Count Bernadotte remain the touchstone of those who approach the question of Palestine today and those who forge any attempt to deal with both the political and humanitarian aspects of resolving the plight of the Palestine refugees; more of all that in a moment.

Allow me to extend the Commissioner-General's thanks to the Folke Bernadotte Academy and the Swedish Government for making this sixty-fifth anniversary event possible; in particular, Axel Wernhoff, the Swedish Consul-General, and Sven-Eric Söder, the Director-General of the Folke Bernadotte Academy. Gentlemen, thank you.

From the perspective of the United Nations, the Folke Bernadotte Academy remains a source of inspiration and principle; a rich repository, both in terms of its intellectual value to the international system and its vast contribution in terms of human resources, sending into the world of diplomacy and peace-making officials of the highest calibre. As for the Swedish Government, particularly our friends here in the Consulate, they remain generous, creative, resourceful and imaginative supporters of UNRWA, allowing many of the ideas of Count Bernadotte to find practical expression, through our work today, in the lives of millions of refugees, who make up some of the most marginalized and disadvantaged communities in our world. Truly, they are the dispossessed of the earth, people who are more dependent than at any time in their history on the structures and processes that were established and nurtured through the visionary work of Count Bernadotte.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been both heartening and revelatory to trawl back into the United Nations archive and to shine a torch through the fog of more than six decades of Middle Eastern politics and look behind the layers of historical interpretation and misinterpretation that have come to colour, some might say "distort", the understanding of Count Bernadotte, particularly in this region. It is interesting for example to see the letter dated 3 May 1949 to the President of the Security Council from the Representative of Israel, Aubrey or Abba Eban, who was later to become Foreign Minister, surely one of the most intellectually able and dignified Israel has ever produced.

Allow me to quote that letter, a covering note in which he transmits to the Council the Israeli report on the "assassination" of Count Bernadotte. Eban says: "I feel compelled to renew the expression of my Government's profound sense of abhorrence of this brutal crime, which cost the life of a servant of the United Nations, who initiated the beneficent process of mediation and conciliation which is now showing such impressive results."

Despite some of the ambiguities and deliberate political historicizing around the assassination by some, at the very pinnacle of the Israeli hierarchy, there was determination and resolve. Word of Count Bernadotte's death reached David Ben-Gurion while he was holding discussions with his military general staff at six in the evening, about an hour or so after the incident. Ben-Gurion's reaction was typically decisive; some would say "self-serving". According to his diary, orders were sent to the Military Police to arrest all the, I quote, "Lehi people". And he dispatched a battalion of the Palmach to Jerusalem with the express orders to act, and I quote, "firmly and mercilessly".

Nonetheless, to this day, no one has ever been brought to justice for those brutal murders, in which the Count was shot 6 times and his French assistant no less than 17. Indeed, some of those suspected of masterminding the killing of the first UN mediator enjoyed immunity and went on to be venerated in the most senior echelons of Israeli public life; little wonder that their values and rejectionist attitudes towards the United Nations sadly are reinforced by repetitious nationalistic mythologizing. So one is hardly surprised that Ben-Gurion's famous put-down, "Um Shmum", or, to give it a rough translation, "the UN is nothing", reverberates with such callous ease among some. If only those who use the phrase appreciated its tragic historical antecedents and its selective ignorance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If Count Bernadotte's assassination sent warning signals through the nascent Israeli administration, the unprecedented killing of a serving UN mediator left the world body in shock and mourning. There was anger also amid the determination to continue with the Bernadotte legacy. The legendary UN statesman Ralph Bunche, who became the chief UN mediator after Count Bernadotte's death, issued a statement on 27 September 1948, just ten days after the assassination, which contained an honesty and clarity that one can hardly imagine today. Allow me to quote him: "The threats and ruthless violence of criminal terrorist bands in Palestine will not be permitted to frustrate the determination of the United Nations to achieve a peaceful adjustment of the Palestine situation."

Ralph Bunche continues with his own views on the killing of Count Bernadotte and his assistant, Colonel Serot:

"There was irony as well as tragedy in Jerusalem on that fateful day on September 17 when Jewish terrorists struck down those two gallant servants of peace. Just twenty-four hours before, Count Bernadotte had signed his report to the United Nations, which had accepted without question the existence of the State of Israel and which had strongly urged that the truce in Palestine must be promptly superseded by a permanent settlement. After the assault, the bodies of the two victims laid in state during the night in the very room of the Y.M.C.A. in Jerusalem in which the UN Special Commission on Palestine, which first put the endorsement of the United Nations on a Jewish state in Palestine, had held its opening meeting."

Ladies and gentlemen,

If the early reports of the assassination of Count Bernadotte are redolent with an honesty and integrity that are almost unimaginable today, so too are Count Bernadotte's own pronouncements on the political prospects of the UN peace process and on the plight of Palestine refugees. These pronouncements would later set the parameters for the creation of UNRWA.

With respect to the refugee issue, Bernadotte was bold and principled. Here I quote his first general report to the Secretary-General. Sadly, the count would not live to see his words inform the international discourse; he was killed the day before it was published on 18 September. Tellingly, this is what he had to say:

"It is ... undeniable that no settlement can be just and complete if recognition is not accorded to the right of the Arab refugee to return to the home from which he has been dislodged by the hazards and strategy of the armed conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. The majority of these refugees have come from territory which ... was to be included in the Jewish State. The exodus of Palestinian Arabs resulted from panic created by fighting in their communities, by rumours concerning real or alleged acts of terrorism, or expulsion. It would be an offence against the principles of elemental justice if these innocent victims of the conflict were denied the right to return to their homes, while Jewish immigrants flow into Palestine, and, indeed, at least offer the threat of permanent replacement of the Arab refugees, who have been rooted in the land for centuries."

It speaks volumes about Count Bernadotte's humanity that for him, the right of return was no panacea in and of itself. Justice for this dispossessed population would need remedies beyond that one mere right. He continues in that posthumously published 1948 report and I quote:

"It must NOT be supposed, however, that the establishment of the right of refugees to return to their former homes provides a solution of the problem. The vast majority of the refugees may no longer have homes to return to and their resettlement in the State of Israel presents an economic and social problem of special complexity. Whether the refugees are resettled in the State of Israel or in one or other of the Arab States, a major question to be faced is that of placing them in an environment in which they can find employment and the means of livelihood. But in any case their unconditional right to make a free choice should be fully respected."

In those words, you can already hear the mandate of UNRWA beginning to take shape, as well as one of the key messages underlying our protection work: that the refugees' unconditional right to make a free choice about their future must be fully respected. The report outlines with heartbreaking detail the situation of the refugees, nearly a quarter of whom Bernadotte says "are simply camped out and living under trees. In most places there was absolutely no sanitary accommodation, and since water was drawn from surface collections, and typhoid was endemic, grave possibilities in this regard at this season of the year were likely".

In that first report to the Secretary-General, the short- and long-term needs of the refugees are summed up with urgency, compassion and authority. The manner in which Bernadotte drew together the resources of the fledgling UN agencies is magisterial. It is an object lesson in humanitarian coordination. The breadth and depth of that report and Count Bernadotte's grasp of the issues that would soon inform the creation of UNRWA reveal a man of extraordinary humanity, a man of compassionate intelligence and vision.

He concludes that section of the report on refugees with words that have echoed through the decades and rightly should haunt us today. I quote: "The situation of the majority of these hapless refugees is already tragic, and to prevent them from being overwhelmed by further disaster and to make possible their ultimate rehabilitation, it is my earnest hope that the international community will give all necessary support to make the measures I have outlined fully effective. I believe that for the international community to accept its share of responsibility for the refugees of Palestine is one of the minimum conditions for the success of its efforts to bring peace to that land."

Ladies and gentlemen,

I fervently hope that the peacemakers of today are listening, because 65 years after his death, Count Bernadotte's vision and his prophetic warnings remain as tragically relevant today as they did before his untimely departure. Many of the underlying assumptions of specific UNRWA interventions – particularly our rights-based protection work -- find their first expression in Count Bernadotte's early reporting to United Nations headquarters. The links we make today between satisfying humanitarian need and creating an environment in which peace can take hold, were first given voice by him. And in UNRWA's repeated calls for a just and durable solution for the refugees -- a voice sadly crying in the wilderness -- we hearken back to Count Bernadotte who announced this truth that dare not speak its name with such boldness, a boldness that may, ultimately, have cost him his life.

But the legacy of those arguments lives on; indeed, allow me to take Count Bernadotte's rationale to its contemporary conclusion: The Middle East will remain inherently unstable while millions of refugees are allowed to languish, many in inhuman conditions in decaying camps, with little prospect of a political resolution of their plight; indeed there can be no peace in this region unless and until some 5 million Palestine refugees are brought out of their statelessness, dispossession and exile. Without that, this region is doomed to a future of insecurity and instability. Moreover, the dignity and humanity of all of us is diminished, while the Palestine refugees are deprived of theirs. For those conclusions, for that legacy, we all owe Count Bernadotte a profound debt of gratitude.

And so, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude where I began, with thanks to Sweden. And as a quick aside, let me say that this thanks is solidly grounded. Since 2000, Swedish contributions to UNRWA have totaled a staggering US\$ 495 million; that's nearly half a billion dollars in just 13 years.

But this relationship between Sweden and UNRWA is about far more than money. It is also about shared values, a common humanity that has its roots in the life and work of Count Bernadotte. He may be a national treasure in Sweden, but believe me, ladies and gentlemen, in UNRWA also, his memory is likewise treasured. The values he brought, as a Swedish statesman of high humanitarian principle, defined -- and continue to define -- our partnership with the Government of Sweden and Swedish institutions. Count Bernadotte placed humanitarian compassion and the plight of the refugees at the centre of all we do. As a military man with finely tuned diplomatic instincts, he was keenly aware of the contribution that human development could make in situations of instability and desperation. And he never lost sight of the primacy of fundamental rights, including political and economic rights, in the search for a just and durable peace.

And so I end with the words of Ralph Bunche, from that statement of 27 September 1948 that I quoted earlier, in which he paid tribute to the lasting legacy of the inspirational leader he had just lost. Bunche concluded, as do I:

"I am certain that I express the views of all when I say that our continuing tribute to Count Bernadotte is to do our utmost to carry on the work for which he laid down his life. We have lost an irreplaceable leader, a man of greatest good will, but his inspiration remains with us."

Thank you.

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#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight. UNRWA's services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, and microfinance.

Financial support to UNRWA has not kept pace with an increased demand for services caused by growing numbers of registered refugees, expanding need, and deepening poverty. As a result, the Agency's General Fund (GF), supporting UNRWA's core activities and 97 per cent reliant on voluntary contributions, has begun each year with a large projected deficit. Currently the deficit stands at US\$ 54.3 million.

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