

Statement by UNRWA Deputy Commissioner-General, Filippo Grandi

World Refugee Day

20 June 2007, Al Hakawati Theater
East Jerusalem

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends, good evening.

I'd like to extend a warm welcome and a sincere thanks to all of you for being with us this evening to commemorate World Refugee Day.

World Refugee Day was first declared by the UN General Assembly in 2001 – the fiftieth anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

World Refugee Day was established to recognize and raise greater awareness of the plight of all refugees around the world. It is usually a day to be optimistic; to celebrate the resilience of refugees; and to have faith in the hearts of people to ensure that all refugees can return to their homes from which they were forced to flee.

Tonight, however, I find it a tough assignment to be hopeful.

I will shortly focus our attention on the events of the past fortnight – especially those in Gaza – but before doing so, I would like to recall a statement given by Jan Egeland, the former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, on 30 August last year. He said: "Gaza is a ticking timebomb. ... It cannot continue like it is now without a social explosion ... Is it in 10 days or is it in 10 months? Of course we don't know." Nine and a half months later, unfortunately, we do know.

The events of the last fortnight should not, after all, come as a surprise. The situation has been deteriorating for years. In Gaza, in particular, the staggering decline of the economy and of the physical, humanitarian and social conditions are not a recent phenomenon. The downfall started in the year 2000, when over a hundred thousand Palestinians lost their livelihoods because of the impossibility to work in Israel. It continued with major military operations in many of the cities of the Gaza Strip, the large-scale destruction of houses, agricultural land, and infrastructure. It worsened dramatically with the income deprivation imposed upon the Palestinian Authority following the results of the Palestinian Legislative Council elections last year, when both foreign economic aid and Palestinian public income were summarily withheld. And in the second half of 2006, while the world's attention was focused on the war in Lebanon, a barrage of military might was being brought upon the people of Gaza, culminating in the assault on the town of Beit Hanoun during which 19 people were killed, including 7 children.

By the end of 2006, we were all hoping that we had seen the worst and that the situation would improve in 2007. Alas, it was not to be.

In Gaza – where over two-thirds are refugees – we have seen interfactional fighting claim the lives of 146 people and the injury of 700 others. We have seen people being summarily executed on the basis of political affiliation. We have seen bombings and masked men spray bullets above the heads of peaceful demonstrators. It is now over fourteen weeks since Alan Johnston – one of the most respected journalists in the occupied Palestinian territory – was kidnapped. And we mourn the deaths of two UNRWA employees – Hassan Ahmad El-Leham and Abdul Fateh Hussein Abu-Ghali – killed in cross-fire between Palestinians.

Many in the international community wrongly see these events as a symptom of an innately violent society. It is impossible for those of us who have not lived in Gaza to appreciate what it is like. But we must try.

We must try to understand what it is like to be sealed with 1.4 million others into an area 363 square kilometers in size. Where 80 percent of the population lives in poverty. Where 40 percent of the population is unemployed and more are underemployed. Where opportunities to access education, employment and other opportunities outside Gaza are limited. Where external trade is blocked. Where delivery of humanitarian aid and access to the sea for fishing are subject to frequent and arbitrary obstruction by the occupying power. Where the breakdown of law and order is aggravated by the difficulties faced by the Palestinian Authority in paying salaries of public servants, including police.

All this of course does not absolve the Palestinians and the Palestinian leadership of their responsibilities. People living under occupation are also subject to the law of armed conflict, and damage is done not only to Israeli civilians but also to the Palestinian standing every time a rocket is launched over the border. But the point I wish to make is that we cannot observe and pass judgment on the events of the past fortnight in Gaza without appreciating what its people – most of whom are refugees – have been forced to endure.

The same concerns about inter-Palestinian violence and about the consequences of occupation also apply in the West Bank. The shootings, assaults and violent retaliations of the last week are extremely worrying. On the other hand, in the West Bank the occupation manifests itself in the form of restrictions on movement and access and in the form of confiscated land. In the form of an illegal wall that is over half complete; illegal settlements and outposts; an elaborate road network that services those settlements; a hardening permit regime, swipe cards and checkpoints; search and arrest campaigns and the imprisonment without trial of politicians and other civilians. Just as in Gaza, trade is almost non-existent and movement of humanitarian workers and goods is becoming increasingly difficult.

We often express our admiration for the strength and dignity of the Palestinian people, and in particular for the resilience of its social fabric. Their values resisted years of armed conflict, humiliation and dispossession but this is now taking its toll and factional fighting with weapons is now replacing disagreement with words. The environment within Palestine – the way Palestinians treat one another – has changed and is continuing to change.

In recent days, in public declarations and in the international media, there has been – almost – a sense that after the dramatic events of the past few weeks in the occupied Palestinian territory, the worst is over. True, from any crisis arises an opportunity, and we should not stifle efforts to build on every chance to pursue peace. However, from the vantage point of UNRWA – that of an agency engaged every day with refugee families that are increasingly poor, angry and afraid – we wish to tell policy-makers that, this time, their judgment and their decisions must also be informed by the concerns of those who have suffered the most through years of missed opportunities – Palestinian women and Palestinian men that want to live in peace. In the short term, humanitarian assistance must continue to be provided to those in need – in the West Bank and especially in Gaza where otherwise there will be – there will be – a humanitarian and public health disaster. In the long run, no pursuit of peace will be successful unless assistance geared towards development and the building of institutions resumes for the entire occupied Palestinian territory, the root causes of the conflict are tackled, and – now in particular – reconciliation among Palestinians is actively promoted.

It is positive that the international community has shown renewed interest in supporting the Palestinians, and in revitalizing the peace process. At the same time, however, the majority of citizens in Gaza – and increasingly in the West Bank – are desperately struggling to maintain societal values while societal structures are collapsing, creating room for violence and radicalism. Traditional networks and structures were the best guarantee against extremism and in support of common sense and moderation. The recent events in Gaza and the West Bank do not absolve the need for dialogue. For the sake of peace and for the sake of saving human lives, the international community must re-engage in a meaningful, constructive way with all Palestinian people.

And on World Refugee Day, we should focus especially on refugees. The vulnerability of the refugee population in the West Bank and Gaza at this stage is almost indistinguishable from the vulnerability of the rest of the population in the territory. But, as recent events in Lebanon have demonstrated, Palestine refugees are especially susceptible to instability. For the 27,000 residents of the Nahr El Bared camp who have run from the fighting to find refuge in another already overcrowded camp, the conditions are dismal and the situation is bleak. Our television screens have been showing plumes of black smoke rising from the camp for over two weeks. And yet the shelling continues resulting in further civilian casualties. We mourn the death of one UNRWA staff member – Adel Khalil – to sniper fire on 21 May. We pray that the fighting will end soon and that in the meantime civilians will not be caught in the crossfire.

Although it is difficult to predict when and how the situation will improve for Palestine refugees, we can, at the very least, stand here and assure them that UNRWA is more resolute than ever in its determination to support them. We will continue to do so through the provision of programmes that deliver education, health, social services, microfinance, improved camp conditions and emergency assistance in areas of conflict.

UNRWA has served Palestine refugees for almost sixty years. It has provided these services, uninterrupted by numerous conflicts and crises. Even during the most

intense fighting in Gaza last week, UNRWA's emergency and health services continued. Later tonight, we will pay tribute to those UNRWA employees who, in 1967, faced a sudden challenge of huge magnitude as a result of the Six Day War and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. It is especially significant to pay tribute today to our colleagues whose courage, hard work and determination were crucial forty years ago, and are inspiring to all of us forty years later.

Dear friends,

We appreciate the generous contributions made to UNRWA from our donors and the assistance of host authorities. It is vital that this funding and assistance continue – not only to UNRWA but to the World Food Programme and other humanitarian actors. It is vital that statements indicating that humanitarian assistance in the occupied Palestinian territory, and especially in Gaza, are actually made reality.

But this crucial need should not make us forget that the imperative for everyone in the international community – everyone – is to redouble and redouble again their efforts to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict, for it is in the political arena that lie both the plight of the Palestine refugees, and the solution to their problem. UNRWA will continue to support the Palestine refugees so long as the refugee issue remains unresolved and a peaceful solution to the conflict remains outstanding.

In concluding, let me strike a personal note. Like many of my colleagues, I have worked with refugees for a number of years, in different parts of the world. Like many of my colleagues, I know that refugees – all refugees – are courageous and resourceful. As Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd has said many times, this is also and perhaps *particularly* true for Palestine refugees. It is fitting to say so tonight, as we celebrate World Refugee Day. It would be even more fitting if in the weeks and months to come we gave Palestine refugees, and Palestinians at large, those tangible signals of hope for a future of renewed conciliation and of real peace, which they need to sustain their resilience in difficult times.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.