

“THERE IS A CRYING NEED FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT IN GAZA,” COMMISSIONER-GENERAL TELLS ARAB LEAGUE FOREIGN MINISTERS

8 September 2014

IN FIRST MAJOR POLICY ADDRESS SINCE THE CEASEFIRE ANNOUNCED ON 26 AUGUST, PIERRE KRÄHENBÜHL, COMMISSIONER-GENERAL OF UNRWA, ASKED THE COUNCIL OF FOREIGN MINISTERS OF THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES FOR US\$ 47 MILLION FOR GAZA RECOVERY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2014

Mr Chairman, Secretary General, Your Highnesses, Excellencies,
I am most grateful for this opportunity to address the Council.

For seven long weeks - from 7 July to 26 August - the population of Gaza was exposed to a widespread and brutal conflict. Thousands of civilians were killed and injured. Nearly half a million people were displaced and the level of physical destruction of homes and infrastructure goes beyond anything seen in recent years.

While the weapons have now fallen silent, the people of Gaza are only just beginning to emerge from the deep shock that they experienced during this war. It is a shock resulting from the death and devastation around them and caused by the profound sense - expressed so many times as the conflict was unfolding - that the world had abandoned them and had failed to protect them.

The tragic conflict in Gaza was also a formidable human challenge for and pressure on my agency, UNRWA. Around 70 per cent of Gaza's inhabitants are Palestine refugees and, as many Gazans will tell you, UNRWA is in several ways the backbone of the Strip in terms of delivering health, education and emergency services. Our own staff, 12,500 of them, are almost all from Gaza themselves. And they suffered just as other inhabitants did. I visited Gaza three times myself while the war was ongoing and met most of the families of the 12 UNRWA staff who were killed.

Our overriding concern during the conflict was to provide a form of safe haven for the thousands who fled in fear from their homes. I wish here to pay tribute to the achievements of my colleagues in this regard - at one time assisting almost 300,000 in 90 of our installation in the middle of a war zone. But on seven separate occasions, UNRWA schools used as shelters were hit by shelling or other munitions, and dozens were killed, including children as they slept next to their parents on the floors of our classrooms. We stood up and said this was an affront to all of us, a source of universal shame. Nothing justified or could imaginably justify Israel's shelling of UN premises being used as civilian shelters, all of which has repeatedly been duly notified precisely to ensure that they would be preserved.

We called for accountability and today I reiterate that call for investigations into these very serious incidents. This must not be forgotten as attention turns understandably to other issues now that the fighting has stopped.

Those other issues how ever are pressing. Foremost among them is the need to provide the most vulnerable among the survivors with food and shelter. Some thirty of our schools are still being used as temporary accommodation for over 55,000 displaced people who have no homes to return to.

The conflict this time was five times worse than the already terrible one of 2009, in terms of the number of displaced and houses damaged. UNRWA is at the forefront of the effort to rehabilitate Gaza and re-ignite its life. Besides sheltering for many months to come the homeless we shall be repairing thousands of houses and dozens of our own schools and other facilities, we shall give cash support to thousands of families to help them find their feet, we shall provide counseling to traumatized individuals, including many children, we shall provide employment opportunities and we shall help to restore some of the infrastructure like water systems.

To do this we need two things. First we need to be able to bring essential building materials into Gaza. If we go back to the situation before the conflict when Israel was effectively blocking most construction we shall be able to achieve little. And the seeds of destruction will be sown yet again. It is therefore inconceivable that the current ceasefire - as important and vital as it is - would be the only outcome after this deadly conflict and that the situation would be allowed to return to the preexisting conditions under the blockade, which has rendered conditions in Gaza untenable and unlivable. The blockade is illegal under international law and must be lifted, and rocket attacks on Israel must cease.

The second thing we need is funds. UNRWA is working with other parties involved - other UN actors, the unity government - to work out a long term plan for Gaza recovery and reconstruction. It goes without saying that a heavy responsibility will fall on the international community, particularly Arab countries, to shoulder this burden. For without strong financial support, not only will the already severe suffering of many thousands continue, but it will be impossible to restore any semblance of healthy economic life, and thus human security and stability, to Gaza.

Let me be clear, however. There is a crying need for financial support now, today. Longer term reconstruction must be addressed but will depend on the outcome of negotiations on access for building materials. My main message to you today is please do not wait for weeks before providing support. UNRWA needs \$47 million in the next four weeks to help make conditions just about bearable in Gaza pending fully fledged reconstruction. With funds, now, immediately, we can facilitate minor repairs like new doors and windows for hundreds of houses before the winter. With funds now we can give cash to thousands of homeless in order to rent temporary rooms, and to others to buy essentials to find again their feet. Secretary General, when you and I first discussed my attendance here earlier this year we envisaged that I would be speaking about UNRWA's role and its needs not just in Gaza but in each of its five fields:

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where we struggle to protect against the impact on livelihoods of the West Bank Barrier and other restrictions of movement, settlement expansion, forced displacement, house demolitions and other manifestations of the occupation.

In Lebanon, where many refugees still live in squalid overcrowded camps and where UNRWA is rebuilding an entire camp to accommodate 22,000 people at Nahr El Bared which will contribute to stability in North Lebanon, provided we have the funds to complete it.

In Syria, where the conflict has forced over half the 540,000 Palestinians in the country to flee their homes and where we shelter about 8,000 every day in our schools in Damascus alone, many of them from Yarmouk.

And in Jordan, a relative oasis of calm but where UNRWA provides education to about 116,000 children including many who have fled from Syria.

UNRWA can only carry out these tasks if it has the funds to do so. We depend almost entirely on voluntary contributions. Secretary General, you kindly co-chaired a meeting with Mr Ban Ki-Moon in New York a year ago which generated a renewal of the commitment of Arab governments to aim at providing 7.8 % of UNRWA's programme budget. I have to say that performance at 4% still falls well short of this target. I urge your members to give more generously to allow UNRWA to continue its vital work.

I am well aware that several of them already give generously for refugee housing, new schools and clinics and emergency relief. We are grateful for that. But our programme costs - the money to keep our 710 schools, 138 health centres and 40 food distribution centres running - exceed our ability to pay, so that we face a deficit of \$50 million this year, even after imposing severe austerity measures. I cannot overstate the precarious state of UNRWA's finances.

Finally I want to return to Gaza. In exactly one week from today the schools will reopen, a remarkable achievement so soon after the end of the conflict. We aim to open 252 schools in over 130 school buildings educating nearly a quarter of a million children, many of them deeply traumatized, but who will be happy to see their friends after the war. I wish I could take you all there so you could see for yourselves both the laughter and the tears. I am sure you all agree that nothing is more important than the education of the next generation and of now here is that more true than in Gaza today.

As I have stated repeatedly during the war, Palestinians are not statistics. They are men, women and children with hopes and expectations similar to those of people everywhere else in the world. Fundamentally, it is time for a change of paradigm in Gaza and in the West Bank. It is time to address the underlying causes of conflict and occupation and to provide freedom to move, to trade and to work. In the meantime, I urge you to renew and strengthen your support to UNRWA so that we can give these children and their families a decent life and the basis for a dignified future.

Thank you.

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\$ 70.5 million.

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