

**VISIT OF THE UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL TO SYRIA**

11 March 2015

UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl visited Syria on 9-11 March to demonstrate solidarity with Palestine refugees and UNRWA staff, who have endured extreme suffering during four years of conflict, and to advocate for expanded humanitarian access.

In meetings with Syrian Government officials, Mr. Krähenbühl acknowledged the facilitation of the Syria authorities in enabling UNRWA to provide humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected Palestine refugees across Syria and sought increased and sustained support for UNRWA work. Noting that more should be done, the Commissioner-General stressed in particular that in Yarmouk, safe, uninterrupted, substantial humanitarian distributions must become the norm. He emphasized that the continuation of regular UNRWA services, such as health and education services, and humanitarian assistance, adapted to the current conflict situation, is vital to protect the resilience of Palestine refugees in Syria.

During a visit to Yarmouk, the Commissioner-General welcomed the resumption since 4 March of UNRWA humanitarian assistance to trapped civilians, through a new distribution point established with the facilitation of the Syrian authorities. This followed a prolonged period of interruption in humanitarian distributions, lasting for over three months from early December 2014 to early March 2014, with reports of widespread deprivation and malnutrition among Yarmouk residents. The Commissioner-General called upon the Government of Syria to maintain and build on this opening to support the civilian population of Yarmouk. He requested that no limits be imposed on the number of days for distributions or on the number of families who may receive assistance on each day of distribution. He urged armed groups within the camp to actively ensure the safety of Palestine refugees and other civilians, and to not interfere with distributions.

The Commissioner-General, after speaking with refugees in Yarmouk, said: "The extreme hardship faced by Palestine refugees in Yarmouk, but also in other locations in Syria as a result of the armed conflict is, from a human point of view, unacceptable. Despite progress in the assistance to civilians in Yarmouk, we remain deeply conscious that far more needs to be done to meaningfully address the needs and dignity of Palestine refugees. I wish to express deep admiration for the courage and determination of Palestine refugees to whom I reaffirm UNRWA's commitment to provide support and protection. I reiterate my call on all relevant parties to support us in this effort by facilitating unhindered humanitarian assistance and access."

The Commissioner-General said it was crucial to find a political solution to the conflict affecting Palestinians and Syrians. "There has been too much suffering. We have to remember that we are dealing with yet another generation of Palestine refugees facing the trauma of dispossession and displacement," he emphasized.

In Qabr Essit, a Palestine refugee camp to which UNRWA recently regained access, the Commissioner-General visited the re-opened UNRWA Alma-Yarmouk School and other rehabilitated facilities in the camp. In Husseinieh, from which the entire population had been displaced due to hostilities, the Commissioner-General requested the continuing support for the return of all Palestine refugees to their homes and restoration of UNRWA services there.

The Commissioner-General met with UNRWA staff and expressed recognition and thanks for their tireless efforts in fulfilling their duties to support Palestine refugees in Syria. He paid tribute to the 14 colleagues who had lost their lives during hostilities.

**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\$ 100 million.

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