
Commissioner-General's Advisory Commission Speech

Amman, 27 February 2007

Introduction

Your Excellencies, Members of the Advisory Commission, Colleagues and Friends,

A year ago on 27 February we held the first meeting of the "revitalized and expanded" Advisory Commission. As I have remarked previously, I continue to be gratified to see how rapidly this Commission has progressed over such a short period of time. An intensified meeting schedule has allowed more substantive engagement and exchange of views on critical issues, and we have gone even further than I acknowledged back in September in nurturing a comfortable and productive relationship. There is an improved level of mutual understanding among us that is quite palpable and growing. The more transparency, the more trust, the more cooperation UNRWA has in its relationship with the Advisory Commission, the better we can hone our combined efforts to serve Palestine refugees more effectively. The work of the sub-committees has become an important part of this equation, giving us a broader stakeholder perspective to inform our work. The recommendations we received from sub-committees in December were very welcome and we shall hear tomorrow more about how we have taken, and will take, them forward.

UNRWA developments

The last few months have been busy, as always. My deputy will brief you further on progress in the Organizational Development process. I am sure you will be interested in his account of the New York mission he and our Comptroller undertook, partially for the purpose of informing our interlocutors there, including your counterparts, about the OD process and to garner support for additional staff positions.

The letter of the Advisory Commission Chairperson to the President of the General Assembly reinforced this effort. I am confident that your representatives in the Fifth Committee will continue to bolster support for the Agency and our reform process.

The Director of Operational Support will lead our discussion on the OD Programme Strategy. We look forward to discussing your suggestions, many of them received in advance, not so much on the form of the paper before you—but on the broad lines of strategy as well as on the substantive questions: what is the best way to go about raising on a permanent basis the quality of our programmes and services?; how can we achieve better programme performance in an environment of limited resources?; what in practical and realistic terms can be prioritized within UNRWA's special circumstances?; and what is the best way to persuade all our stakeholders—donors, hosts, refugees (and even staff)—to support our drive for change?

Like each of you, my colleagues and I have high expectations about the benefits a new programme strategy will deliver. Our expectations need to be tempered, however, by the reality of what can be achieved with the resources we have, the time available to us and the imperative of producing a quality product. In the course of preparing the discussion paper, we thought through the various steps and activities that are required if the development of a programme strategy is to have maximum utility. We came to the view that it is prudent to proceed at a deliberate pace that will guarantee the quality of the product and ensure that our programme strategy is meshed with other components of the planning and budgeting process. We envisage our programmes becoming part of an organizational framework of continuous learning, innovation and improvement. The Director of Operational Support will have more to say about how our thinking has evolved and about the direction our programmes will take going forward. We count on your support to help us on our way.

You have also received our workplan for the overall OD process. You will have seen that we have made it as concrete as possible, including time lines and benchmarks (some of you commented that it was too detailed!).

The workplan identifies desirable outcomes and sets out indicators against which we will measure our progress. I am certain your comments and suggestions will enable us to tighten the workplan further.

You will be pleased, as are we, that we have (finally) received the penultimate draft of the IUED Synthesis Report and are examining how best to integrate its findings into our planning. While the survey generated a wealth of information, we realize that some further analytical work is required to clarify how much of it can be used immediately and directly. Our challenge is not only to effectively use this information, but perhaps more importantly, to develop the capacity to collect data in a systematic way and to plan and budget on the basis of credible, empirical evidence. The Director of Operational Support will brief you further on this.

Overall and field environment

This meeting is taking place, like most before it, against a backdrop of political change. Last year we met just after free and fair elections ushered in new leaders to the Palestinian Authority. We met before the conflict erupted in Lebanon and after it had ended. I raise this point because the context of our work and our discussions and our living in the region is extremely important. We are here, we see, we play a role. I would like to return to this thought after looking at some of the most recent developments. My field directors will brief you more extensively on these developments and their specific areas of operation this morning.

As you are aware, refugees from Iraq have been flowing into Syria, and the government has been most generous in hosting them. Our own efforts in Syria have been in helping UNHCR provide for Palestinians who have been allowed in to the country, as well as those stuck at the border. I met with the High-Commissioner for Refugees

earlier this month and spoke with him again on Friday. He is very concerned about the plight of Palestinians in Iraq, and is actively seeking solutions that would bring them to safety. In Paris last month, a second conference on Lebanon raised a considerable amount of money for reconstruction. Donor response to our initial appeal within the Early Recovery Plan was generous, as was funding of the Camp Development Initiative. We hope that the current turmoil will soon be overcome and that the government's substantive plans to help Lebanese and Palestinians alike recover from last summer's devastating conflict is not interrupted. Like its counterparts, the Government of Jordan invests an large amount of money in hosting Palestine refugees. There is a question of whether UNRWA can do more. We are looking at this question seriously, and my director in Jordan will explain further.

I would like to turn now to issues and events in the occupied Palestinian territory. We are very grateful for the efforts made by some of you to assist us with access issues. As you know, the problem of Kami is a constant drain on resources - contributed by your tax-payers -- that should be going to the refugees. These very concrete interventions are a much appreciated boost for UNRWA and for Palestine refugees. I hope in addition to these types of measures, you will also direct your attention towards the wider issues, to help policy makers choose steps that are based on the best interest of people here, steps that will actually lead the region towards peace. Regarding the current context, throughout last year Palestinians in the oPt experienced social, political and economic decline to abysmally new low levels. Today, we are meeting at (yet another) critical juncture where there is agreement to form a government of national unity as Palestinians seek to present a single, determined front to the world. The question on every Palestinian's mind is whether the unity government will in itself undo the knot with which the international community has bound the Palestinian authority.

To put it another way, will the considerable effort made by all sides (including the Saudis) at Mecca be acknowledged and rewarded in the form of renewed international support for persuading Israelis and Palestinians to make compromises in the interests of peace? The inter-factional fighting that raged across parts of Gaza posed a genuine threat to the existence of the Palestinian polity. It also confronted Palestinians with the sad, even frightening, possibility that the fountainhead of their strength and survival, namely the social fabric of communal trust, kinship ties and family loyalties, was at grave risk. Palestinians had to confront the shocking--and embarrassing, I might add--realization that their vulnerability to destruction could come--not only from the modern armaments of their old foes across the green line--but also from within.

The Mecca Agreement was fuelled by this realization and it represents a courageous step back from that abyss. The Agreement challenges the international community to match the courage and compromises shown by the parties with bold steps of its own, bearing in mind that the choices it makes will have profound consequences on the future of Palestinians and Palestine.

UNRWA and Palestine refugees in this context

All these events have a direct impact on the welfare of the Palestine refugees. UNRWA exists to contribute to the refugees' welfare and human development, but we find that external forces often obstruct our objectives and goals. Our resources are drained, our operations disrupted, we fall further back in our mission rather than forging ahead. Therefore, we believe it is incumbent upon us to engage with interlocutors, including politicians and policy makers, about these developments. None of us is a passive actor. As people engaged in the business of deciding how international funds will be dispensed to the Palestine refugees, and as actors with an eye-witness view of events as they unfold, our (yours and my) operational paradigm must be based on a concern for humanity, the upholding of human rights, a view to fairness and restitution and the desire for just and lasting peace. Turning a blind eye to expanding settlements and the extension of the barrier, to economic blockades, to occupation generally, works against our goals and indeed vitiates our purpose for being here. The stark reality is that Palestinian space -- both physical and political -- is shrinking. This space is the only foundation on which to build the stability and peace so necessary for the well-being of the people we serve.

As a humanitarian agency devoted to Palestine refugees, we require an environment of calm, stability and reasonable security to be effective in discharging our responsibilities, and for our work to have the desired long term impact. Our commitment is such that we will continue to operate in insecure conditions of political tension and armed conflict--but only to a point. Our staff, the refugees we serve and the Palestinian people as a whole deserve to live and work in conditions where a minimum standard of protection and security prevails. For these reasons we have a direct stake in the restoration of some semblance of "normalcy", and we appeal to you to work with your own governments and with Palestinians and their institutions to move toward achieving a just and lasting peace.