

REMARKS OF DEPUTY COMMISSIONER-GENERAL AT THE 'INVESTING IN THE FUTURE' CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE

17 October 2014

UNRWA Deputy Commissioner-General Margot Elis delivered these remarks as part of the 'Investing in the Future' Protecting Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa High-Level Panel: Towards Better Protection of Refugee Children and Adolescents in the Middle East and North Africa Region

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Your Highness, Excellencies, distinguished guests.

Important voices before me have outlined the gravity of the situation and the urgency of our challenge. The truism "children are the future" has perhaps never rung as clearly as it does today in the Middle East. We see schools bombed, children killed and maimed, families torn apart and made to flee their homes and countries. Insecurity and fear are becoming the norm rather than the exception. And this should not be the case. We come together to discuss how we can combine our efforts to secure productive futures for the children and youth of the region.

I work for UNRWA, which has 65 years of experience in assisting and protecting Palestine refugees. Protection needs stem from vulnerability. Few are more vulnerable than the children of refugees. Trying to mitigate that vulnerability has therefore put protection at the very heart of our mandate. Protection is interwoven through all our services since UNRWA's establishment in 1949.

The vulnerability of Palestinian children and youth is more acute than ever before. Palestine refugee children are exposed to considerable child protection concerns including physical and emotional violence, sexual abuse, child marriage, detention, child labor and the effects of armed conflict.

Poverty, stifled employment opportunities and overcrowded living conditions in refugee camps are just some of the elements that exacerbate child protection concerns for Palestine refugee children. The data are alarming:

- Over 500 Palestinian children were killed in the recent onslaught on Gaza. Another 500 were orphaned. Moreover, the majority of Gaza's 110,000 homeless are children.
- While less news-worthy, violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, including children, has spiked, and is now double that of last year.
- The slaughter continues in Syria, with no apparent consideration for the lives of the precious and innocent.
- In besieged Yarmouk camp, children have died due to lack of medical care, and suffer severe malnutrition and dehydration.
- In Lebanon, Palestine refugee children and their families live on the margins of society, unable to access jobs and services.
- For Palestinian children fleeing Syria, the dangers are many. In some cases entry to safety is simply denied to all Palestinians; other states discriminate in their treatment of Palestinians. For example, since 2013, of the 164 cases documented of forcible return from Jordan to Syria of Palestinians, 69 were of Palestine refugee children.
- Children who are able to reach safe ground are subject to web of complex threats, including lack of legal status including from the denial of birth registration, forcible return, threat from sexual predators, and dire poverty.
- Palestinian mothers, children and youth seeking safe refuge and a better future have chanced a terrifying, perilous journey across the Mediterranean or through ISIL territory, sometimes with disastrous outcomes.
- In addition to the impact of armed conflict, according to our statistics, nearly half of the gender based violence survivors are below the age of 18 years.

Palestinians have a specific and unique vulnerability, and they often speak of feeling trapped, singled out and unwelcome. But in today's world, these are anxieties shared by many. Palestine refugee children are in a sense the 'canary in the coal mine', the first to experience vulnerabilities that others will subsequently face. UNRWA's mandate for an especially vulnerable community, its experience in serving beneficiaries directly, and its ability to be flexible and innovative, may provide insight to build on when considering the protection of all children and youth.

I would like to share with you five 'lessons' from our experience:

1. Protection through services, and maintaining normalcy. UNRWA's raison d'être has always been "investing in the future." Our services, especially our largest programmes in education and health, provide direct protection to children. Half a million children attend UNRWA schools and more than 260,000 children under the age of five receive health care at UNRWA clinics where we also screen and treat victims of child abuse and gender based violence. As important as our services is the continuity and predictability of these services. Families and communities are sustained when they can count on UNRWA's support structures even under dire circumstances. Nothing protects children or prepares youth for the future like secure families and communities. We should not just look at addressing specific protection problems, but take a more holistic view and work to create a base of security and support for families.
2. Our staff are refugees and are embedded in camps, communities. UNRWA has more than 30,000 staff, the vast majority of whom are Palestinian themselves. We are embedded in communities and understand the problems. This is our comparative advantage.
3. Education and schools as loci for our protection responsibilities and place for stability. With so much of the region in active conflict, and with so many children's lives in turmoil, we recognize that offering students stable access to education is crucial. Our first priority is simply keeping schools open where circumstances allow. In Syria and Gaza, UNRWA largely maintained education services. Alternative locations and courageous staff keep schools open even in areas that are hard to reach. Through innovation and partnerships, we reach even children who cannot come to school. The self-learning materials UNRWA has developed in Syria for English, Mathematics, Arabic and Science have been adopted by UNICEF and will be used in schools throughout Syria. These materials supplement UNRWA's satellite channel, which broadcasts from Gaza lessons on core subject areas. Viewership data indicate that these lessons are viewed throughout the Middle East, not just in UNRWA's five fields, and even in Europe and North America. UNRWA's long-standing human rights enrichment programme and its newer human rights curriculum bring children into conversation about their rights at an early age.
4. Organizational advocacy. At UNRWA we advocate for policy makers to address core problems. But that implies that member states must sometimes hear messages that are uncomfortable. Occupation is the root of most protection problems in Gaza and the West Bank. An insidious and persistent erosion of rights affects every child in Palestine. Recurrent and deadly military operations are not incidents; they are a structural feature of occupation. Let's demonstrate how and where it deprives children and youth of their rights and demand redress. We must use and uphold the international legal system. It's all we have: protection doesn't exist without rights.
5. Youth voice and agency. This is the point I would like to end with, because it is as important as anything we do to protect children and youth. It is in effect promoting self-protection.

We just saw Malala win the Nobel Peace Prize. She is an important inspiration, a courageous girl standing up for her rights. But she is not unique in her wishes to have all the opportunities and protection we assume for our own children.

UNRWA's tradition of school parliaments gives children voice in the way their schools are run. We are now piloting an innovative project called MyVoiceMySchool. Using Skype, we link conflict-affected youth in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan with peers in the UK to develop advocacy on education and give voice to youth on their futures. Conversations are vibrant and exciting as youth discover shared values, fears and priorities.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines children's right to have a voice, particularly in matters that concern them. Ensuring that children and youth are not ignored and have the space to define their own lives are incredibly powerful ways to promote protection. And this voice and vision transcend political agendas, silencing the senseless violence and destruction.

Ayat, a 15 year old girl in a collective shelter in Damascus, confidently says she plans to rebuild her country more beautiful than it ever was. "In silence, I am powerless but with my voice, I can do many things", she says. It is only when our children see they have audience, know they can be heard, and can effect change – that they will.

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\$ 56 million.

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