
Geneva Conference: press information

"Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Building Partnerships in Support of UNRWA" COMMISSIONER-GENERAL'S WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Geneva, 7 June 2004

Ambassador Walter Fust
Director-General Sergei Ordzhonikidze
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

This is a historic moment in the life of UNRWA. The number of countries and organisation partners meeting outside the region is testimony to the engagement and commitment of the International Community to the future and wellbeing of over 4 million Palestinian Refugees.

Nine months ago, when we first began discussing the holding of this Conference, there were many question marks. On behalf of the Swiss Government, SDC had put an invitation on the table, to come to Geneva and take a longer-term look at the needs of the four million refugees we serve. But it was not clear how best to respond. There were opportunities, but there were also risks to weigh in the balance.

Nobody needs an excuse to come to this beautiful city. We all know its role as the global centre of humanitarian thinking and action. Nevertheless, there were some who hesitated or who expressed doubts about the wisdom of raising our usual low profile – maintained for 54 years – and holding an extraordinary conference in Geneva of all stakeholders. Those early concerns, I hope have been laid to rest: first by the quality of the preparatory process in the field and now by this excellent turnout.

By your presence today you have endorsed the value of this event, and agreed with us that this is the right moment, and the right way, to work together on addressing key humanitarian aspects of the Palestine refugee question. As Commissioner-General of the UNRWA, the body charged by the General Assembly with caring for the refugees and their descendants until a just and lasting political solution is reached, I am grateful for the commitment you will be demonstrating over the next two days.

It is therefore with warm appreciation that I would like to thank Ambassador Fust, and, through him, his colleagues in SDC for bearing the financial cost of this Conference and for devoting so much staff time to its preparations. The organisation has been first-class. We have been working together for some years now on strengthening the capacity of UNRWA to deliver, and this is a major milestone along that road.

To remain relevant, and to stay on the cutting edge, humanitarian and development organisations such as UNRWA and SDC need three things: high-quality staff, the right supporting environment and adequate funding. Speaking for my Agency, I can tell you that we always had the first; we have usually had the second; and – for many years now – we have rarely had the third.

Considering the proven cost-effectiveness of UNRWA, what we ask for from our donors each year is very modest. Perhaps we have not been bold enough in the past in stating what we believe to be the real needs. Perhaps we need to work better with all of you – donors and host countries – on defining those needs, and thinking collectively about how to meet them. This Conference should mark a big step in that direction.

But no Conference should be an end in itself. It should instead act as a catalyst to prompt wider consequences in the years to come. How diligently we follow up, from Wednesday onwards will be the real mark of our collective commitment to ensuring the Palestine refugees are not short-changed.

I shall now read a message that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan, would like to deliver this morning.

