

## OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. PIERRE KRÄHENBÜHL, THE COMMISSIONER-GENERAL OF UNRWA

[الخطاب الافتتاحي للمفوض العام للأونروا ببيير كرينبول في اجتماع اللجنة الاستشارية](#)

17 November 2014

*Mr. Chairman; Mr. Vice-Chairman; Distinguished Delegates; Colleagues,*

I would like to begin by thanking His Excellency Mr. Mohammad-Taysir Bani Yassin, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, for welcoming us here and for hosting this meeting. I would also like to thank His Excellency Mr. Per Örnéus of Sweden, Chairman of the Advisory Commission, and Mr. Ali Mustafa of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Vice-Chair. My appreciation is also extended to Ms. Segolène Adam of Switzerland, who has so ably led the Sub-Committee, with the support of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the United States of America.

It is a pleasure for me to address you again. Since our last meeting in June, I have had opportunities to hold fruitful discussions on a wide range of issues with many of you: host countries, longstanding donors and new partners. I am pleased to see our strong and cooperative relationships continue to grow. It is something I am very committed to and it gives me pleasure to welcome the Undersecretary for International Cooperation and Development of the United Arab Emirates, H.E. Mr. Hazza Mohammed Al Qattani to our meeting; we look forward to the Emirates – along with Brazil, also represented today by H.E. Ambassador Paolo Franca and Qatar, represented by Mr. Abdullah Aldham – joining the Commission.

As I begin this statement allow me to underline how deeply affected I am personally and as Commissioner-General by the loss of many colleagues in recent months and years. I wish to pay tribute to the 14 colleagues killed in Syria since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 – 24 others are missing there as well – and to the 11 colleagues killed in Gaza this summer and another killed in the West Bank in 2013. I will never get used to such losses and I will never forget the meetings I have had with many of their families.

Allow me also to inform you of changes that have occurred and will be taking place in my senior leadership team. First is a colleague who has been invaluable as I got to know the Agency. I am of course referring to Deputy Commissioner-General, Margot Ellis. Margot, this is your last Advisory Commission with UNRWA and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you personally for your remarkable service and your outstanding and generous support to me. Your positive spirit and experience will be truly missed. Salvatore Lombardo, the Director of External Relations and Communications and Peter Ford, our Senior Fundraising Executive and my representative to Arab countries will be leaving shortly. Both have been instrumental in bringing UNRWA to where we are now in terms of relationships with and support from the donor community. Salvo and Peter, you will be dearly missed and I commit here to ensure continuity both of the spirit and energy that you have shown in your years with UNRWA.

### TIME FOR HOPE

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

At our last meeting, I described the situation of Palestine refugee communities as unsustainable. Since then, the trends have become even bleaker. The pressures on Palestinians and Palestine refugees are immense and the threats to their lives, livelihoods or future are of such magnitude that hope is needed somewhere on the horizon. Hope – in this most unstable region – can only and must be brought about by resolute political action.

Half way through its seventh decade of existence and action, UNRWA is an illustration of what can and in many ways has been achieved for Palestine Refugees over this period but we are also a living reminder of what happens when no political solutions are found to address the underlying causes of an historic injustice.

Throughout my statement you will hear confirmation – if it was needed – of UNRWA's profound commitment to serving the Palestine refugee communities today and in the future, consistent with the mandate, role, and responsibilities we have been given by the international community, specifically the UN General Assembly. You will also hear that we find impossible, year after year, to accept the failure to resolve the fundamental issues of occupation, blockade and conflicts that affect Palestine refugees so severely.

I call here for determined and structured political leadership by the international community in this regard. I do so because we are among the best placed to daily observe and highlight the human consequences and costs of the ongoing denial of dignity and rights of Palestine refugees. In that context, I am convinced that it is our responsibility both to provide services to the refugees and to advocate for an end to this intolerable reality.

I do so also because over my first months in office, I have become increasingly aware of an issue that I believe even our longest-standing supporters and many of you here in this room may underestimate, which is that – with your support – UNRWA has achieved one of the most remarkable processes of human capital development in the developing world, in particular in the fields of health and education, as underlined once again in a recent World Bank report.

Palestinians have always greatly invested in education, something UNRWA was able to build on and expand. I frequently hear comments about the burden for donors to continue assisting an ever growing number of Palestine refugees, when in actual fact you have through UNRWA supported a major investment in knowledge and skills and should take more credit for this outstanding accomplishment.

There are many developing and middle-income countries that would envy the Palestinians for the quality of their human capital. As we know there is one thing that Palestinians envy others for and that is the fact of having a state. The creation of a Palestinian state – living beside and coexisting with Israel – would be one of the defining measures of the sustainability of this decades-long process of development.

### SURVEY OF REGIONAL AND FIELD TRENDS

Allow me now to highlight some events and changes since we last met in June. As field directors will present their updates in the next session, I will focus on a few key parameters only.

To begin with it is of course striking how unstable and radicalized the wider Middle eastern environment has become. We are deeply aware that host countries and many other states have this on their minds and very often at the centre of their attention. I am thinking here in particular of developments in Iraq and Syria that have intensified since the summer, including with the role and operations carried out by *Daesh*.

After the strong focus on Palestine this summer, there is now a real risk that attention shifts once more to a multiplicity of other crises in the world and that it becomes once again challenging to draw attention to the fate of Palestine refugees. We are making a determined effort that this not be so because we know it is a risk the world cannot take.

### SYRIA

In Syria proper, the effects of the conflict continue to be catastrophic for Syrians and for Palestine refugees alike. Fighting continues to be ferocious in many areas and the patterns of indiscriminate and often deliberate violence against civilians remains very critical. Over 60% of the Palestine refugees are now displaced or have become refugees a second time over, in Lebanon or Jordan, in Turkey or in Egypt. Fleeing the conflict, though, is becoming more difficult by the day as borders are closing forcing refugees to take increasingly dangerous routes across *Daesh* territory or the Mediterranean, in their attempt alongside many others to reach Europe.

Yarmouk remains an example of how civilians suffer from the unresolved conflict. 16 to 18,000 civilians are still trapped, living in hunger, cold and constant fear. UNRWA recognizes the facilitation of the Syrian authorities that enable distribution of food and certain other humanitarian items. But since this summer, there has been a noticeable decline in what the Agency has been able to bring into Yarmouk. Far more needs to be done in terms of assistance and of protection for the people in Yarmouk, something that continues to be explicitly raised with the Syrian authorities.

In Syria, 76 UNRWA schools – more than two-thirds – have become unusable. Most were damaged by the conflict or are now in areas too dangerous to reach. Fifteen of these are currently used as collective shelters, housing 6,106 people together with Damascus Training Centre and other UNRWA facilities. Schools engulfed in the fighting is another dramatic example of the disregard for the sanctity of civilian life shown by parties to this conflict and it must be condemned.

### LEBANON AND JORDAN

Lebanon and Jordan continue to pay a heavy price for regional insecurity and the conflict in Syria in particular. We use every opportunity we have to pay tribute to their hospitality and emphasize the need for the international community to support the two countries.

In Lebanon, 400,000 registered Palestine refugees live in often very difficult economic and social circumstances, many in overcrowded refugee camps. In addition, approximately 44,000 Palestine refugees from Syria have fled to Lebanon, almost all of whom UNRWA is assisting with health, food and educational services. UNRWA believes that Palestine refugees from Syria should continue to be admitted to Lebanon, notably those in need of special medical treatment and those seeking to reunite families. In that context, we welcomed the news this September that Palestine refugees could renew their visas for 3 months, even if their stay in Lebanon had been irregular. Let us not forget another displaced population still in need of urgent assistance in Lebanon – the remaining refugees from Nahr el-Bared Camp who await re-housing.

In Jordan, which hosts the largest number of registered Palestine refugees in any single country, 2 million, many in this refugee community have been able to secure a living; others face economic and social hardship. UNRWA's role remains important to the human development of the refugees in general, and to the most vulnerable refugees in particular. Jordan is also hosting over 14,000 Palestine refugees from Syria who are being assisted by UNRWA. They should be allowed to remain until the conflict subsides and conditions for their return

to Syria improve.

Allow me here to say that more can be done in Lebanon and Jordan to prevent stigmatisation of Palestine refugees. In this context, I wish to note that circumstances for Palestinians arriving in Egypt from Syria are becoming increasingly difficult. This is a matter that UNRWA is regularly engaging the Egyptian authorities on. We are grateful for Egypt's readiness to discuss these issues with us.

#### **PALESTINE - WEST BANK**

Turning to the West Bank, the situation of the 750,000 Palestine refugees there has also worsened. We have seen a sharp increase in the number of refugees killed and injured in operations by Israeli Security Forces involving the use of live ammunition. Just last month there were 149 injuries, three times the total for the whole of 2013. There has also been a 50 percent increase in Palestine refugees killed compared to the same period last year.

UNRWA is concerned about the threatened forcible displacement of approximately 7,000 people in around 45 residential areas including in the sensitive E1 area. Forcible displacement of persons from land under occupation would represent a breach of international humanitarian law. Many of these Bedouin are registered with UNRWA as refugees.

Overall, socio-economic conditions in the West Bank including East Jerusalem continue to deteriorate for Palestine refugees, with systematic Israeli restrictions on the movement of Palestinians and their conduct of trade causing widespread poverty and unemployment including in the 19 refugee camps. 90,000 Palestine refugees live within the separation barrier in and around Jerusalem. They are amongst the poorest people we support, cut off from the rest of the West Bank. This is compounded by the pressures resulting from further illegal settlement construction and recent events in Jerusalem itself have raised the very serious spectre of widening insecurity and violence.

#### **PALESTINE - GAZA**

In Gaza today, Palestine refugees and non-refugees alike, are just emerging from the unprecedented violence and destruction experienced during the 50-day conflict in July and August. Over 1,500 civilians in Gaza, including 538 children and 306 women were killed. Some 1,500 children have been orphaned, 11,000 people were injured including 1,000 children who will live the rest of their lives with permanent disabilities. Five civilians in Israel were also killed.

Many of you have in the meantime visited the Gaza strip and seen with your own eyes the immense destruction – leaving 110,000 people homeless – the loss of livelihoods and of businesses. At the peak of the crisis almost a third of the population of Gaza fled their homes; UNRWA alone sheltered and assisted almost 300,000 displaced persons in 90 of our schools. Today some 27,000 are still sheltered in 18 UNRWA schools.

UNRWA was affected by seven incidents of munitions fired at its schools, three of them with deadly consequences resulting in over 42 deaths and an estimated 200 persons with multiple injuries. We unreservedly condemned those attacks on UN premises which constituted violations of international law by Israel and we have called for investigations and accountability, a call I repeat here today. We also discovered weapons components hidden by Palestinian groups in three of our schools: we were proactive and transparent in informing all key parties about these discoveries and we publicly condemned these violations of international law. The independent Board of Inquiry established by the Secretary-General will look at all major incidents that affected UN operations, notably those of UNRWA, during the crisis.

The focus now is on rebuilding Gaza. We welcomed the Cairo Conference and the significant pledges made. These need urgently to be transformed into actual disbursements. We welcomed Prime Minister Hamdallah's visit to Gaza in early October. Ongoing leadership by the government of national consensus is needed to ensure that the reconstruction can take place. A genuine commitment by Israel is also required to enable the needed material to be brought to Gaza. For the time being the process is much too slow and largely ineffective. Should this continue we will reach the winter with no progress in rebuilding the homes of the many still displaced, including those still in UNRWA schools. The people of Gaza deserve much better and much more than that.

This should not be a time for wait-and-see attitudes on anybody's side. The actors who agreed to the temporary mechanism should be held accountable for its implementation. Time is running out, tempers are rising in Gaza and people are desperate.

The only way this sense of despair can be overcome is to make Gaza a liveable place again. This means, as the Secretary-General has recently emphasised, once and for all addressing the underlying causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: an end to the occupation that has ground on for nearly half a century and a full lifting of the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. Indeed there is no doubt in my mind that, after years of collective punishment of the population in Gaza and after the recent devastating conflict, it is simply inconceivable to return to the pre-existing conditions under the blockade. A change of paradigm is needed and only dedicated and determined political action by the international community can bring it about.

When one considers all these developments, one comes to recognize the existential nature of the threat faced by Palestine refugees.

#### **THE MEDIUM-TERM STRATEGY**

It is against this troubling background that UNRWA has been developing its next Medium-Term Strategy (MTS). Our Director of Planning and I will give a more detailed presentation in a separate session but allow me to highlight a few elements. First I wish to underline that the MTS is the product of considerable consultation. My sincere appreciation goes to Advisory Commission members for the quality of the input received throughout the process and in particular since the last session in June and during the different Sub-Committee meetings.

This MTS presents UNRWA's statement of intent for the Agency's operations for the period 2016-2021, based on thorough analysis of the growing and evolving needs of the Palestine refugee populations. It outlines UNRWA's strengths and areas of required improvements in meeting these needs and providing access to vital services for all refugees who may seek them, with particular attention paid to the vulnerable who need these services the most. The strategy is designed to be applicable in any security context, including in the most intense and violent conflicts.

The MTS lays out a set of Strategic Outcomes designed to address the needs of Palestine refugees, and UNRWA will very actively mobilize support and resources to achieve those Outcomes. UNRWA's response will focus on its clear mandate from the General Assembly and comparative advantages, which include the scale and geographic coverage of its operations, its coordinated and diversified programming and, above all, its workforce – the majority of whom are Palestine refugees themselves and members of the communities they serve.

UNRWA's strategic priorities will begin with a focus on protection and rights for all refugees including the most vulnerable. I personally felt strongly that advocating for the rights of Palestine refugees should be the first outcome because, at the end of the day, however good services are, they will never fully compensate for the unfulfilled, legitimate expectation of refugees to see their rights respected.

The four very important programme service outcomes are central to the MTS. The MTS is also more explicit on the need to further improve on the conduct of emergency operations. It is also strong in terms of commitments to new forms of partnerships. Not – and I insist on this point – to weaken or outsource core areas of UNRWA's work, but to widen the scope of what can be done for refugees and complement areas of expertise of UNRWA. On this point, I would like to emphasise that we shall continue making progress in our education and health reforms, which will be essential to fulfilling the objectives of the 2016-2021 MTS. In addition, as reflected in the MTS, the planned spin-off of UNRWA's Microfinance Programme will proceed in consultation with our stakeholders at the relevant junctures. To that end, the Director of the Microfinance Programme will hold discussions with stakeholders in the weeks and months ahead.

In order to be successful in the implementation of this strategy, we have defined three management commitments. As I highlighted in June this will involve building on many existing fundraising partnerships, developing new long-term relationships both with states and the private sector and addressing some underlying, internal elements of UNRWA's difficult financial situation.

Furthermore, we will continue to work on operational and organizational effectiveness. Completion of our Enterprise Resource Planning system in early 2015 will improve essential Agency-wide support functions in our Headquarters, including Finance and Human Resources. We will also finally engage staff and refugee communities in more systematic and inclusive ways. To help spur the process, I have commissioned with donor support a number of staff-relations initiatives which will be spearheaded by my office over the course of 2015.

#### **THE FINANCIAL SITUATION IN 2014 AND BEYOND**

I want to update you on the current financial situation and provide some information on the 2015 budget that I will soon be approving. The deficit in June was at around 70 million USD. It is currently at 45 million USD, a little lower than last year. I want to thank those of you who have already provided and some who may still provide additional means to help us balance the budget at the end of this year. You recall that I had committed to first make internal cuts in expenditure before returning to you for additional funds. This commitment was kept since we reduced the deficit by 18 million USD this summer, as conveyed to you in my letter of 19 September 2014.

For 2015 we anticipate a financial shortfall of around 65 to 70 million USD. I have been working with my colleagues to reduce the expenditure increases previously shared with the Sub-Committee, and those increases have now been brought down from 25.2 million to 19.2 million USD. We are still trying to reduce this further before final approval of this budget. We may be able to continue to just about find immediate resolution to our financial difficulties in 2015 and, maybe just about in 2016. But let me be very clear we are reaching an organizational crossroads and action must be taken now to change UNRWA's financial predicament. I reiterate the commitment I made when I addressed you at my first Advisory Commission meeting, and on many other occasions since, to take action to remedy this and deal with some of the underlying elements of our deficit. This includes a decision to begin working on these issues from early 2015. At the same time, I remain deeply engaged in outreach to develop existing and new partnerships. Next year we will take stock of our strategy thus far, culminating in a new Resource Mobilisation Strategy for the period 2016-18 which we will share with you in November 2015.

#### **AN APPEAL ON BEHALF OF REFUGEES**

In conclusion, let me state once again that at the heart of the destiny and plight of Palestine refugees is an unresolved conflict, an ongoing occupation and a lasting injustice. This is now compounded by the devastating effects of recent conflicts in Gaza and Syria.

Over the past 65 years, against many odds, UNRWA has contributed to a significant process of human capital development which all should take more pride in. However, the current mix of conflict, occupation and blockade are now at times seriously reversing many of the gains made in the fields of health and education.

Investments made in Gaza are regularly destroyed by bombs, gains in the West bank are curtailed by settlement expansion and progress and self-sufficiency in Syria is being blown to pieces in the conflict. In almost all fields unemployment is pushing increasing numbers into poverty and dependency.

UNRWA has been a provider of important services and has proven an ability to respond in crisis, even if this has come, as I stated earlier, at a considerable price with the loss of many colleagues. Nevertheless, UNRWA is able and highly determined to continue playing its indispensable role but it should not be taken for granted.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The refugee communities need support but they now also need solutions. While the conflict in Syria risks dragging on the question must be asked if the international community can really afford to have the Israeli/Palestinian conflict remain unresolved and a constant source of oppression, humiliation and despair in the region. The answer is most clearly no.

It is time for a change of paradigm and attitude, time to overcome sceptical and pessimistic views. It is time for energy and commitment to resolve one of the longest standing conflicts

or our time and provide a basis for a just and lasting solution for the refugees themselves.

I 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\$ 56 million.

**For more information, please contact:**

**Christopher Guinness**

UNRWA Spokesperson

**Mobile:**

+972 (0)54 240 2659

**Office:**

+972 (0)2 589 0267

[c.guinness@unrwa.org](mailto:c.guinness@unrwa.org) (link sends e-mail)

**Sami Mshasha**

UNRWA Arabic Spokesperson

**Mobile:**

+972 (0)54 216 8295

**Office:**

+972 (0)2 589 0724

[s.mshasha@unrwa.org](mailto:s.mshasha@unrwa.org)