
Statement by the Commissioner General of UNRWA

Tuesday, November 13th, 2007

Beirut, 13 November 2007

I'd like to welcome Geir Pedersen with whom I toured Nahr el-Bared yesterday. Together, we were able for the first time to glean to a fuller extent the damage to the Camp.

My visit to Lebanon has been far more than a fact finding mission. As Commissioner General of an agency that is charged with providing relief and works for Palestine refugees it was important for me to come here and see for myself the plight of those we serve in the Nahr el-Bared Camp and the nearby camp of Beddawi, where many took refuge from the fighting. It was important for me to hear first hand about the problems the refugees face and to listen to their frustrations, their hopes and their fears, so that we can better address their needs and aspirations in these most difficult circumstances.

Bare statistics did little to prepare me for the enormity of the destruction in Nahr el Bared. For the first time, we were able to drive through the official camp, what is known as the "old camp", which bore the brunt of the conflict over the summer. Nearly every building there has been reduced to rubble. I fear there are few structures that can be saved. In decades of service with the United Nations I have witnessed nothing like this. Let me be clear. Rebuilding Nahr el-Bared will be one of the largest humanitarian projects my Agency has had to undertake.

Already, and in the face of such enormous devastation, I am pleased to report progress by UNRWA in our efforts to address immediate needs and restore to the refugees some semblance of normal life. Nearly one thousand families have returned to the area on the periphery of Nahr el-Bared, known as the "new camp". This is remarkable, given that UNRWA was able to gain access to the camp less than two months ago. We have built two new schools in Baddawi Camp, which will be open next week, if all goes to plan. And we have acquired land for another school in Nahr el Bared itself. Beyond housing and schools, we and our NGO partners have continued to distribute food parcels and non-food items, such as mattresses, hygiene kits and cooking stoves. I am pleased to announce that I have now appointed an UNRWA project manager who will oversee our work, as we move from the emergency phase into preparations for longer term reconstruction as well.

Once the emergency phase is over, the task of reconstructing the camp must begin. It is clear at this early stage that this will have to be one of the most collaborative efforts ever undertaken by UNRWA: collaboration with the refugees, with the parties which work for them, with the Lebanese authorities, with the donors and with the UN family here on the ground in Lebanon. Let me stress that UNRWA and our Lebanese partners remain wholeheartedly committed to the reconstruction of the camp and the return of the refugees, in spite of the logistical challenges that this will inevitably pose.

I would like now to update you on our funding. In June, we launched a *Flash Appeal* for US \$12.7 million. The response of the international community was immediate and extremely generous. Seventeen million dollars were pledged. In September, we launched our *Emergency Appeal* for nearly US \$55 million dollars to address the humanitarian needs of the refugees over the following twelve months. Again, the response of our donors was gratifying. Together with the additional funds from our *Flash Appeal*, we have to date received pledges for more than half of this: nearly US \$29 million. To our donors I say thank you. Thank you for your generosity in allowing us to rise to the challenges posed by this crisis.

Finally, to the refugees and the communities beyond them affected by this conflict, my message is simple. UNRWA stands ready to serve. But we will need the co-operation and goodwill of all concerned, as we approach this unprecedented undertaking. We will also need patience and a sense of realism. The task handed down to us is complex and poses daunting challenges. But with the support of the international community and our Lebanese hosts, with the collaboration of the Palestine refugees and our humanitarian partners on the ground, we will rise to and meet these challenges.