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### **ISRAEL APPROVES 'VAST MAJORITY' OF REQUESTS BY RELIEF AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES, BUT OPPOSES ITS POLITICAL AGENDA, FOURTH COMMITTEE HEARS**

#### **Opposing Delegation Says Staff Continue Efforts despite Israeli Harassment**

Israel supported the humanitarian work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) by approving the vast majority of its requests and providing it unrestricted access to Israeli officials, its representative told the Fourth Committee today, adding, however, that the country "deeply opposes UNRWA's political agenda".

As the Committee concluded its consideration of UNRWA's work, Israel's speaker said that the Palestinian refugees, unlike any others, were treated to exclusive service at the United Nations, with "their own set of rules, their own funding, and their own international agency". Paraphrasing George Orwell, he said all refugees were equal but some were more equal than others.

Many UNRWA camps were even decorated with keys, he said, symbolizing "right of return". But those keys only "locked the refugees in a distorted reality". Further, many States critical of Israel did little to "pick up the tab" in support of UNRWA or the refugees. Though saturated in petrol dollars, not a single Arab or Muslim country was on UNRWA's top 10 donors' list.

A divergent view of the situation was expressed by delegations from other States in the region, including that of Qatar, whose representative said that despite Israel's statements about supporting the refugees and a peaceful solution, it did not follow-through on them. All of those who worked with UNRWA continued their efforts despite the harassment by Israeli authorities and the budgetary constraints. The ultimate solution to the refugee situation was a peaceful resolution to the ongoing hostility between Palestine and Israel, he said.

Tear down the separation wall, urged Saudi Arabia's representative, who noted that Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territory was the "oldest occupation still standing" and impeded the end of worldwide decolonization. Saudi Arabia had increased its contribution to UNRWA and had become one of the lead donors. Its support would continue until the Palestinians received the right of return.

Jordan's representative noted that his country hosted more than 42 per cent of the refugees, but received only 20 per cent of the Agency's budget. Currently, 150,000 Palestinian refugees in Jordan lived in camps or in homes provided by the country, and that number increased daily. Until the parties reached a solution, the demands on host countries to make up for UNRWA's shortfall would only increase in severity. Now, Jordan's border was open to Syrian refugees. It was thus imperative for the international community to step up its support.

Picking up that thread, Turkey's representative said the Syrian crisis had displaced about half the Palestinian refugees, and he reiterated the call for the international community to support the Syria Response Plan. The refugee population continued to grow by 3 per cent each year, and the cost of UNRWA's services was increasing under difficult physical situations and the effect of inflation. Turkey welcomed the Secretary-General's call for a pledging meeting on 3 December to announce voluntary contributions, and it agreed that a strong and financially sound UNRWA was a contributor to the stability of the Middle East.

Several countries from outside the region also shared their concerns and support for UNRWA. Among them, the representative of Malaysia, who lauded the Agency for "humanizing" the lives of Palestinian refugees and lessening their suffering. Malaysia was a staunch supporter of UNRWA, to which it had contributed \$1.2 million last year. The representative of Australia, noting that the country was UNRWA's twelfth-largest donor, commended the Agency for its positive contributions, not only to Palestinians, but to the region as a whole, by building the "human capital" essential for a future Palestinian State.

The representative of Sierra Leone worried that UNRWA's \$48 million shortfall would not only negatively impact the welfare of Palestinian refugees, but "may also create tension, suspicions and mistrust" towards the high expectations that "some good may come out of the ongoing peace negotiations".

In that connection, he welcomed United States' efforts to bring the conflicting parties to the table, but said they needed to meet certain conditions, among them, the unconditional cessation of all human rights violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the end of Israeli settlement construction in the Occupied Territory. The launching of rockets from Palestinian Territory into Israel must also stop, and Israel's right to exist as a nation must be respected.

Filippo Grandi, UNRWA's Commissioner-General, delivered closing remarks.

Also speaking during the debate were representatives of China, Botswana, United States, Brazil, Nigeria, Egypt, Libya, United Arab Emirates, Norway, Kuwait, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Viet Nam, India, and United Republic of Tanzania.

The Permanent Observer of the Holy See also participated.

The Observer of the State of Palestine spoke in exercise of the right of reply, as did the representatives of Israel, Syria, and Malaysia.

The Committee will meet again at 10 a.m. tomorrow, 8 November, to begin its consideration of the report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories.

#### Background

The Fourth committee met today to continue its consideration of the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

#### Statements

SONIA SUGHAYAR ( Jordan) said the crucial point in the situation of the Palestinian refugees hinged on the reaching of a peaceful solution between Israel and Palestine. Jordan hosted the majority of those refugees, whose right of return was mandatory under United Nations resolutions, most important among them, the one adopted in 1948. Jordan hosts more than 42 per cent of the refugees, yet it received only 20 per cent of the budget of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Given the Agency's budgetary constraints, however, Jordan equalled that expenditure for essential services needed by the Palestinians. Until the parties reached a solution to the Palestinian cause, the demands of host countries to make up for UNRWA's shortfall would only increase in severity. The Organization must address the financial deficit with long-term solutions. Currently, 150,000 Palestinian refugees in Jordan lived in camps or in homes provided by the country, and that number increased daily. Now, Jordan's border was open to Syrian refugees. It was thus imperative for the international community to step up support for the refugees and alleviate some of the burden on the host countries, including Jordan.

BENJAMIN SHARONY ( Israel) said that his country supported UNRWA's humanitarian missions, but deeply opposed its political agenda. Every refugee in the world fell under the jurisdiction of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. However, the Palestinian refugees were treated to exclusive service at the United Nations, with their own set of rules, their own funding, and their own international agency. To paraphrase George Orwell, all refugees were equal but some refugees were more equal than other. Further, the UNRWA education system was deliberately perpetuating the refugee status. Palestinian children were taught that the only solution was the so-called right of return. Many UNRWA camps were decorated with keys, symbolizing "right of return", but in truth those keys had "locked the refugees in a distorted reality".

Instead of extending their hand at assisting the Palestinian refugees, he added, the Arab States believed that UNRWA's creation released them of any responsibility. "So who was picking up the tab?" he asked. Many States that criticized Israel had done little to support UNRWA or Palestinian refugees. The region was saturated in petrol dollars, but there was not a single Arab or Muslim country in the Agency's top 10 donors list. The Palestinian leadership was content to use the population as political pawns, rather than doing everything in their power to create a better future for them.

While balancing the need to uphold its security, Israel was doing its utmost to facilitate the Agency's operations, he said, adding that working relations with the Agency's office in the West Bank had improved. The vast majority of UNRWA's requests were approved as soon as possible and the Agency had unrestricted access to Israeli officials at all levels. However, last month, the Israeli Defense Forces had discovered a terror tunnel that ran for two kilometres, originating in Gaza and ending just outside an Israeli community. "Instead of building houses, Hamas was building smuggling tunnels." The time had come for permanent solutions rather than another round of biased ones, and the time had come to amend UNRWA's politicized mandate.

RASHID AL-KUWARI ( [Qatar](#) ) said all of those who worked with UNRWA continued their efforts despite the harassment by Israeli authorities and the constrained budget. It was crucial to address the financial crisis for the well-being of the refugees, including for their educational, health care and other relief measures. However, the ultimate solution to their situation rested on the peaceful solution to the ongoing hostility between Palestine and Israel. UNRWA staff normally conducted services for 90 per cent of refugees, including the provision of dire assistance to the Gaza Strip, where the situation was worsening, owing to the Israeli blockade and other hostile measures against the Palestinians there. Qatar was concerned that Israel continued its statements on the support of all the refugees and a peaceful solution, but yet did not follow-through on them. Qatar was also deeply distressed over UNRWA's budget shortfalls, especially as they had become chronic. His country had doubled its financial support of UNRWA and called for the extra assistance by the international community as a whole.

YANG ZHIYU( [China](#) ) said that UNRWA had been relieving the suffering of the Palestinian people and promoting peace in the Middle East. The conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and especially the humanitarian situation in Gaza were of grave concern. Israel must end its blockade of Gaza and allow humanitarian relief into the region thereby restoring a normal and dignified life for the people living there, and the international community must increase its assistance to the Palestinian's social and economic development. China had been a firm supporter of UNRWA, donating annually for the past 30 years. Given the Agency's financial troubles, China had increased the amount of its donation this year.

LEVENT ELER ( [Turkey](#) ) highlighted some of the important challenges facing UNRWA, especially the anticipated \$48 million funding shortfall this year and its structural underfunding, which seriously risked all of its operations. As the refugee population continued to grow by 3 per cent per year, the cost of UNRWA's services was increasing under difficult physical situations and the effect of inflation. Turkey welcomed the recent call of the United Nations Secretary-General for a pledging meeting on 3 December to announce voluntary contributions, and he echoed his words today that "a strong and financially sound UNRWA is a contributor to the stability of the Middle East". On that note, the crisis in Syria had displaced about half of the Palestinian refugees, and Turkey reiterated the call for the international community to support the Syria Response Plan. Restrictions on movement of persons and humanitarian goods were another source of operational difficulty for UNRWA. Turkey had recently decided to send another urgent dispatch of 10,000 tonnes of wheat flour to Gaza. It welcomed the recent initiative of the United States to settle the dispute between Israel and Palestine, and urged the international community to seize that momentum.

KETSHIDILE GLORIA BAFETANYE( [Botswana](#) ) said that her delegation had consistently expressed its support for the people of Palestine and Syria, and called for an end to the horrific situation that they continued to endure, particularly women and children. On the question of Palestine, Botswana believes that there was no alternative to the two-State solution. The coexistence of Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side as two sovereign States could not be overemphasized. Botswana was encouraged by the resumption of the long overdue talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. However, it reminded the concerned parties that a mutually acceptable solution required a spirit of compromise, trade-offs and mutual respect. Botswana appreciated UNRWA's support of the Palestinian refugees, despite its myriad financial and resource challenges.

CHRISTOPHER KLEIN ( [United States](#) ) said UNRWA continued to deliver essential humanitarian support for 5 million Palestinian refugees, providing health, education and relief services in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza. Over the past year, conflict had affected each of their operating fields, but despite the challenges, the Agency had demonstrated an unwavering dedication to protect and support the refugees under its care. His country remained the largest bilateral donor to UNRWA, with the current year's support of more than \$294 million representing the country's largest ever single-year contribution to the Agency. The United States also commended the continuing generosity of those countries that had hosted Palestinian refugees and applauded those that had come forward with contributions in 2013, noting especially the commitments made by members of the League of Arab States to achieve and sustain the 7.8 per cent target for Arab Governments contributions to UNRWA's core budget.

LEONARDO LUÍS GORGULHO NOGUEIRA FERNANDES( [Brazil](#) ) welcomed the resumption of direct final status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, but was particularly concerned at the ongoing expansion of illegal Israeli settlements and the plight of the Palestinian refugees in Gaza, where restrictions on the movement of civilians and goods continued, with negative consequences for human development there. The humanitarian crisis in Syria had contributed equally to a further deterioration of the situation in the region, including that of Palestinian refugees, with increasing challenges for Lebanon and Jordan. He stressed the need to assist UNRWA with sustained financial and political support, as its activities had contributed to stability in the Middle East. In the last few years, Brazil had steeped up its cooperation with UNRWA, with voluntary financial contributions and bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including the India-Brazil-South Africa framework. In parallel, the Brazilian Government concluded an agreement this year with the World Food Programme and UNRWA for the donation of 11,500 tonnes of rice, worth approximately \$5.5 million, equivalent to the total annual consumption of the Palestinian refugees assisted by the Agency.

DAMIAN WHITE( [Australia](#) ) welcomed UNRWA's efforts, which helped Palestinian refugees under extremely difficult circumstances. The Syrian conflict had displaced over half of the 529,000 of those refugees registered there placing an enormous strain on the Agency's already limited resources as well as on neighbouring countries. Despite that, UNRWA had continued to provide essential services in Syria, as well as

elsewhere. As for its persistent funding shortfalls, she commended the Agency's efforts to increase efficiency, but since budgetary constraints would remain tight, it should continue to direct its efforts in a targeted fashion. Noting that Australia was UNWRA's twelfth-largest donor, she said the Agency contributed positively, not just to Palestinians, but to the whole region, by building the "human capital" essential for a future Palestinian State negotiated through a two-State solution with Israel. Australia strongly supported the resumption of negotiations towards that goal.

ANTHONY A. BOSAH( Nigeria) he said that UNRWA's efforts were a demonstration of the resolve of the international community to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of the Palestinian people and the stability of the region. However, it had been made more difficult by the prevailing economic and political conditions and the security challenges, heightened by the civil war and the humanitarian crisis in Syria. For the Agency to maintain the quality and quantity of its services, it must receive funding that was commensurate with the refugee population growth. He thus called for its increased financial assistance to meet the most urgent humanitarian needs of the Palestinian refugees. Nigeria also welcomed General Assembly resolution 65/272, which requested continued financial support to the Agency from the Organization's regular budget. He commended Member State donors and welcomed renewed efforts by the United States to kick-start Israeli-Palestinian negotiations aimed at achieving a lasting peace.

MOHAMED SELIM( Egypt), associating with the Non-Aligned Movement, said that despite many challenges and obstacles, UNRWA continued to assist 5 million refugees in its provision of health care, education and safety. It would continue that role until the right of return of the refugees was fulfilled and compensation was made for their plight. Egypt was concerned over Israeli sanctions, which ran contrary to international law. It urged the opening of the borders with Gaza, which would ease some of the problems and put an end to some of the illegal practices. Finally, UNRWA's financial situation required the contributions of additional States. He also called on the Arab countries to honour their planned contribution of 7.8 percent to UNRWA's budget and encouraged additional support by the international community to address the Agency's funding issue.

IMAD I. A. TAGURI ( Libya) said more than 65 years of its establishment, UNRWA was mandated to care for 5 million people, living in inhumane circumstances. The Agency had played a key role in easing their difficulties by providing basic services, which had kept their hope alive for a better future. The shortfall in the Agency's funding, as well as the administrative and security difficulties it faced caused by Israeli authorities, was troubling. The Palestinian refugee problem was not separate from the political problem, the root cause of which was Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territory. The settlement activities had increased to unprecedented levels in the first three months of 2013, which affected the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinians.

AHMED AL-MAHMOUD, ( United Arab Emirates), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, expressed concern for the "tragic situation" of the 5 million refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria and Lebanon due to Israeli aggression. To meet the needs of the growing number of Palestinian refugees, owing to conditions in the surrounding countries, the Committee should exert pressure on all the stakeholders to secure the continuation of UNRWA services and the safety of its staff. Israel must lift the Gaza blockade and cease settlement construction in the West Bank and all demolitions of Palestinian homes. A fair solution to the Palestinian question should include the refugees' right of return and right to receive compensation for their displacement. Stabilizing UNRWA's budget was required to enable an emergency response to the new refugees emerging from neighbouring countries. He encouraged the support of the United Nations for the Arab League's provision of 7.8 per cent of the UNRWA budget for three years. He also welcomed the support of the Red Crescent for the 1.7 million Syrian refugees already in camps and the influx of an additional 500,000 fleeing conditions there.

GEIR O. PEDERSEN ( Norway) said the increasing funding gap in the Agency's budget could not be covered by the small group of its top contributors. Norway welcomed the engagement by members of the League of Arab States to achieve and sustain the 7.8 per cent target for Arab contributions to UNRWA's core budget. Continued service delivery to the refugee population also required that the Agency adapt to the changing realities in the region, with priority given to the most vulnerable refugee groups. Norway appreciated ongoing improvements to the Agency's performance and encouraged its continuation based on the next medium-term strategy. His country welcomed the Agency's commitment to improve its financial procedures. Increased transparency and accountability enabled stakeholders to have a say in the Agency's priorities and how its resources were spent.

MOHAMMAD AL-ALATI ( Kuwait) expressed appreciation for UNRWA's efforts, but said the international community could not talk about the suffering of the Palestinian people without underscoring the systematic operations of Israel in destroying Palestine's infrastructure. States must take the situation in hand and force the removal of the Gaza blockade, which limited both the overall well-being of the residents of Gaza Strip and the work of UNRWA in its care of 70 per cent of the refugees. The West Bank was also suffering, due to Israeli impediments to Palestinian support and security to the refugees, as well as the limitations it imposes on the movement of workers and business owners. He urged the Committee to address that situation as well as to solve UNRWA's shortfall by increasing its 2013 budget. However, without the Palestinians' right of return, a concrete solution to their problems remained implausible. Kuwait expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people in the exercise of all of their rights and would pursue its efforts to address the matter under the international community's guidance.

HUSSEIN HANIFF ( [Malaysia](#) ), associating with the Non-Aligned Movement, commended UNRWA's resolute commitment and outstanding work. The number of Palestinian refugees had now increased to a "staggering" 5 million, in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and UNWRA's role was integral to ensuring their basic needs. He expressed deepest sympathy for the families of eight UNRWA staff members killed in violence related to the Syrian conflict. The Agency's report this year contained "very disturbing figures" regarding deterioration in all five fields of the Agency's operation. The international community was haunted by Israel's intensified illegal settlement of the West Bank, as well as the dire situation in Syria. Despite those and other challenges, UNWRA contributed greatly to "humanizing" the lives of Palestinian refugees and lessening their suffering. Turning to the Agency's alarming financial situation, he said that, in the context of efforts to widen its donor base, Malaysia was concerned that the level of response had "stagnated". His country remained among the staunchest supporters of the Palestinian cause and the work of UNWRA, as reflected in its contribution to the agency of \$1.2 million last year.

FAISAL AL-ZAYANI ( [Bahrain](#) ) said his country appreciated UNRWA's work, even amid the repercussions of the financial crisis that had affected its relentless efforts to advance the services it provided. Although the Agency's mandate was to help the Palestinian refugees in achieving the full potential of their human value, the harsh conditions in which the refugees lived and the deterioration of the political situation were clearly major problems. His country was aware of the reforms taking place in the Agency, aimed at improving its provision of services, and believed that those had led to a qualitative leap in its ability to monitor and evaluate its operations so that it could plan its programmes in a more strategic manner.

ABULKALAM ABDUL MOMEN( [Bangladesh](#) ) hoped and believed that UNWRA could fulfil its mandate, providing protection and essential services to the Palestinian refugees. His country was gravely concerned about the security of the Agency's staff, including their detentions, which had continued despite appeals to host authorities. Given the imposition of transit charges on UNRWA shipments and the intrusion of military and security forces to its premises, he called on all parties to respect the United Nations Charter and the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and relevant United Nations resolutions. With the volatile situation in Syria, the vulnerability of the Palestinian refugees there was deepening, requiring greater attention. Likewise, the situation in Gaza and the West Bank was "dire", and Bangladesh urged an immediate halt to settlement expansion, along with other stabilizing measures.

PHAM QUANG HIEU([Viet Nam](#)), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, commended UNRWA for providing educational, health and social services for the well-being, human development and protection of nearly 5 million Palestine refugees, despite increased challenges in the region and the severe operational difficulty in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Viet Nam was gravely concerned about the lack of progress in the Middle East peace process, as well as the volatile situation in Gaza, and the issue of Palestine refugees. He called on Israel to cease all military and settlement activities in Palestinian Territory and end its blockade of Gaza. Support must be provided to UNRWA's staff, as well as safe and convenient conditions under which to carry out their difficult work. Viet Nam also called for intensified efforts by the international community, in particular the Security Council and the Quartet, to address the current political and humanitarian crisis, and promote just, lasting and comprehensive peaceful solutions to both the Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflicts.

VIJAY INDER SINGLA ( [India](#) ) said the situation in the Middle East region remained fragile, and it was regrettable that the long-standing Palestinian question remained largely unresolved. The conflict in Syria had also seriously impacted Palestinian refugees. In that context, UNWRA's provision of critical assistance assumed greater significance, and the Agency was to be commended and encouraged for its valuable work. India supported a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, as well as Palestine's bid for full United Nations membership. His country had enhanced its financial contribution to UNRWA, among other initiatives in support of that Agency; all Member States should follow suit.

KHALID I. M. AL SALLOOM( [Saudi Arabia](#) ) appreciated UNRWA's work and was here today to help address its \$48 million shortfall. He called on the international community, other donors and specialized agencies to contribute to the Agency and help ease the obstacles it faced. Saudi Arabia had increased its contribution and become one of the lead donors; it would continue its support until the Palestinians received the right of return and financial compensation for their suffering. He also underscored the deteriorating situation of the refugees in East Jerusalem, owing to the settlements, and he condemned the Israeli plan to set up 500,000 new ones there. The international community must pressure Israel to end its illegal practice and tear down the separation wall. Israel's occupation is the "oldest one still standing" and impeded the end of decolonisation around the globe. The international community must contribute, not only financial support to Palestinians, but also political support to a return to their lands with Jerusalem as its capital, in order to secure stability in the Middle East.

MAURA MWINGIRA ([United Republic of Tanzania](#)) said Palestinian refugees were in "unspeakable humanitarian distress". UNRWA was alleviating their plight through its efforts to provide basic health and education services. His country welcomed the serious measures undertaken by the Agency to address its budget shortfall, but it was concerned about the worsening security situation in the region, which had been exacerbated by the Syrian crisis. Political dialogue and negotiations among all parties was needed to address the larger security concerns.

AMADU KOROMA ( Sierra Leone) commended the “tireless effort” of UNRWA’s Commissioner-General over the years to improve life for the refugees. It was an “indictment on the community of civilized nations” that the Palestinian conflict remained unresolved. The refugees’ only wish was to “have and raise children in their homeland and work and live on the sweat of their labour” to fulfil their dreams, and not to perpetually depend on “donor handouts”. Sierra Leone welcomed the United States’ efforts to bring the conflicting parties to the negotiating table in the quest for a two-State solution, but Israel and Palestine needed to meet certain conditions, among them, the unconditional cessation of all human rights violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, especially Gaza, and the end of Israeli settlement construction in the Occupied Territory. The launching of rockets from Palestinian Territory into Israel must also stop, and Israel’s right to exist as a nation must be respected. Finally, UNRWA’s \$48 million shortfall would not only negatively impact the welfare of Palestinian refugees, but “may also create tension, suspicions and mistrust” towards the high expectations that “some good may come out of the ongoing peace negotiations”.

FRANCIS ASSISI CHULLIKATT(Holy See) said that in this region, which was home to the earliest Christian communities, the Catholic Church shared those same harsh realities on the ground that confronted UNRWA daily. The Holy See, together with donor agencies, had provided education, health care and social services for the population as well as rehabilitation facilities for those injured in conflicts. He noted that the concerns of the Commissioner-General in his report were the same as those of the Holy See. He urged the Quartet and all those assisting in the resumption of the peace process to spare no effort in facilitating negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The objective must be to secure a reasonable compromise for two viable and stable States, which give each party independence and security for their peoples. A lasting solution must also include the status of the Holy City, Jerusalem. The Holy See firmly supported “internationally guaranteed provisions to ensure the freedom of religion and of conscience of its inhabitants, as well as permanent, fair and unhindered access to the Holy places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities”.

#### Rights of Reply

The observer of the State of Palestine, speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the representative of Israel had suggested that the right of return of the Palestinian refugees was a non-starter, despite the fact that the Palestinian refugee issue was a final status issue to be negotiated by the parties. How was respect for human rights and international law contrary to the requirements of peace, and how did the perpetuation of the exile and misery of the Palestinian peoples serve the cause of peace? she asked. Israel must recognize the humanity of the Palestine refugees and put an end to the denial of their rights for its unjustified political interests.

The callous remarks regarding the number of refugees and who could be called a refugee, she added, was the height of hypocrisy by a State who granted the right of return to any Jewish person. Israel’s flagrant denial of the rights of Palestine refugees was immoral and indefensible. Why, following the cessation of hostilities in 1949, did Israel deny the refugees the right of return and why did it continue to deny that right? If, following the end of a conflict today, those in power refused the right to return of those displaced in the conflict, how would the international community react to such a dishonest action? Yet, the Palestinian people remained committed to compromise and peace. The answer to Israel’s assertions regarding UNRWA could be found in the many statements of support for the Agency that had been heard during the debate, she added.

Also speaking in exercise of the right of reply, the representative of Syria said that a number of delegations had expressed concern about the deteriorating conditions in the country and its effect on Palestinian refugees. The Syrian Government’s position was not limited to expressing concern; it had done all that was necessary to protect the refugees and ensure their decent living conditions.

He added that Syria had undertaken its obligation in receiving Palestinian refugees and dealt with them as if they were Syrians, with no discrimination in ownership, employment or health care. That was well-known to UNRWA. Syria used to be the most stable and convenient place for Palestinian refugees, in terms of security and living standards. Now, the refugees were suffering new hardships, owing to two factors: armed groups had broken into the camps and conducted terrorist activities against the civilian populations there, compelling the refugees to leave the camps; and the unilateral economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian people had impacted the Palestinian refugees living in Syria as well.

Syria, he added, also wished to remind the representative of the Israeli occupying Power that Israel was not entitled to speak about the status of the refugees in Syria or in any other part of the world. Everyone in the room and outside knew that Israel had caused the misery of the Palestinian refugees by forcing them out of their homes and subjecting them to daily massacres.

The representative of Israel, also taking the floor in exercise of the right of reply, said that his country was committed to “two States for two people” and was ready to make a historical compromise. Now was the time to seize the moment for lasting peace; not the moment for spreading lies and hatred.

Responding to statements made by the representative of Malaysia, he said that Israel was a thriving multicultural democracy, in which the rights of all minorities was respected, unlike in Malaysia, which allowed the abuse of workers’ rights and denied freedom of expression and religion.

The representative of Malaysia, also speaking in the right of reply, said that the representative of Israel should have raised his concerns about Malaysia in another forum as this Committee was concerned with UNRWA and was not the appropriate venue for such statements.

In closing remarks, FILIPPO GRANDI, UNRWA's Commissioner-General, congratulated Agency staff and voiced support for Turkey as the head of the Working Group on Financing of UNRWA. He reiterated the importance of addressing "before anything else, the conflict in Syria", which trapped the refugees in places where assistance could not reach them. UNRWA has had good dialogue with Syria and believed the situation would be resolved, but he asked all neighbouring countries to "keep their borders open to all the refugees and the Palestine refugees fleeing that situation".

On UNRWA's behalf, he thanked Israel for removal of parts of the blockade around Gaza and respected its and Egypt's security concerns. Still, he added, "civilians must not be the victims of security measures if they are not responsible for these conflicts". He noted that 21 of the 121 projects initiated by UNRWA had been completed, but that 20 had been halted because of the inability to import materials to Gaza. Furthermore, exports from Gaza remained at 2 per cent, far below the goal of 40 per cent, and the movement of people from Gaza was at 200 down from 26,000. That problem needed to be addressed immediately because of its serious socioeconomic impact. He also clarified – "for the benefit of Israel" — that Arab States were a primary donor to the UNRWA project budget and the Arab League contributed 7.8 per cent to its core activities, which were now only 2 to 3 per cent funded.

The Commissioner-General noted the positive comments made by Israel in support of UNRWA's work, but "regretted the association of UNRWA with injustice" committed towards the Israelis. He noted the injustice towards the Palestinian refugees, adding that he had encountered few refugee communities "assisted beyond the first generation" by United Nations agencies. In addition, UNRWA had continued its efforts to aid the Palestinians in a non-political matter and "regrets Israel's association" of UNRWA with the political situation there.

He meanwhile reiterated the statement by the United States in support of the Agency's effort to educate Palestinian children about tolerance and peace towards the people of Israel and added that UNRWA would remain anything but an obstacle to the peace initiative. It was also "far removed" from keeping Palestine reliant on assistance. Rather, the Agency gave refugees an avenue by which to resume their regular lives. He regretted leaving his position before a political solution was found to the refugee problem, especially considering the Syrian situation, and specifically before the Palestinian refugees "receive a just, fair, consultative" conclusion to that "historic injustice" in contribution to Middle East peace.

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