

Chapter 10

PALESTINE REFUGEES



The 1948 hostilities witnessed thousands of Palestinians fleeing their homes in Palestine to take refuge in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and neighbouring Arab countries. For several years, tents like this one in Jalazone camp near Ramallah, West Bank, were the only “homes” many Palestinian refugees had. Today, the landscape has changed and the tents have been replaced by shelters, which have water and sewerage systems.

A nation of refugees

The hostilities that accompanied the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 led to the flight of some 750,000 refugees from Palestine. Most of these refugees fled to the West Bank, then held by Jordan, to the Gaza Strip, held by Egypt, and to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and even further afield. The Arab-Israeli war of 1967 led to yet another displacement, this time of more than 500,000 Palestinians, nearly half of whom were refugees uprooted for a second time.

The General Assembly adopted, in November 1948, its first resolution on providing assistance to Palestine refugees. In response to a report by acting mediator Ralph Bunche that “the situation of the refugees is now critical”, it established the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR). During its brief existence, UNRPR channelled emergency assistance to refugees from Palestine through international voluntary agencies.

On 11 December 1948, the General Assembly declared in resolution 194 (III) that refugees wishing to return to their homes should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date and that those choosing not to return should be compensated for their property. The resolution established the Conciliation Commission for Palestine, which was requested, among other things, to facilitate the refugees’ repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation. Efforts by the Commission to secure the return of the Palestinians have been unsuccessful.

Creation of UNRWA, 1949

As hopes for the immediate return of refugees to their homes faded, the General Assembly made more lasting arrangements. In December 1949, it established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to succeed UNRPR and to carry out refugee-related activities in collaboration with local governments.

In May 1950, UNRWA, from its then headquarters in Beirut, took over operations put together by international voluntary agencies. In the first few years of its work, UNRWA concentrated on providing immediate relief in the form of food, shelter and clothing. It has adjusted its programme over the years in keeping with the changing needs of the refugees.

Today, there are over 3.9 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA. The Agency continues to provide education, health care, relief assistance and social services in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Agency services include elementary and preparatory schooling; vocational and

technical training; comprehensive primary health care, including family health; assistance towards hospitalization; environmental health services in refugee camps; relief assistance to particularly needy households; and developmental social services for women, youth and persons with disabilities. Those services are for the most part provided directly to beneficiaries by the Agency, parallel to the public sector services provided by local authorities to their own constituents. In addition, the Agency operates income-generation programmes that give loans to micro- and small enterprises and carries out a wide range of infrastructure projects and other activities. Where appropriate and feasible, refugees participate in the cost of Agency services by means of voluntary contributions, co-payments, self-help schemes, volunteer efforts and participation fees. UNRWA is the largest United Nations operation in the Middle East, employing some 22,000 persons, nearly all of whom are Palestine refugees, and operating or supporting some 900 facilities.

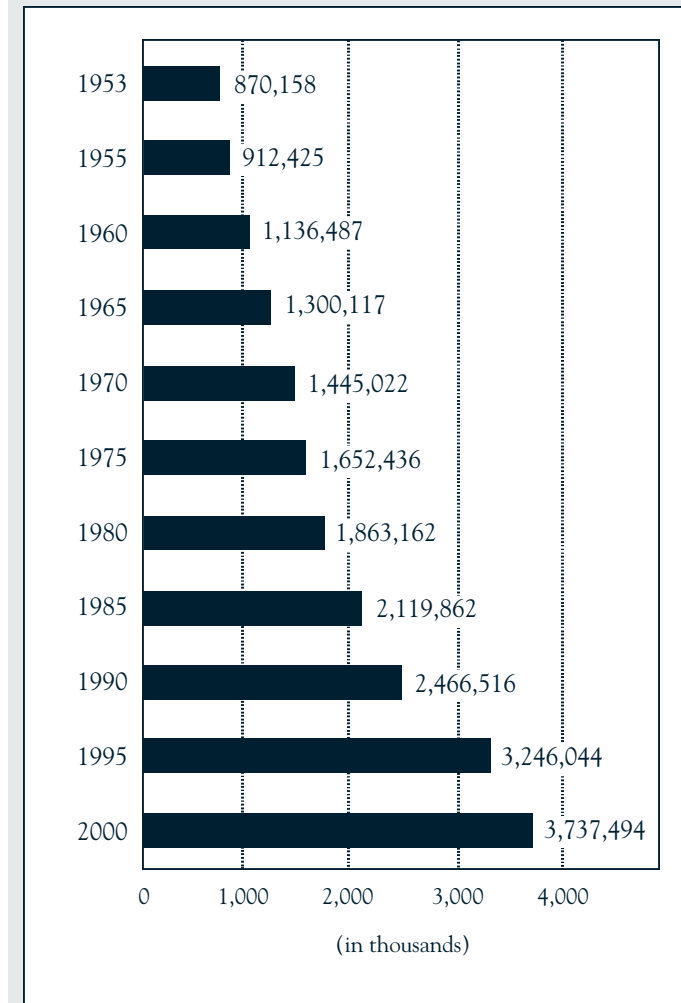
In carrying out its mandate, UNRWA works in cooperation with host Governments, the Palestinian Authority, other United Nations agencies, local and international non-governmental organizations, and the World Bank. The Agency is seen by the refugees as a symbol of the international community’s commitment to the refugees until the problem is resolved. Its mandate is renewed regularly by the General Assembly.

The headquarters of UNRWA, which was in Beirut until 1978, and then in Vienna for 18 years, returned to the Middle East in the mid-1990s. The relocation of the headquarters to Gaza in 1996, decided by the Secretary-General and endorsed by the General Assembly, was seen as a means to demonstrate the commitment of the United Nations to the peace process.

Nearly all of the funding for UNRWA comes from voluntary contributions. As of 2000, UNRWA’s largest donors were the United States, the European Commission, the United Kingdom and Sweden. Other major donors include the Scandinavian countries, Japan and Canada. A small portion comes from non-

governmental organizations and concerned individuals. In recent years, UNRWA has faced a growing financial deficit, seriously affecting its ability to serve the Palestinian refugees. In the 1970s, UNRWA used to spend about \$200 per registered refugee per year. Today, that amount is about \$70. According to UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen, this amounts to less than 20 cents a day per registered refugee to provide direct education, health, relief and social services. In an urgent appeal for increased assistance from donors, made in March 2000, Mr. Hansen said UNRWA's financial situation had reached rock bottom owing to a crippling financial deficit. Unless the deficit was covered, the international community risked losing a key stabilizing factor in the region and an important vehicle for delivering emergency assistance, he cautioned.

Registered Palestinian refugees, 1953-2000



Source: UNRWA.