



# **Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Building Partnerships in support of UNRWA**

Geneva, 7-8 June 2004

## **WELCOMING ADDRESS**

Ambassador Walter Fust

**Director General  
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation**

**CHAIRMAN OF THE CONFERENCE**

Mr Commissioner-General

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this Conference, which brings together for the first time here in Geneva UNRWA and its partners: its donors and potential donors, host authorities of Palestine refugees and other humanitarian organisations.

The number and diversity of countries represented here is a reflection of the interest that this Conference has aroused around the world. In all, some 350 representatives from 62 countries and 29 international organisations have responded positively to the invitation which was jointly issued by UNRWA and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. My special thanks go to the numerous delegates who played an active and constructive part over the last few months in the preparatory process leading up to this event.

UNRWA's history is spanning over more than fifty years and is closely intertwined with that of the Palestine refugees' question. A just and lasting solution to this question remains - as we all know - dependent upon a political settlement of the Middle East conflict. However, as stated in the invitation letter, this Conference has been convened to address the humanitarian needs of the refugees. It is not linked to any ongoing political discussions and initiatives, nor is it meant to compete with these. It is therefore important that in our discussions we would not deviate from this

humanitarian objective while adopting a forward-looking and pragmatic approach to the medium-term challenges facing UNRWA in its five areas of operations (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Banks and Gaza).

The objectives of the Conference are reflected clearly in its title: “Meeting the humanitarian needs of the Palestine refugees in the Near East: building partnerships in support of UNRWA”. It is around these two key themes – meeting the needs and building partnerships – that the Conference's proceedings will be structured.

Today’s programme should allow us to better understand the scope and complexity of the Palestine refugees' humanitarian needs in a short and longer term perspective. In the four Workshops which will meet in parallel, and whose themes reflect priority concerns on the ground, we should seek to build a high degree of consensus on the key challenges facing Palestine refugees and on the main areas where humanitarian action is needed to address these challenges.

The Workshops' themes were chosen through the consultative process initiated in the field last autumn. They are: first, promoting the well-being of the Palestine refugee child; second community development and refugees; third, promoting the socio-economic development of Palestine refugees; and finally, conditions for the successful management and mobilisation of resources on behalf of Palestine refugees.

Basing their work on the excellent papers already produced in the course of the preparatory process, participants in the workshop will seek to finalise a set of concrete recommendations to be presented to the Conference tomorrow. The Workshops should also serve as an opportunity to build consensus among a broad range of stakeholders at different levels, on the best strategies to practically address the humanitarian challenges facing Palestine refugees in UNRWA's fields of operations.

On the basis of these inputs, discussions during the second day plenary of the Conference will be an occasion for the participants to identify policy lines which could form the framework of an agenda for building stronger partnerships in support of UNRWA.

Through their participation in the conference preparatory process conducted in the field, several of UNRWA's main stakeholders have been able to build a strong sense of ownership for the process which led up to this conference. It is that same strong sense of commitment and ownership we would like both to reinforce and share with the wider community represented here. This shared sense of ownership and the active participation of all concerned is indeed a condition for the success of this Conference and its follow-up.

Tomorrow's programme contains some innovative agenda items: the video-link to Palestine refugees in Jordan is one of these. The link should provide a window into their daily lives and lend a personal touch to our deliberations here in Geneva.

In the afternoon there will be a panel debate involving an open-floor discussion on the theme of: “Human security and economic progress: improving the lives of the Palestine refugees”. We are fortunate that several distinguished personalities have accepted the invitation to participate.

The Conference differs from standard international conferences in that it is not designed to conclude with the adoption of a final declaration. Rather, it is part of a dynamic tripartite process of cooperation and dialogue initiated several years ago between UNRWA, its donors and the host authorities for Palestine refugees. It shall be a privileged opportunity for us to engage in collective reflection and analysis on the best way to meet the needs of the Palestine refugees.

As such, the Conference is therefore not an end in itself, but a culminating stage in an ongoing process aimed at strengthening UNRWA, and a re-invigoration of this tripartite process with a new dynamic. I hope this dynamic will lead to sustained momentum for future progress. In recent years, this participative approach has already shown its potential when the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation took the initiative to bring together UNRWA and its major donors in Montreux in December 1998. That meeting led to the adoption of a management reform plan for UNRWA. A similar second meeting was organized in Lausanne in December 2000 with the objective of responding rapidly to the emergency funding needs arising from the tragic humanitarian situation then prevailing in the refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. It is inspired by these positive experiences that we took

the decision to convene this conference in Geneva to further support UNRWA's existing mandate to provide essential services to Palestine refugees until a just and comprehensive solution has been found in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions.

The outcomes of the Conference will take the form of a Chairman's summary, in which I will endeavour to summarise the proceedings of the Conference and its key recommendations. This summary will hopefully serve as an orientation framework for future action that sets out the main elements of a common agenda. My wish is that this Conference will lead to a renewed global commitment to UNRWA and to the Palestine refugees.

For this to occur, this Conference must build on frank exchanges of views between the participants here present, with a view to dealing with the humanitarian issues before us in a pragmatic, forward-looking and solution-oriented manner. That is why I would kindly ask all participants to facilitate our collective task by being clear and concise when addressing the Conference and especially by participating actively in the discussions.

Mr Commissioner-General

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

We may be tempted to focus our attention on recent events in Gaza, whose tragic nature has been, I am sure, a matter of deep concern for us all. However, it would be important that we keep a comprehensive view of the Palestine refugees' situation in all five

of UNRWA's areas of operations that constitute the scope of this Conference. It will also be important that we zoom out from a narrow and short-term view and adopt a medium-term perspective on the challenges facing UNRWA.

How will we know if we have successfully achieved our objectives during this Conference? I think we will have to judge it as part of an overall process that I expect will mainly bear fruit over the medium-term. Agreeing on a set of practical recommendations of high quality that allow UNRWA to better carry out its role is one yardstick of success; increased and more stable financial contributions to UNRWA, including through the widening of UNRWA's donor base, is another. In the medium term, we will have made progress if this Conference leads to stronger partnerships between UNRWA, the host authorities, donors and partner agencies. But most of all, we will have been successful if this Conference and the process it is part of lead to a tangible improvement in the living conditions and life expectations of Palestine refugees.

In taking up this challenge, the city of Geneva, with its long humanitarian tradition, can serve as a fitting backdrop as we discuss how best to move forward on this common front. Geneva is a symbol both of the humanitarian character of this event and of the hope of a better future that UNRWA and its partners, including all the actors represented here, can bring to the lives of the Palestine refugees. Additionally, I think that the location of the Conference in Geneva is an opportunity for UNRWA to reach out to a wider diplomatic and humanitarian community.

Finally, I thank you all very much for your participation, which shows your commitment, and through your presence, the commitment of the international community, to helping meet the needs of the Palestine refugees in the Near East. I am confident that this Conference will be a decisive step towards achieving that goal.

Thank you.