

High-Level Conference

“Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Building Partnerships in Support of UNRWA”

International Conference Centre, Geneva: Tuesday, 8 June 2004

Commissioner-General’s Closing Remarks

Ambassador Fust,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Mr. Chairman: Your thoughtful and comprehensive summary of what has taken place here over the past two days does justice both to the contents and the spirit of our deliberations.

As everyone seems to agree, this has not only been an extraordinarily productive conference. It has also succeeded magnificently in its stated goals. Let me remind everyone what these were at the outset.

- To reach out to a wider constituency of interested countries and international institutions, to inform and educate them on what Francophones would call the *problematique* of the Palestine refugees;
- To develop a common understanding of the priority needs of the refugees, and the best ways to meet them, looking ahead over the next five years;
- To break free of the short-term outlook that has, of necessity, hobbled the Agency’s planning, due to chronic funding shortfalls and the crisis of the past almost four years in the West Bank and Gaza Strip;
- To build new tripartite partnerships between the Agency, host authorities and donors; and
- To lay the foundations for renewed financial commitments to the Agency, commensurate with or needs. It should be evident from what we have heard at this Conference that the needs are greater than our recent budgets have allowed.

I was very happy to hear about the unexpected pledges of new financial support that we heard this morning, during an unscheduled extra agenda item arranged at the last minute, in response to your wishes. It was especially gratifying to hear from those that have not been traditional donors like Algeria and the OPEC Fund, and from major donors like Spain which today signaled its willingness – once again – to stand fully by our side.

As you know, this was never intended to be a pledging conference. But, I hope and believe it has served the useful purpose of focusing the minds of high-level policymakers from capitals, working in the humanitarian and development fields, on the Palestine refugee question. From what I have heard here today, this should – although I am not obsessed with the subject - translate into substantial new money, which is badly needed, in the near future. Hopefully this commitment will be sustained over the long-haul, in line with the needs expressed in our Medium Term Plan. I thank you all.

There is no need for me to recapitulate on the common themes that have emerged during the past two days' discussions. What was striking to me, however, was the breadth of agreement on the nature of the problems and what needs to be done. These are just a few highlights:

- You want us to improve our planning and analytical capabilities.
- You want us to strengthen our data collection and dissemination capacity.
- You want us to improve the quality of our service delivery, particularly in those areas where we have slipped behind in recent years;
- You want us to adopt an equitable, inclusive and comprehensive approach, one which ensures that scarce donor resources will be used as efficiently as possible; and
- You want us to make sure that this Conference is not the last word, and that there is a proper follow-up.

What all of us are also keen to see is that the substance and nature of our discussions, exemplified by yesterday's workshops, is also maintained. How we talk to each other is almost as important as what we say.

All I can add to these, and other, shared aspirations is: I fully agree.

Tomorrow, at the follow-up meeting, I hope we can translate those aspirations into concrete steps, to address the simple question: Where do we go from here?

Let's build on that energy and buzz of excitement that has made its way from the region, where we started out on our preparatory process, to Geneva, and now let's take it back again there – to where the real work is being done every day, in the schools, clinics and refugee camps. Let's not lose sight of the Geneva dimension. We will continue to work closely with you here in Geneva, the humanitarian capital of the world.

No doubt, in future years we will look back on this Conference as a landmark in the life of the Agency. With your strong support – today, tomorrow and the day after – we will also hopefully look back on Geneva as the start of a renaissance for UNRWA: a new age in which Palestine refugees are as well equipped as anyone in the region to stand on their own feet, and fulfill their ambitions and dreams. After 54 years, we owe it to them not to lose faith in this noble task.

I look forward to greeting some, hopefully most, of you again in Amman when we reassemble in late September for our regular meeting of donors and host countries.

Thank you for your attention; thank you for coming to this special Conference, and working so hard to make it a success; and

Thank you, Ambassador Fust, for making it possible.