



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

Geneva 7-8 June 2004

MESSAGE from

Micheline Calmy-Rey

**Federal Councillor
Minister of Foreign Affairs**

Excellencies
Mr. Commissioner-General of UNRWA
Ladies and Gentlemen

Unfortunately, I could not be with you today to welcome you to Geneva, on behalf of the Swiss Government, and to take part in your deliberations. However I would like to share with you, through this message, a few of my thoughts on the subject of this conference, a subject which is constantly on my mind.

First of all, let me say what an honour it is for Switzerland to host this extraordinary conference organised jointly by UNRWA and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and prepared carefully with the active participation of several countries and organisations. The conference aims to increase understanding for the nature and the extent of the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian refugees and to win greater support for activities that UNRWA and other humanitarian actors are implementing in response. Because of its long tradition of humanitarian commitment, Switzerland wanted to associate itself actively with this project.

For more than 50 years, UNRWA has been active in providing the necessary assistance for the survival of Palestinian refugees who today number more than four million. To be able to continue developing its activities, UNRWA needs the determined support of the international community, both on the political and financial levels.

The UNRWA mandate is unique; unique in its duration, nature, scope and diversity of its responsibilities. Indeed, this diversity includes such sectors as education, health, social action and development; responsibilities which are normally allocated to government agencies. For an idea of the extent of these activities, you simply have to recall that 500,000 Palestinian children attend classes each day in the 600 UNRWA-administered schools in the

five regions of the Middle East where it operates and that its staff, recruited from the refugee population, today number around 24,000.

The complexity of the UNRWA mission is due in no small part to the particular political and security situation in which it operates. But added to this major challenge is the necessity for UNRWA to be able to act both in extremely urgent situations as well as in circumstances calling for a medium or long-term approach, such as development, socio-economic action, education, professional training and health.

To conduct such a wide range of tasks, it is obvious that solutions must be found through partnerships with other humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies or with non-governmental organisations in the region with the capacity to offer constructive support. This strategy must also be able to count on the support and cooperation of the host countries where the Palestinian refugees are located. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my heartfelt thanks to those governments of the region who have shown such solidarity in their assistance to the refugees.

It seems to me that the theme of this conference, "Building partnerships in support of UNRWA", takes on its full import in this context. I hope this conference will be an event where these partnerships are encouraged, where existing partnerships are consolidated and where new ones are established in a positive and innovative spirit.

As concerns the increase in operational capacity on the ground, which unfortunately is always a priority, the notion of partnership involves a convergence of complementary skills. UNRWA must be able to count on the international community to offer support which is broad and strong.

My fervent wish is that this conference offers a sign of hope to the refugees. This conference must look to the future and not to the past. It must confirm in the minds of the refugees that there is also a future for them and their children; a better and peaceful future. We are preparing for this future by working together to make UNRWA action stronger. I know that the reports which served as the bases for the workshop discussions yesterday, as well as the medium-term plan developed by UNRWA, contain innovative and dynamic proposals. I hope that they will find their place in the conclusions of your deliberations and that they can then be translated into concrete action.

There is one final point on which I would like to dwell a moment. The organizers of this conference have made a point of stressing its humanitarian character. They said that this conference was not linked to the diplomatic initiatives trying to reach a just and durable solution to a conflict which has gone on for too long. Indeed, it is important that this humanitarian dimension and its priority on the rights of the individual is focussed on the refugee question at this conference.

Nevertheless it would be wrong to conclude from these remarks that humanitarian and political concerns are irreconcilable. Quite the opposite, I am convinced that the humanitarian dimension is an essential complement to political reflection and action.

That is why it is so important for the conference today to make the voice of humanity heard and to exercise it to the fullest concerning the issue of Palestinian refugees. It is vital that this voice is raised strongly. Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, our world must learn to construct peace by basing it on the values of humanity. This is crucial to your efforts here today and I thank you for having understood this.