



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

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CHAIRMAN'S SUMMARY

Ambassador Walter Fust

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Excellencies
Mr Commissioner-General
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to conclude the proceedings of this Conference. A comprehensive report should soon be available, and I hope it will reflect well the spirit and substance of our debates during the past two days.

As Chairman of this Conference, I would like to briefly highlight our main achievements and comment on the outcomes of this important two-day meeting.

Allow me first to recall the key objectives set for this event:

- To build awareness of the humanitarian needs of Palestine refugees in the Near East, a human dimension of the Middle East crisis too often obscured by political and security considerations;
- To provide an opportunity for decision-makers from governments to take a more in-depth and medium-term look at the challenges faced by UNRWA in delivering crucial services to the refugees;
- To create a privileged occasion for UNRWA to reach out to a wider diplomatic audience in Geneva considering that its role, concerns and challenges remain little known outside the region where it operates; and for UNRWA to build new or strengthen existing partnerships, including with Geneva-based agencies;
- To produce recommendations on the strengthening of UNRWA's capacity to provide essential assistance and, where applicable, protection for Palestine refugees;
- To enhance the dynamic process of dialogue and partnership initiated a few years among UNRWA, its donors, the host authorities and its other partners in the field which led to the convening of this Conference;
- To widen UNRWA's donor base through the participation and commitment of new partners to the process.

During the last two days we have endeavoured to creatively link an interactive and participative discussion here in Geneva to the realities in the region. This has been an innovative feature of this Conference, which started its work with the convening of four parallel Workshops during the first day.

In the same participative spirit, a live video-link was established with some Palestine refugees in Amman, providing a brief snapshot of their day-to-day world. I believe that this has had the benefit of permitting Conference participants to listen directly to the voices of a few of the refugees we seek to assist.

We have seen during the preparation of this Conference that the situation of the Palestine refugees remains a source of great concern deserving renewed attention from the international community. In fact, over the last decade there has been a constant deterioration in living conditions in the whole of the region, and especially in the West Bank and Gaza since the beginning of the second *Intifada* in September 2000.

Donor contributions have not matched UNRWA's increasing requirements. These requirements have continued to rise due to the demographic growth of the Palestine refugee population, to the rise in extreme poverty in that population, and to a wider process of deterioration of the political, economic and security conditions in the

region. Successive years of under-funding have had a negative effect on UNRWA's service-delivery capacity. Education programmes and health services have both been negatively affected in all five geographical areas of UNRWA's operations. There is therefore an urgent need to provide UNRWA with the necessary means to reverse this trend.

The difficulties faced by the refugees are fortunately not of the same magnitude throughout the Near East. As stated in UNRWA's 2003 Annual Report, refugees in Jordan enjoy Jordanian citizenship rights and have access to employment opportunities in both the public and private sectors. In Syria, Palestine refugees have access to government assistance and services while in Lebanon they still face restrictions, which impact negatively on their socio-economic well being.

The situation of greatest concern as regards to Palestine refugees is in the occupied Palestinian territory, where they face the negative impacts of a protracted conflict. They are at times exposed to cross-fire, major loss of life, damage to property, and difficulties in gaining access to essential services provided by UNRWA or the Palestinian Authority. This has contributed to a general context of deep economic crisis leading to spiralling levels of poverty for large parts of the population.

Work in the Conference Workshops enabled us to come up with some encouraging approaches and solutions to the challenges faced by the Palestine refugee population. Discussions dealt with major substantive issues. Workshop participants were able to identify key problems facing UNRWA and the Palestine refugees and to analyse many of the critical issues that require urgent attention. The workshops formulated joint recommendations on how to best address those important humanitarian issues in the areas where action is required.

We are grateful to UNRWA Commissioner-General Mr Peter Hansen for his frank and thoughtful keynote address this morning. We also heard excellent oral reports on the deliberations in yesterday's workshops by their respective Chairpersons. In the afternoon we witnessed a rich and lively panel discussion with distinguished participants, putting into perspective the complexity of the challenges the international community is facing in its endeavour to respond to the needs of the Palestine refugees.

I believe that this Conference has clearly demonstrated that partnership is a key element in the humanitarian response to the needs of the Palestine refugees. It is therefore essential to further enhance this partnership between UNRWA, its donors, the host countries, UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations present in the field. While UNRWA is the key actor for Palestine refugees, further strengthening its cooperation with all service providers should be encouraged. The point was made that UNRWA's action would benefit from better integration into the UN system and closer links with its relevant agencies.

Among the many themes we touched upon, the following have been identified as key issues in our deliberations, requiring priority attention and sustained action:

1. Ensuring better respect for **International Humanitarian Law** was underlined as being a collective responsibility of the international community. It was considered to be an essential condition for the creation of a safe environment for the delivery of services to Palestine refugees and for the protection of the integrity of UNRWA staff. The events that recently took place in *Rafah* have underlined once more the extreme vulnerability of the Palestine refugees living in the occupied Palestinian territory, and have served to remind us of

the urgent imperative of ensuring effective protection for the Palestine refugees and for the civilian population more generally.

2. **Access** was identified as a priority and cross-cutting concern. It was noted that UNRWA's task would become impossible unless major improvements are achieved with regard to full, safe and unfettered access. It was furthermore noted that increased financial contributions could only have a real and lasting impact on this basis. Similarly, stakeholders have expressed concern as to restrictions that hinder refugees' access to UNRWA's services and disrupt economic activities.
3. In more a general context **protection** was raised as a central theme in many discussions, although UNRWA does not have a specific protection mandate. Participants stressed that detailed data and research about the present protection needs, in particular of vulnerable groups, including children, is required. Relevant and disaggregated data covering violence, abuse and exploitation should therefore be compiled and analyzed. Social workers, teachers, medical personnel and other relevant staff should be given the means to carry out their professional duties in good conditions. Participants particularly stressed the need to ensure that the rights of the child, as contained in relevant Conventions, form the foundation and permanent reference for interventions and assistance provided to Palestine refugee children. In this regard, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the norms it contains should guide the work of UNRWA and the international community.
4. Participants expressed great concern with regards to large scale destruction of infrastructure and housing which have recently caused emergency situations, particularly in Gaza. As a consequence, UNRWA faces the challenge of stepping up efforts to provide **emergency re-housing**, which has become an important component of its emergency operations. Participants were of the firm opinion that the question of responsibility for such destructions has to be addressed. At the same time, several participants called for adequate funds to be made available by donors for UNRWA' emergencies activities.
5. **Improving housing and infrastructure in refugee camps** should be given higher priority with a view to addressing overcrowding, poor environmental and sanitary conditions, and a lack of recreational space. The *Neirab* re-housing project in Syria could serve as a reference pilot project in this context.
6. **Education** was considered key for ensuring a better future for Palestine refugee children and youth. Participants placed heavy emphasis on improving the physical infrastructure of schools, the learning conditions for children and the working conditions for UNRWA teachers.
7. **Health care** was identified as an area in which UNRWA does remarkably well. However, participants felt that the available statistics may not give an accurate picture of the health status of Palestine refugees, in particular in the occupied Palestinian territory, with respect to the mental and psycho-social health of refugee children.
8. **Community development** came up as a topic requiring a comprehensive and innovative approach. It was suggested that an effective system of data

collection and implementation indicators be established to identify gaps and monitor progress as a management tool in the planning process. Participants furthermore underlined the importance of working towards equity as regards the quality of services provided to refugees in comparison to those enjoyed by resident communities.

9. **Employment creation and income generation**, as well as **access to microfinance and credit**, were identified as, respectively, efficient tools and important prerequisites for addressing economic hardship and for enhancing a developmental approach to socio-economic challenges. The participants underlined the importance of creating the necessary additional capacity to cater to refugee youth in the field of skills development and vocational training that will help them access modern labour markets.

Many participants referred to the generosity of host countries towards Palestine refugees and UNRWA, and commented on the generally excellent partnership and collaboration between UNRWA and host countries.

In terms of management issues, several useful suggestions were formulated and addressed to UNRWA, among which:

- Improve needs analysis through collection and updating and sharing of relevant data regarding refugees' needs;
- Improve planning in order to increase capacity for rapid response;
- Enhance efforts aimed at widening the donor base, mobilising funding contributions from new sources, including in the private sector;
- Develop within UNRWA a stronger operational coordinating capacity such as through the setting up of a coordination unit;
- Strengthen UNRWA's partnerships with its stakeholders, by building on or adapting existing management structures, and by pursuing with partners a joint reflection on the optimizing coordination structures;
- Develop a more dynamic communication strategy.

I would like to reiterate here what I said in my opening statement: this Conference is not an end in itself, since it is part of a dynamic process of cooperation and dialogue initiated several years ago between UNRWA, its donors and the host authorities. I am very pleased to note that many participants expressed the desire for a follow-up to this Conference.

We must indeed enhance and sustain our efforts in view of achieving the goals we have set ourselves here today in support of UNRWA's mandate. I am therefore pleased that, tomorrow already, members of the Core Group - composed of representatives of UNRWA, donors, host countries, the PLO and UN agencies - who have helped to shape this event, will be meeting here in Geneva to discuss how to ensure a dynamic follow up to our recommendations.

Furthermore, considering that many of our recommendations match and complement the proposals contained in the UNRWA Medium Term Plan that still needs to be discussed with its main stakeholders, I would like to suggest that they be integrated into the Plan and, similarly, be reflected in the Annual Report presented by UNRWA to the UN General Assembly. This will ensure that this Conference's conclusions and recommendations are also brought to the attention of the whole international community.

I would also like to underline that this Conference was convened to send a positive signal of our common and sustained concern for the Palestine refugees at a moment when the peace process shows little prospect of an imminent positive development.

To the Palestine refugees we say: you will not be abandoned. Your active participation here and the level of your delegations sends a strong signal that the international community, along with UNRWA and the host countries, remain determined to continue supporting UNRWA's essential role until a just and lasting solution is found to the question of the Palestine refugees based on UN resolutions. Therefore this Conference also intends to be the starting point of a new humanitarian mobilisation in support of the Palestine refugees.

At his point I would like to take the opportunity to thank UNRWA, its management and staff for their dedicated and courageous work for the Palestine refugees.

Finally, I would like to thank very warmly all those in the region of the Near East and here in Geneva who have played an active part in the preparation and organisation of this Conference. Your contribution has been essential to bringing the Conference to a successful conclusion.

Thank you.