



Meeting the Humanitarian Needs  
of the Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Building Partnerships in Support of UNRWA

Geneva 7-8 June 2004

## PRESS RELEASE

### Geneva Conference Declares: The Palestine Refugees Will Not Be Abandoned

The two-day conference addressing the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian refugees has made a solemn declaration on behalf of the international community – you will not be abandoned. Delegates from over 91 countries and organisations committed the international community, UNRWA and the host countries to the continuing support of the four million refugees scattered across the Middle East.

During the course of the conference, which was hosted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and chaired by Ambassador Walter Fust, participants touched upon a series of key issues which they deemed as priority areas requiring attention and long-term development. Among these issues were the need for the respect for international humanitarian law, freedom of movement for refugees and improved efforts on community development and access to employment.

Several of the delegates stressed a need for detailed information about the present protection needs of vulnerable groups, in particular children. International humanitarian law was considered to be an essential condition for ensuring a safe environment for the delivery of services to Palestinian refugees and for protecting the integrity of UNRWA. Moreover, participants placed a heavy emphasis on improving the physical infrastructure of schools and applauded UNRWA for achievements it had made in the area of health care.

During the course of the discussions, presentations were made by refugee school children and community representatives, via a video link to Amman, Jordan, who echoed their concerns and needs to the Geneva audience. Among their expressions were for peace and stability in their region.

Although the meeting was not a pledging conference, financial pledges were also made by some delegations in the amount of 10.5 million US dollars. These pledges came from the governments of Algeria, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland and the UK and from the OPEC Fund for International Development. France, Sweden, Norway, the European Commission and the United States all announced that they would make additional financial pledges shortly.

In a keynote speech to the conference, Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General for UNRWA, recalled the creation of his Agency as a temporary programme to deal with refugees who had lost their homes and livelihood in that part of Mandatory Palestine which became the State of Israel. Some 55 years later, UNRWA was still working with a mandate to provide relief and works assistance and support to a Palestinian refugee population which had grown to 4 million registered refugees. Over the decades, in the face of wars, conflict and ensuring turbulence, UNRWA had to deal with waves of first-time, second-time and third-time refugees. At times, financial contributions had not covered even the minimal needs of UNRWA. These shortfalls affected the refugee community in many ways and were a massive violation of the principles of humanitarian relief. Among other things, it led to setbacks in the benefits and achievements gained slowly and painstakingly over the years and furthered the perception in the refugee community that the world paid less attention to their claims and needs.

The situation in which UNRWA, and Palestinian refugee communities, found themselves in today, should be seen in the context of an inexorable and escalating worsening in their daily lives.

Jean Marc Boulgaris, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations Office at Geneva, delivered a message on behalf of the Micheline Calmy-Rey, Federal Counselor and Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, which underscored the purpose of the conference to raise awareness about the needs and hope of the Palestinian refugees and to rally support for UNRWA and other key actors to meet those needs. For more than 50 years, UNRWA had been supporting these needs yet it still needed the support of the international community, both politically and financially. The Agency's mandate was unique given its diversity of responsibilities in areas covering education, health services and in providing a host of social services.

Some 500,000 Palestinian children went to school every day in schools administered by UNRWA, the message recalled. The Agency's mission was made all the more difficult given the political and security conditions in the region. Partnerships with international agencies and with NGOs were invaluable in order for UNRWA to carry out its tasks. The topic of this conference was particularly meaningful in that it expressed the hope that these partnerships would be strengthened further. Moreover, the conference must provide an opportunity to the refugees to believe in a better and peaceful future for themselves and their children and was paving the way to build that road to the future.

In conclusion, Ms. Calmy-Rey highlighted the important role the conference had to give priority to human rights in a humanitarian dimension while expressing the hope that the voice of the conference be heard loud and clear.

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