



UNRWA

Press Release

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Switzerland and UNRWA to Host Major Conference on Humanitarian Assistance to Palestine Refugees

Geneva – The Swiss Government and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) announced today that they are to host a unique conference in Geneva in June to discuss the future of humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees.

More than five decades after they first lost their homes, millions of Palestine refugees continue to live lives of hardship and poverty across the Middle East. Now, for the first time in 54 years, an estimated 65-70 countries and inter-governmental organisations will gather together to plan humanitarian and human development strategies for the 4.1 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA. The conference will discuss these issues without prejudice to the refugees' status or to any future political agreement.

UNRWA's 24,000 staff, almost all of them refugees themselves, provide education, healthcare, social services and emergency aid to over four million refugees living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

The two-day meeting, which will be held on 7-8 June, will be jointly hosted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and UNRWA at the International Conference Centre in Geneva (CICG). Invitations will be issued to senior officials from Capitals.

In advance of the conference, four thematic groups have been established under the leadership of individual countries and major international organizations to propose future initiatives. These groups cover: Palestine refugee children; housing, infrastructure and the environment in Palestine refugee camps; refugee participation in regional economic development and the management and mobilization of resources on behalf of the refugees.

The first day of the conference will be composed of four all-day workshops on the above themes with the aim of producing concrete conclusions and recommendations. The second day will see an address from the Swiss Minister for Foreign Affairs, a live link to refugees speaking from a school in Jordan and a high-level panel debate on improving the lives of the Palestine refugees. The conference will conclude with a summary of the key proposals from the workshops and a final declaration.

UNRWA, whose regular cash and in-kind budget for 2004 is set at US\$350 million, is funded by voluntary contributions and has for years suffered from a shortfall in its finances. This has led to deteriorating infrastructure and slipping standards of shelter, healthcare and education for the refugees. The aim of the Geneva conference is to have the international donor community play a part in planning for the future humanitarian development of the refugees and in so doing, commit themselves to the future funding of those plans.

Peter Hansen, UNRWA's Commissioner-General said: "Over the past decades, the Palestine refugees have proven themselves resilient, but they continue to need help so that they can help themselves. UNRWA sees this conference as a way of raising the profile of their plight and of charting the best way to help them make full use of their human potential."

*For more information contact Matthias Burchard on +41 22 917 1166
or Paul McCann on +972 59 428 008 or Sami Mshasha on +972 2 589 0408*