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HR/VP speeches

Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Ministerial Conference on UNRWA

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Rome, 15 March 2018

Check against delivery!

We are here in Rome to send two strong messages. Firstly, that the work of UNRWA is important and must be preserved. Second, to support this work concretely. We care, because it is a moral duty but also a self-interest.

The situation in the Middle East is extremely volatile and we can't afford even greater destabilisation.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is taking care of millions of people. Preserving and supporting UNRWA is not just a matter of humanity. It is also our strategic interest, for the sake of peace and security in the Middle East, and our own security.

UNRWA is of crucial importance for at least three reasons: for the future of all Palestine refugees, for the viability of the two-state solution, for stability and security in the region.

First: a sudden stop of UNRWA's services in all fields of operation, not least in Gaza, would be incredibly dangerous. More than seven hundred schools would likely not open anymore after the summer break, and hospitals would be much less operational. Palestine refugees would probably lose their hope for the future. And when people lose hope, they often become an easy target for the propaganda of terrorist groups.

Second: UNRWA is essential for Palestinian State building, and for the very perspective of a two-state solution.

There can be no State without schools, hospitals and vocational training. Moreover, a just, agreed and realistic solution to the refugee question is one of the key elements for peace. And the two-state solution is still the only viable path towards peace and security for both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Third: UNRWA's work contributes to regional stability. UNRWA takes care of Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere. We truly don't need a new refugee crisis or even worse. Tensions, turmoil and even worse violence in an already difficult regional context.

UNRWA's curricula provide for specialised training courses to raise awareness of extremism, terrorism and incitement. Without UNRWA, young Palestine refugees would be much more exposed to radicalisation. I've visited myself UNRWA schools in Gaza. I've met the children, their parents, the teachers. I've seen how much hope is built around books and classes.

And as a parent, everyone understands that a school is much more than "just" education, which is anyway the essence of life: schools are the backbone of a community, a society. Do we really understand the danger that opening such a vacuum would represent? Do we want to see the blue of the UN flags replaced by other colors?

There is also a high risk that the daily conditions for 5 million Palestine refugees become so intolerable that they decide to leave the region. Think about what happened in 2015, when funding cuts to the World Food Programme pushed so many to leave their homes in the Middle East alone, and many more worldwide.

The European Union and its Member States contribute to about half of UNRWA's budget. The European Commission has just signed an agreement to anticipate our annual contribution of €82 million. The money is leaving our accounts today. And we have committed ourselves to contribute to UNRWA at a similar level for the next two years. As predictability of funding is key, also for a good planning and managing of resources.

So the EU is doing its part, as always. We call on others to do the same. Today we should call to potential new supporters of UNRWA. But also contributing countries to check whether each and every one of you cannot increase their sponsorship. And even more importantly, I call on those who have cut funding to rethink their decision.

It is also important that UNRWA becomes more efficient in how it manages its resources: so let me thank the UNRWA leadership for all the work they have done on this in recent months and years.

Preserving UNRWA is our own interest. I trust that the international community will keep in mind what our common interest is: guaranteeing not just good food but also education for the Palestinians, preventing further exposure to radicalisation and avoiding yet another escalation of tensions in our fragile region, in our complicated world.

Thank you.

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