



Virtual Event on the Question of Palestine

“The COVID-19 pandemic in Gaza and ways to mitigate its impact on Palestine refugees”

**The Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People in
conversation with Mr. Matthias Schmale, UNRWA Director of Operations in Gaza**

14 April 2020

CHAIR SUMMARY

The Event on **“The COVID-19 pandemic in Gaza and ways to mitigate its impact on Palestine refugees”** was convened virtually, on 14 April, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP).

The one-hour Event consisted of a conversation between the Bureau of the Committee and Mr. Matthias Schmale, the Director of Operations in Gaza of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA). It addressed current developments in the occupied Gaza Strip, the latter’s preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic, the assistance to Palestine refugees in the Strip provided through UNRWA and the need for continued international resolve to support the Agency including with emergency funding. The Event was streamed live on the Committee’s official Facebook page.

At the opening, the **Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Cheikh Niang (Senegal)**, shared a brief history of the Committee and its mandate, stressing that it was in such challenging times that the international community needed to rally its support and solidarity.

Mr. Matthias Schmale shed light on the set of challenges in Gaza during the COVID-19 pandemic. Against the background of years of Israeli blockade, Mr. Schmale’s main concerns were Gaza’s population density, dilapidated economy and inadequate health infrastructure. He informed that there were no cases of infection in the local community; those infected had come from overseas and had been placed under quarantine. He emphasized that an outbreak in Gaza’s crowded refugee camps would swiftly overwhelm Gaza’s health care system and cause an unprecedented health crisis. There was a concern that in case of an outbreak Israel would close Gaza completely. UNRWA had taken mitigating measures to prevent the virus from spreading to the local community; shared examples included converting some schools into health posts and extending UNRWA’s primary health care services to the population at large and not only to refugees. The local authorities had also closed mosques and other places of congregation.

During the Event's interactive section and responding to questions from **Ambassador Dian Tianshan Adjani (Indonesia)**, Mr. Schmale underlined that UNRWA, as the United Nations system, was aligned with the Palestinian Government's response plan for the pandemic, complementing it with public health messaging through UNRWA's Palestinian staff, for example. He expressed concern about a possible tightening of the blockade should an outbreak take place, which may not be effective in countering the pandemic but would be devastating for the economy of the Strip.

Responding to **Ambassador Ana Silvia Rodríguez (Cuba)**, Mr. Schmale emphasized that contributions to Gaza could also be in the form of technical expertise and stressed the importance of solidarity as referenced by the Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General and the World Health Organization. Referring to UNRWA's role, he stressed that the Agency was "driven by its mandate" and that it "exists because there is no just solution for the people of Palestine".

Addressing questions from **Ambassador Adela Raz (Afghanistan)**, Mr. Schmale underlined that the economy in Gaza had been collapsing even before COVID-19, with unemployment as high as 50 per cent, and for those below 30 years of age as high as 70 per cent. He called for international solidarity to convince the occupying Power to lift the blockade, concluding that "if you want to help Gaza, lift the blockade." Mr. Schmale added that UNRWA's core funding for Gaza would last until May and maybe June 2020. If Gaza's total collapse were to be avoided, funding for COVID-19 measures should not detract funding for UNRWA's other operations.

In response to **Counsellor Julia Imene-Chanduru (Namibia)**, Mr. Schmale noted that UNRWA was part of the Occupied Palestinian Territory appeal, facilitated by UN Resident Coordinator and Development and Humanitarian Coordinator, and that the response rate for the first round of the appeals had been fairly positive with 80 per cent being funded. As for UNRWA's own appeal, Mr. Schmale stressed that while the initial response was positive, the question was not just about resources but about availability of protective equipment, for example.

Ambassador Riyad Mansour (Palestine) noted that Palestine's relationship with the occupation authorities was limited to technical coordination and was not cooperation. Israel was forced to deal with Palestinians because it occupied their land.

Mr. Schmale concluded that for Gaza it was not a matter of international aid, but of occupation, as it relied on a highly educated population that was innovative, resilient, entrepreneurial and able to turn the Strip into a prosperous place if the blockade were lifted.

The virtual Event was closed by the Chair.

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****Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the virtual Event. A video of the Event can be found on the webpage of the CEIRPP, www.un.unispal.org as well as in its official Facebook page and YouTube account.*