



## VIRTUAL EVENT

### ***“Delivering Critical Assistance for Palestine Refugees: Challenges and Opportunities in a Complex Context”***

**Briefing by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) convened by the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP)**

**Wednesday, 7 April 2021**

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### **CHAIR SUMMARY**

The virtual briefing took place on 7 April 2021, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP). The event was moderated by H.E. Ambassador Cheikh Niang, Chair of the Committee and Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations. It consisted of an opening session with remarks by H.E. Ambassador Cheikh Niang, H.E. Ambassador Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, Mr. Khaled Khiari, Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific, UN Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, and H.E. Mr. Volkan Bozkır, President of the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly (by video recording). The panel of speakers comprised of Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA and Ms. Gwyn Lewis, Director of UNRWA Operations in the West Bank.

The briefing was open to all Member States on WebEx and the public, who participated in the two-hour event live via UNTV and UN social media channels and had an opportunity to make comments and pose questions to the panellists.

At the opening, **the Chair** welcomed the participants and noted how the Committee, throughout its existence, had provided strong, unwavering support to UNRWA and that the briefing event was continuing this partnership. Tasked with a General Assembly mandate, for the past 71 years, to provide protection, relief and social services, education, health services, and economic assistance to Palestinian refugees, UNRWA's essential role had been long recognised by the international community. He mentioned that UNRWA needed all means of support – financial, material, political – to continue delivering on the mandate that the United Nations had tasked the Agency with. He reiterated the Committee's commitment to UNRWA and called upon all Member States to join this noble effort.

**Ambassador Mansour** thanked the Committee for organizing the event and UNRWA for its tireless efforts and invaluable work for the Palestinian people, particularly considering the increasingly difficult conditions due to the occupation and the COVID-19 pandemic. The briefing was an opportunity for the international community to reaffirm its support for the rights of the Palestine refugees and mobilize political and financial support for UNRWA. Ambassador Mansour hinted that according to the press and as a follow-up to the US statement to the Security Council briefing of 25 March 2021 on resumption of support, the US Administration would soon announce a humanitarian aid package to UNRWA of US\$150 million. If confirmed, the US support would help the Agency to deliver critical humanitarian and livelihood services to Palestine refugees during the incoming months.

**Mr. Khaled Khiari** highlighted the need to share collective ownership of UNRWA and responsibility toward the Palestinians until the achievement of a just and viable political solution to the conflict. He further described the gathering as an opportunity to better understand UNRWA's challenges and express collective solidarity with the Agency. UNRWA was one of the few sources of hope to millions of Palestine refugees and played a key role in maintaining regional stability. He cited UNRWA's budgetary crisis, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as putting at risk the education of half a million Palestine refugee boys and girls and health service across the region. He explained how the failure to achieve a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians remained the root cause of Palestine refugees' plight.

Mr. Khiari expressed deep concern at the continued illegal occupation of Palestinian territory and the denial of Palestinian inalienable rights that undermined the prospect of a two-State solution. He encouraged all supporters of the two-State solution to help Israel and Palestine to find a mutually agreeable framework to re-engage toward a negotiated, peaceful settlement. He further decried alleged "donor fatigue" on the question of Palestine refugees and called for investment in UNRWA that ensured sustainable, predictable, and sufficient funding. He welcomed efforts by Jordan and Sweden, in collaboration with UNRWA, to convene an International Conference later in the year to strengthen the international community's political and financial commitment to the Agency. Mr. Khiari noted that as the international community renewed efforts toward meaningful negotiations on the Israel-Palestine conflict, investing in UNRWA would contribute to generating peace dividends and be central to consolidating any agreed lasting peace as well as stability.

The statement of the President of the UN General Assembly (PGA), **Mr. Volkan Bozkır**, was presented as a video recording. The PGA noted that for over seven decades, Palestine refugees had suffered great hardship despite countless General Assembly resolutions. He indicated that resolving the situation of Palestine refugees was imperative for the achievement of justice and a lasting peace in the region. He further called on the international community to fulfil its legal and moral obligations and shared responsibility to support Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict according to relevant UN resolutions, international law, and long-standing international parameters for the Middle East Peace Process. This was the only way to end the occupation and achieve the vision of two independent, sovereign states living side by side, in peace and security, within recognized borders based on the pre-1967 lines.

Mr. Bozkir explained how UNRWA continued to play an essential role in alleviating the plight of Palestine refugees, including by providing quality education to more than 530,000 students, healthcare, increasing livelihood opportunities, and access to more than US\$531 million of microfinance loans since 1991. He commended UNRWA's crucial efforts to help to prevent and contain the spread of COVID-19 throughout its areas of operation. He expressed concern that despite UNRWA's vital and fundamental work, funding gaps continue due to rising needs resulting from the pandemic's detrimental impact on socio-economic and deteriorating humanitarian conditions. To make up for critical shortfalls in funding, UNRWA issued an appeal for US\$1.5 billion to support the provision of essential services, emergency appeals and priority projects for Palestine refugees in 2021 that needed the support of Member States. He called on all governments, organizations, and individuals to contribute generously at the upcoming international conference. He reminded participants that the question of Palestine is the most protracted-standing issue on the UN agenda and that Member States needed to prove that the UN can deliver when it was required.

**Mr. Philippe Lazzarini** outlined the extreme challenges in 2020 for Palestine refugees, with the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown hitting them hard and the communities' impoverishment deepened by decades of blockades, displacement, violation of basic rights, resulting in growing despair. On unemployment, he mentioned the plight of refugees in camps in Lebanon and Syria as well as in the West Bank and Gaza, where poverty was already high before the pandemic. Young people felt abandoned because reduced contributions to UNRWA in 2020 went down to the level of 2013, at a time when needs increased significantly. Palestine refugees across the region – who exclusively rely on UNRWA services – requested that the Agency do more at a time when its resources were even more limited. He cited how UNRWA reached a breaking point in November 2020, when it failed to pay the salaries to its staff, who nonetheless remained fully determined to maintain all the critical services. He expressed worry about the possibilities of deteriorating human development.

Going forward and despite the persistent challenges, Mr. Lazzarini noted cautious optimism and new opportunities in 2021. He welcomed the prospects of US resumption of assistance to UNRWA to restore a decade-long partnership with the Agency and the Palestine refugees. On how UNRWA had adapted to the difficult operating context, he talked about the digital transformation which allowed UNRWA, for example, to switch to telemedicine to reach all refugees during COVID-19 lockdown, to develop mobile phone health support apps, and to establish an Information Technology (IT) hub in Gaza - upon which the entire UN family relied - while creating new job opportunities for Palestinians. In addition, the Agency would also be launching the first online learning platform, allowing millions of students to continue their studies while schools remained closed due to the pandemic or the conflict.

Mr. Lazzarini confirmed that Jordan and Sweden would host an international conference later in 2021 to reengage the international community around UNRWA's blueprint for the years to come. UNRWA would need sufficient, predictable, and sustained funding to support its transformation into an Agency that can deliver on the mandate received from the UN General Assembly and in line with current times. He explained how the conference would be more than a pledging meeting, as it is aimed to move the Agency away from day-to-day crisis management towards sustainability until the day there is a lasting solution and a fair peace agreement. Mr.

Lazzarini also discussed how UNRWA would address its challenges in 2021, including how to overcome the continued financial difficulties despite hopes for new funding; rolling out a national vaccination campaign; efforts to continue to protect the mandate and rights of the Palestine refugees in the face of growing defamatory campaigns against the Agency; navigating the prevailing global economic struggles in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis to continue supporting Palestine refugees; maintaining its cost-effective, direct implementing model; and mobilizing Member States' full support ahead of the renewal of the Agency's mandate next year in 2022. He concluded by stating that Palestine refugees were a global responsibility until there is a just and lasting solution to their plight and stressed the Agency's temporary nature as long there was no such political agreement on the horizon.

**Ms. Gwyn Lewis** talked about challenges in 2020 that faced the Palestine refugees in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The situation was characterised by the threat of annexation, breakdown in cooperation between Palestine and Israel authorities and the COVID-19 pandemic that dramatically affected the Palestinian economy and people. She noted that 40 per cent of households in the West Bank had seen their incomes decline by more than half; unemployment in camps in the West Bank increased to 23 per cent and 49 per cent in Gaza; growing demand for food operations, etc. She outlined a parallel between house demolitions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and ongoing blockade in Gaza. The West Bank was currently facing a third wave of COVID-19 infections, while Gaza's situation was also getting worse. The Palestinian Authority vaccination campaign started in February 2021, with only 200,000 doses received for West Bank and Gaza. Israel had kicked off vaccination in March for Palestinians with permits to work inside Israel and for some UN staff. Ms. Lewis stressed the need for more support to assure swift access to COVID-19 vaccines by refugees.

She expressed concern at the disproportionate number of live ammunition injuries in the camps, the settler violence that has reached unprecedented numbers, and the increased number of home demolitions and continuing support for 35,000 injured in the third year since the "Great March of Return." She described the psychosocial and mental health conditions as a hidden pandemic in Gaza, while urging support for families exposed to elevated levels of violence and the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip. She concluded by highlighting some of UNRWA's achievements, including how the Agency succeeded in sustaining health services, assuring continuity in the education system through the quick shift to remote or blended learning modalities that benefitted about 320,000 students across the West Bank and Gaza, in clean schools with more teachers, and supplying door-to-door food assistance to one million beneficiaries during the lockdown.

During the **Question-and-Answer** session, representatives of **Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, and Turkey** made interventions in support of the rights of the Palestine refugees and their social welfare as well as in support of UNRWA. **Jordan** reaffirmed that His Majesty, King Abdullah had placed UNRWA at the top of Jordan's policy priorities to assure that the Agency be provided with the needed political and financial resources to carry out its duties, effectively and sustainably in accordance with its UN mandate. The panellists responded to questions from the floor and the public on resumption of US aid to UNRWA and transparency in education. **Ambassador Mansour** reiterated the Palestinian Authority acceptance of a Commission from United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to review education curricula in Palestine and Israel in response to continuing distortions and

defamatory claims in this regard. In response to a question on the treatment of human rights in the education curriculum, **Mr. Lazzarini** stated that UNRWA upheld the highest levels of neutrality and respect for human rights, strongly rejecting a “campaign of misinformation” alleging the promotion of hate in education materials and pointing to the Agency’s zero-tolerance policy for incitement to violence and discrimination.

In concluding remarks, **Mr. Lazzarini** stated that keeping all UNRWA services, investing in the human development of Palestine refugees and preventing despair in a volatile region brought a sense of normality and stability in the refugee community that also contributed to regional stability. A healthy UNRWA was a tribute to the international community to protect and assist Palestine refugees until there is a just and lasting solution to their plight, he added. **The Chair** concluded by thanking the speakers for taking the time to participate in the briefing, sharing valuable information and insights and answering all questions. He reiterated the call on all Members and Observers of the Committee, and on Member States at large to continue and enhance support for UNRWA, for Palestine refugees, within the framework of the larger support to the Palestinian people in their just quest to exercise their inalienable rights and realize a just and enduring solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Chair closed the event.

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*\*\*\*Note: 1]. 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](http://www.un.unispal.org) as well as in its official Facebook page and YouTube account. 2]. The views and opinions expressed in this summary are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.*