

*Permanent Observer Mission
of the State of Palestine
to the United Nations*



البعثة المراقبة الدائمة
لدولة فلسطين
لدى الأمم المتحدة

Statement by Ms. Feda Abdelhady-Nasser, Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, before Special Political and Decolonization Committee (4th Committee), Agenda Item 49: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 2 November 2016: (Check against delivery)

Mr. Chair,

At the outset, I wish to reaffirm Palestine's recognition of, and deep appreciation for, UNRWA's vital humanitarian work in support of the well-being, protection and development of the Palestine refugees for over nearly seven decades. This Agency's mandate constitutes a major component of the United Nations' permanent responsibility towards the question of Palestine until it is justly resolved in all aspects and the rights of the Palestinian people, including the Palestine refugees, are fulfilled, in accordance with rules and principles of international law and relevant UN resolutions, including resolutions 194 (III) and 302 (IV).

It is only such a just solution that will enable the Palestinian people to overcome the grave injustice they have endured for far too long and that will finally make Palestinian-Israeli peace a reality, so central for stability, security and peace in the Middle East and beyond.

I thank UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl for his important reports to the General Assembly and his sobering briefing today regarding the critical situation of the Palestine refugees and the Agency's ongoing financial crisis, as detailed in his 14 September 2016 report. We also thank Norway for presenting the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA. The challenges are clearly immense as persistent structural underfunding, recurrent financial shortfalls, and deteriorating socio-economic, humanitarian and security conditions are impairing the Agency's ability to respond to refugee needs and necessitating broader emergency interventions.

In this context, we recognize the Commissioner-General's adept leadership of the Agency in all fields of operation in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Occupied Palestine and his tireless outreach efforts. Moreover, we express appreciation for his compelling advocacy for the needs and rights of the Palestine refugees in these difficult times, marked by rising vulnerabilities and existential fears throughout a community whose cohesion is being torn asunder by the turmoil in the region and its far-reaching negative impact.

The reality is that the overwhelming majority of Palestine refugees have stayed in the region, close to home, for all of these years, awaiting a just solution to their plight. However, as regional conditions have precipitously declined, with conflicts raging around them, poverty rising, and hopes diminishing, more and more of our refugees have been compelled to leave the region in search of the human security and better life universally desired by all people. In this regard, the Commissioner-General has noted that there is "a deep sense of despair and insecurity that runs through the Palestine refugee community. Coupled with hopelessness and fear, amplified by the unresolved Palestine refugee question, many are joining the refugee exodus within the region and into Europe, often on perilous journeys".

In our interactive dialogue today, I therefore wish to ask the Commissioner-General to elaborate on this matter, including with regard to current statistics, if possible, and Agency interventions to address the specific vulnerabilities being experienced by the Palestine refugee population, including as a result of the Syria crisis, and to stabilize the community in this volatile period.

Mr. Chair,

As we renew appreciation to the Commissioner-General, Deputy Commissioner-General and Field Operations Directors, we also renew our gratitude today to UNRWA's entire staff, international and national, for implementing the Agency's mandate under challenging circumstances, including situations endangering their lives. We pay tribute to the lives of staff tragically lost over the years. We commend Agency staff for their daily provision of assistance to meet basic needs, while also promoting resilience among the refugees and preserving human dignity.

This includes the service of more than 30,000 national staff – Palestine refugees themselves who have been assisting their brethren as teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, administrators, emergency workers and more. They are a testament to the notion that refugees must not be seen as burdens, but rather that they can be agents for good in the societies and countries hosting them, pending achievement of just solutions. They are also testament to UNRWA's remarkable work in harmonizing humanitarian and development aid, which can serve as a model in this era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and following the momentous adoption of the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants.

Mr. Chair,

The Palestine refugees constitute nearly 25% of the world's refugee population, over 40% of the globe's long-term refugees, and the most protracted refugee crisis in contemporary times. They Over 5.3 million Palestine refugees are registered with UNRWA, dispersed throughout the region in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Occupied Palestine, including East Jerusalem, with millions of men, women and children still living in the fifty-nine refugee camps established following the onset of their plight in the 1948 *Al-Nakba*.

Their plight remains painful proof that unresolved conflicts do not simply dissipate or disappear with the passage of time, but are rather compounded and exacerbated in the absence of just solutions. In the long years of their exile and dispossession, the continued denial of their rights – including to return to live at peace with their neighbors and to compensation for their losses – has forced successive generations to endure great hardships, deprivation, marginalization, repeated displacement and violent crises.

But the story of the Palestine refugees is also one of resilience, and is most relevant at this time that we are witness to the largest movements of refugees and migrants since World War II. They, who have endured so many upheavals and misfortunes, remain resolute, adherent to their legitimate aspirations and convinced that international law and the arc of history will restore their rights. They have contributed broadly, positively and proudly to their people's steadfastness and in their communities in the Diaspora. As conveyed by Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah at the 19 September Summit on Refugees and Migrants, *"they share this spirit of hope and resilience with their refugee and migrant sisters and brothers around the world, including and especially in our troubled region, standing in solidarity with them in this moment of need, offering solace and support as they all seek and await just, peaceful solutions for their plights"*.

Mr. Chair,

While it has only been less than two months since the Summit and the General Assembly's adoption of the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, ongoing crises compel immediate follow-up. States are duty bound – politically, legally and morally – to uphold the commitments made in the NY Declaration; it is time to translate words into meaningful action to remedy the plight of the world's millions of refugees and migrants by providing them with needed humanitarian assistance, while at the same time exerting every possible effort to uphold their rights, in conformity with international law, including human rights law, humanitarian law and refugee law, and to address the root causes that have forced millions of people to leave the sanctity and safety of their homes and devastated so many lives.

The Palestine refugees cannot be the exception to the rights and commitments affirmed in that important Declaration. This includes the commitment made to "*actively promote durable solutions, particularly in protracted refugee situations, with a focus on sustainable and timely return in safety and dignity*" (paragraph 75). In accordance with resolution 194 (III) (11 December 1948), and consistent with this commitment, the General Assembly has rightly persisted in its calls and efforts for a just solution to the Palestine refugee question and has rightly supported UNRWA's mandate for over than sixty-five years, ensuring the provision of vital assistance to the Palestine refugees, as well as to Palestinians displaced in June 1967 and subsequent hostilities who are in need.

Mr. Chair,

Thus, with the principled support of the international community, UNRWA has helped to alleviate the hardships of the Palestine refugees, and its education, healthcare, relief, social and microfinance assistance programs, along with protection and emergency aid in periods of crisis, have provided assistance, as well as opportunities for development and hope. As stated on numerous occasions, UNRWA has been a lifeline, sustaining the refugees through cycles of conflict and upheaval that have depleted coping capacities and endangered their lives, as we witness now in the context of the disastrous conflict in Syria, with its massive spillover into Lebanon and Jordan, or in Occupied Palestine, where the brutalities and indignities of the Israeli occupation and blockade of the Gaza Strip and military aggressions upon it have gravely affected the refugee community. UNRWA has also been widely recognized as a stabilizing factor in our tumultuous region.

Of course, the longevity of UNRWA support to the Palestine refugees has only been possible due to the cooperation and support of host countries and donor countries since the Agency began operations in 1950. Today, we once again recognize the central roles of the host countries – the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic – and renew our abiding gratitude for their invaluable support to the large Palestine refugee communities they have hosted for nearly seven decades and for their continued cooperation and facilitation of UNRWA's mission.

Mr. Chair,

I wish to now briefly address current conditions and dynamics in UNRWA's five fields of operation, as reflected in the Commissioner-General's report:

In Jordan, host to over 2.1 million Palestine refugees, we note that the situation of the refugees remained stable, yet that needs have continued to grow as unemployment and poverty have risen, with 83% of the refugees struggling to meet basic needs. Thousands more Palestine refugees have also arrived to Jordan in search of refugee and safety from the conflict in Syria.

In Lebanon, pervasive instability, abject poverty, and lack of opportunity continued to severely affect Palestine refugees, including those from Syria, who are among the most vulnerable groups in the country. We appreciate UNRWA's continued advocacy for Palestine refugees to access the labor market in Lebanon in pursuit of an adequate and dignified standard of living. We also commend the Agency for its reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp and appeal for donor support to alleviate the displacement of thousands whose shelters have yet to be rebuilt and to expedite completion of the camp's reconstruction.

In Gaza, nearly ten years of the punitive, unlawful Israeli blockade has caused aid dependency among almost the entire population – 1.3 million of whom are Palestine refugees. Without humanitarian assistance, even the most basic needs cannot be met, as unemployment remains among the highest in the world and food insecurity and poverty are rampant, with socio-economic conditions at their lowest point since the occupation began in 1967. Repeated military aggressions against the besieged Palestinian population in Gaza and the human, humanitarian, structural, security and psychological impact caused have deepened the dire humanitarian crisis and increased reliance on UNRWA services for subsistence. Moreover, while reconstruction remains a humanitarian imperative, it continues to be painfully slow due to the Israeli blockade's restrictions on entry of essential construction materials. Over 60,000 people are still displaced following the destruction of their homes by the occupying Power in the 2014 conflict. We appreciate UNRWA efforts for reconstruction of thousands of refugee shelters and commend its coordination in this regard with other UN agencies, international NGOs and the Palestinian Government.

In the West Bank, violent military raids by the Israeli occupying forces, causing death and injury to civilians, as well as other illegal practices, including settlement activities, demolition of homes and infrastructure, forced displacement of civilians, movement restrictions and other measures of collective punishment and rights violations, along with settler terror and violence, continued unabated. This has negatively impacted Palestine refugees, intensifying the protection crisis, including for Bedouin communities, who remain at risk of forced transfer and are among the most food insecure. Of course, throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, UNRWA operations also continued to be affected and hampered by restrictions imposed by the occupying Power, including the blockade on Gaza, as well as repeated harassment and intimidation of Agency staff and impairment of access.

In Syria, the situation of Palestine refugees has remained alarming as the crisis has intensified, resulting in increased humanitarian and protection needs. As reflected in the report, 560,000 Palestine refugees were present in Syria prior to the conflict. 110,000 have fled Syria seeking safety in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Europe and elsewhere. For the 450,000 who remain, widespread violence, causing death, injury and destruction to camps, repeated displacement, and denial of humanitarian access, are causing immense human suffering and need. A shocking 95% of PRS are now dependent on UNRWA assistance to survive. We commend the Agency's continuity of operations under such extremely difficult, dangerous circumstances.

Mr. Chair,

We must stress again the fundamental principle of non-refoulement and equal treatment of refugees, as affirmed recently and most clearly in the NY Declaration. We echo the humanitarian appeals for access for all refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict, including the Palestine refugees, and also the appeals for international support to the host countries, recognizing their generosity in the face of this crisis.

We also stress the imperative of humanitarian access at all times. Armed conflict, including foreign occupation, does not absolve anyone of IHL obligations. UNRWA must be allowed to carry out its mandate without hindrance and without the imposition of additional costs and burdens. We also reaffirm the inviolability of UN premises and the obligation of all parties to refrain from actions that undermine or endanger the safety, security and neutrality of UNRWA installations and staff. All such violations must be condemned. In this regard, we continue to await accountability for the grave violations perpetrated by Israel during its military aggression against Gaza in 2014, in which several UNRWA facilities, including schools sheltering thousands of civilians were struck by the Israeli occupying forces, causing death, injury and destruction. The Charter, the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention, and all relevant resolutions and agreements must be fully respected.

Mr. Chair,

As clearly conveyed by the Commissioner-General, the structural underfunding of UNRWA and constant financial shortfalls have become debilitating, risking reduction or interruption of the Agency's core education, health and relief and social programmes. Such an outcome must be averted, for the consequences would be far-reaching in both human and stability terms. We thus appeal for a sustainable remedy to be found by the General Assembly, of which UNRWA is a subsidiary body, for which the Assembly remains responsible.

In this regard, we reiterate our gratitude for the international community's longstanding support of UNRWA and urge continued solidarity with the Palestine refugees and support to the Agency. We thank all of the donor countries and organizations from around the world, large and small, traditional and new, for their contributions and partnerships that have helped to ensure continuity and quality of Agency programs. We recognize their generosity, particularly the major donors and all who have enhanced support in response to the Agency's financial crisis and the emergency appeals. We renew our call appeal for increased and multi-year support, where possible.

We express deep appreciation for the special role played by the States and organizations members of UNRWA's Advisory Commission for their valuable support and guidance to the Agency in the implementation of its mandate and its Medium-Term Strategy, as well as to all the States members of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA for their efforts to raise awareness of, and to address, the Agency's financial situation.

Mr. Chair,

We recognize, as reflected in the report, that *"while compressing to a viable minimum its core financial requirements, UNRWA continues to shoulder its responsibilities to assist and protect the Palestine refugee with which it is entrusted by the General Assembly"*. The achievements summarized in paragraph 25 of the annual report are remarkable, considering the circumstances. At the same time, extensive measures have been taken to promote efficiency, control expenditures and implement reforms, as well as to widen the donor base, including with Arab States. But the Agency clearly cannot absorb further austerity measures without degrading core programmes.

Only further sustained support can remediate the funding shortfalls undermining UNRWA's capacity to carry out its mandate and prevent interruption or suspension of services, which would deprive refugees of essential assistance, especially the most vulnerable, including children, youth, women and disabled persons, and further destabilize the situation in all fields of operation. We thus

support the recommendation in the Commissioner-General's special report, calling for urgent consultations with all stakeholders *"to identify and actively pursue measures that result in putting UNRWA on stable financial footing so that the Agency can continue to provide adequate levels of assistance and protection Palestine refugees in accordance with its mandate"*. In this connection, we highlight and welcome the affirmation in the NY Declaration that *"UN entities such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and UNRWA and other relevant organizations, require sufficient funding to be able to carry out their activities effectively and in a predictable manner"* (paragraph 86).

Considering the realities of the situation on the ground and the persistent funding gaps, it is clear that UNRWA's funding model – based primarily on voluntary contributions for the core programmes – is not sustainable. As noted in the Commissioner-General's special report, *"the humanitarian, political and security considerations for UNRWA stakeholders are at odds with the unpredictable, and sometimes volatile, funding arrangements on which the Agency must rely"*. We echo the hope and expectation conveyed in the report that the international community will *"show collective responsibility and provide the resources needed to implement its mandate"*, and that the General Assembly will step up support for the Agency, as well as solidarity with the Palestine refugees at this critical time.

It is in this spirit that the draft resolution to be presented to the Special Political and Decolonization Committee on "Operations of UNRWA" calls upon the Secretary-General to launch broad consultations to explore all potential ways and means, including, inter alia, voluntary and assessed contributions, to ensure that the Agency's funding is sufficient, predictable and sustained for the duration of its mandate. We urge the strong support of Member States for this proposal aimed at ensuring continuity of assistance to the Palestine refugees in all fields of operation and ensuring its continued tangible contribution to regional stability.

Mr. Chair,

The worsening plight of the Palestine refugees and the continued need for UNRWA are testimony to the immense ramifications of the failure to secure a just and lasting solution. This underscores the need for a reinforced global commitment to uphold international law, engage proactively in conflict resolution and prevention, and tackle the root causes of forced and protracted displacement. Humanitarian assistance is imperative, but it does not constitute a solution.

We agree with the Commissioner-General – it is crucial to restore hope and a political horizon for the people in the region. Therefore, while profoundly grateful for the support to UNRWA and solidarity with the Palestine refugees, we must conclude by reiterating our appeal for the international community to mobilize the political will and efforts necessary to bring an end to the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and to achieve a just, comprehensive and peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine, including a just solution for the Palestine refugees, based on international law and the relevant UN resolutions, including resolution 194 (III), stressing that such a solution is one of the keys to the lasting peace, coexistence, and security that we are all seeking.

I thank you, Mr. Chair, thank the Committee, and once again thank Commissioner-General Krähenbühl.