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**Statement by Ms. Feda Abdelhady Nasser, First Counsellor, before the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (4<sup>th</sup> Committee), Agenda item 51: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 1 November 2010:**

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulate you and your country Zimbabwe on your chairmanship of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, confident in your wise guidance of the Committee's work. We also congratulate the Vice-Chairs and all Bureau members this session.

We express our appreciation to Mr. Filippo Grandi, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for his report to the General Assembly and his briefing to the Committee regarding UNRWA's work over the past year. I also reiterate Palestine's warm congratulations to Mr. Grandi upon his appointment as Commissioner-General. Recognizing his efforts and commitment during his tenure as Deputy Commissioner-General, we are assured of his ability to skillfully guide the Agency in carrying out its mandate with the same principled dedication exemplified by all of his predecessors.

On this occasion, Palestine also wishes to reaffirm its abiding gratitude to the entire staff of UNRWA for their exemplary service on behalf of the Palestine refugees in all fields of operation. Their perseverance and commitment to the Agency's mandate, even under difficult and dangerous circumstances, should be commended. In this regard, it must be recognized that, for more than six decades, UNRWA, with strong donor support, has been a constant in the lives of the Palestine refugees, providing them with vital education, health, relief and emergency assistance as well as its successful micro-finance and micro-enterprise programs. In doing so, it has consistently and respectfully promoted the well-being and development of the Palestine refugees, provided them with protection, and helped to safeguard their rights, consistent with its mandate, pending the achievement of a just and lasting solution on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). Moreover, not only has UNRWA helped to ameliorate their plight, but it has also been a stabilizing force in the region.

Today is also an opportunity to reaffirm our recognition and gratitude to the countries of Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, which have for over six decades hosted the Palestine refugees and extended essential support to them and to the Agency in the discharge of its duties. This important role must be recognized at the same time that we acknowledge the very regional dimension of the refugee problem.

On this occasion, we also reiterate our gratitude to the international community as a whole for its support of UNRWA and long-standing commitment to the rights of the Palestine refugees and the achievement of a just and lasting solution on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions, including the resolutions adopted under this item, in which important principles and positions are enshrined. We urge the continued strong support of the Agency, particularly in light of the financial shortfall being endured and increasing needs. This is necessary to avert further austerity measures and a deterioration of services to the refugees, which may call into question the international community's stance at this critical juncture. In this connection, we also convey appreciation to the members and observers of the Advisory Commission and the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA for their efforts to advance the Agency's invaluable work.



Mr. Chairman,

The work and programs of UNRWA and the challenges it confronts cannot be considered out of the context of the over-arching political environment, both contemporary and historical, as a result of which the Agency was established and continues to exist. Our debate is thus also time for reflection about the hardships that continue to be endured by the Palestine refugees due to the ongoing denial of their rights, including their right to return.

It is a tragedy and grave injustice that, more than sixty-two years since the 1948 *Al-Nakba* following the partition of Mandate Palestine by General Assembly resolution 181 (II) and the establishment of Israel thereafter, the Palestine refugees and their descendants, now numbering 4.8 million people, continue to live as an uprooted, dispossessed and exiled people, constituting the largest and most protracted refugee problem in the world. This injustice and their plight remain at the core of the Palestinian historical narrative and the search for justice and peace. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the plight of the Palestine refugees is a core final status issue for which a just, comprehensive and agreed resolution is a major prerequisite for conclusion of a lasting peace settlement.

At this critical juncture, it is imperative to reaffirm fundamental principles and positions, which have not changed despite the passage of time and incessant attempts to denigrate and deny them:

- We reaffirm the right of the Palestine refugees to return to their homes to live at peace with their neighbors and to just compensation for their losses and suffering, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). This is an individual and collective right in accordance with international law and the principles of justice and equity.
- We reiterate our rejection of Israel's constant rhetoric and provocative stance, denying the rights of the Palestine refugees and any responsibility for their plight. This is particularly deplorable as it is Israel that has for six decades deliberately obstructed their return and violated their rights, blatantly refusing to abide by the UN Charter, its obligations under international law and the relevant resolutions, without consequence, and gravely compounding this human catastrophe.
- Similarly, we reaffirm the right of the Palestinians displaced in the June 1967 hostilities to return to their homes and lands, and, as called for by the General Assembly, we stress the necessity of an accelerated return of the displaced to their homes in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and call on the occupying Power to comply with its legal obligations and peace process commitments in this regard.

Mr. Chairman,

As reflected in the report of the Commissioner-General and in UNRWA updates and emergency appeals over the past year, the situation of the Palestine refugees has remained precarious, with poverty, hardship and instability afflicting hundreds of thousands of refugee families. Most distressing is the situation of the refugees in the camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where, in addition to their dispossession, generation after generation of refugees has faced constant insecurity, human rights violations, collective punishment and affronts to their human dignity under Israel's military occupation.

The situation in the Gaza Strip has remained most critical. The continuing impact of Israel's merciless blockade and the severe consequences of last year's Israeli military aggression still gravely affect every aspect of life in Gaza. The trauma, terror and destruction inflicted by Israel, the occupying Power, on the Palestinian civilian population, including children and women, hundreds upon hundreds of whom were killed and injured, and its continued obstruction of Gaza's recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction is detrimentally and perhaps irrevocably harming the well-being and stability of the society as a whole, particularly the most vulnerable such as the refugees, who constitute the majority of the population there.



As noted in the report before us, the Israeli military aggression caused damage or destruction to at least 60,000 homes, of which 46,500 were refugee shelters, and this figure does not include an estimated 1,400 refugee shelters destroyed in military operations prior to December 2008. The occupying forces also caused widespread destruction to civilian infrastructure, hundreds of industrial facilities, businesses and agricultural properties, hospitals, schools, mosques, national institutions, and UN facilities. It is deplorable that the population in Gaza continues to be forced to live amidst the rubble, reminded every day of that brutal onslaught and the blockade. We continue to call for accountability for the perpetration by Israel, the occupying Power, of these war crimes in Gaza and continue our efforts in this regard in follow-up of the report by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (Goldstone Report), emphasizing the need to end Israeli impunity and to realize justice for the victims.

The shameful persistence of this blatant situation is deepening the suffering of the civilian population in Gaza, especially the refugees, and continues to intensify the raw feelings of injustice and despair that prevail. This abhorrent situation also continues to engender solidarity for the Palestinian people in Gaza from around the world, including those civilians that had been aboard the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" in May of this year, attempting to deliver much-needed humanitarian aid. We reiterate our condemnation of Israel's military attack on the flotilla, in violation of international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, which resulted in the killing of nine Turkish nationals, and reiterate our calls for accountability for this crime perpetrated against civilians in international waters.

Mr. Chairman,

A brief look at the socio-economic conditions being faced in the Gaza Strip reveals an alarming situation that is being endured by a civilian population already devastated by forty-three years of occupation and nearly a decade of constant conflict and closures. The refugee population is most afflicted by the widespread poverty, unemployment, hunger, disease, and displacement caused. In this regard, it is necessary to highlight, as noted in the report:

- 76.7% of families in the Gaza Strip have been found to suffer from food insecurity, with UNRWA continuing to provide emergency food aid to nearly half of the population.
- Unemployment remains at shocking levels, with 43% unemployed as of the end of 2009, and the number of families living in abject poverty continues to rise.
- Damaged health and sanitation networks continue to pose major environmental and health risks, with access to running and clean water limited and irregular. It is reported that nearly 90% of the water is unsafe to drink, and that up to 80 million liters of raw sewage are being pumped daily into the sea.
- The education system in Gaza remains severely overburdened and the classroom shortage has been exacerbated by the Israeli prohibition of the entry of construction materials for new UNRWA schools. This has recently resulted in 40,000 Palestinian children being turned away, unable to enroll for the new school year, constituting a violation of their fundamental right to education.

At a time, when the rest of the international community is striving with all available resources to realize the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the situation that prevails in Gaza due to Israel's deliberate imposition of measures intended to collectively punish and impair the existence and development of the Palestinian people is totally deplorable and must be redressed.

Today, we reiterate our unequivocal call for the full lifting of this illegal Israeli blockade, which continues to impede humanitarian access, import of essential goods, including construction materials, and all exports. The sustained, regular opening of the Gaza Strip's border crossings is essential for socio-economic recovery of Gaza as well as for the undertaking of long-overdue reconstruction. Contrary to recent assertions, the import of construction materials into Gaza was almost entirely prohibited over the



past year. We thus call again for the lifting of movement restrictions on persons and goods, necessary for the genuine commencement of reconstruction in Gaza, including of suspended UN projects such as the repair of refugee shelters, infrastructure and Agency facilities and the building of new schools.

The international community should not relent in demanding this of the occupying Power in accordance with international humanitarian law, the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, and Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). This is a legal, political and moral imperative. It is necessary for redress of the humanitarian crisis, rehabilitation of the economy and physical infrastructure, and alleviation of the isolation and deprivation of the population.

At the same time, we draw attention to the ongoing impairment of refugee access to UNRWA services in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, due to Israel's ongoing unlawful construction of settlements and Wall, home demolitions, imposition of checkpoints and the permit regime and its discriminatory Israeli-only road network. These illegal policies, in addition to its military raids throughout the West Bank, which, inter alia, resulted in the killing of two refugee children this year, continue to negatively impact all aspects of life, severely affecting the refugee population. Such measures also continued to hamper the mobility of Agency staff, who continued to be physically harmed and intimidated by the occupying forces, especially at checkpoints.

As noted in the report, Palestine refugees in East Jerusalem have been most vulnerable to these illegal measures, as have been those living in areas between the Wall and 1967 border. In the past year, in East Jerusalem alone, the demolition of 80 homes led to the displacement of 300 people, including 149 children. In this regard, we fully agree with the somber assessment made by UNRWA that *"the trauma of ongoing dispossession and repeated displacement of refugees since 1948 cannot be overemphasized"*.

Mr. Chairman,

The prevailing situation is absolutely abnormal, unjustifiable and unsustainable. It is a situation seriously affecting the lives of the refugees and impairing the work of UNRWA in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its ability to provide assistance in an effective manner commensurate with refugee needs.

The negative effect of the crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory on the financial health of the Agency also cannot be underestimated. Strained resources continue to be depleted to address emergency needs and hardship cases. As noted in the report, the estimated financial cost for UNRWA of meeting the emergency needs of the refugees in the West Bank and Gaza alone was \$456.7 million for only the period between January and December 2009. The Agency's finances and operations have also been affected by the continued prohibition of entry of essential supplies; the hampering and endangerment of access and movement of staff and vehicles and impeding delivery of services; and the imposition of taxes and levies by Israel on the Agency, all in direct violation of the Charter, the 1946 Convention on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and the 1967 agreement between Israel and UNRWA.

This deplorable situation must be rectified, in line with the calls repeatedly made by the General Assembly in relevant resolutions. We acknowledge the firm position of the international community on this issue as well as the constructive role played by the Operations Support Officers in this regard.

In this context, we reiterate the need for respect of UNRWA's immunity and ensuring the safety and security of its staff and facilities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. We recall the affirmations made last year by the Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry following Israel's attacks on numerous UNRWA facilities regarding the inviolability of UN premises, which cannot be overridden by demands of military expediency and that *"United Nations personnel and all civilians within United Nations premises,*



*as well as civilians in the immediate vicinity of those premises and elsewhere, are to be protected in accordance with the rules and principles of international humanitarian law”.*

Israel, the occupying Power, must be compelled to abide by its legal obligations, including, *inter alia*, under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the 1946 Convention. We reiterate that Member States, who continue, including during these critical financial times, to be called upon to provide emergency funding to remedy the negative and costly repercussions of Israel’s illegal practices on the refugees and UNRWA, must firmly insist on this as a matter of principle.

Mr. Chairman,

Before concluding, we wish to commend UNRWA for its extraordinary efforts in the Gaza Strip during the reporting period. The emergency assistance provided has been pivotal in the lives of thousands of refugee families. Moreover, the Agency’s efforts to provide happiness to child refugees, including through the Summer Games held again this year, are most praiseworthy. We deplore the acts of tampering and damage to Summer Games facilities and reaffirm our support for the spirit of this initiative and encourage full support for it. Such programs can make all the difference in the life of a traumatized and deprived child, giving hope for the possibilities of a life free from the want, misery and conflict that continues to be imposed on them and their families.

Similarly, we commend the Agency’s “Engaging Youth” initiative, launched this year in Syria, noting the timeliness of this project during this International Year of Youth. UNRWA special programs for women, special needs students, and the poorest refugees must also be lauded, in addition of course to the Agency’s core education, health and relief services in all fields of operation. We also recognize and appreciate the efforts and cooperation of all other UN agencies and humanitarian organizations working together on the ground to assist the refugees and promote their rights.

Today, we also welcome the efforts made by UNRWA towards reconstruction of the Nahr el Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon and its ongoing efforts to provide emergency assistance to the refugees still suffering from the crisis there. We commend the Agency’s strides to improve living conditions in all the refugee camps in Lebanon and its efforts with the Lebanese government regarding refugees’ right to work and extension of services to them. We welcome the progress made in this regard, express our appreciation to the Government of Lebanon, and reaffirm our readiness to continue to cooperate constructively for further progress on this important matter.

Mr. Chairman,

The international community has rightly been firm in its long-standing support of the UNRWA mandate, reflecting not only a humane commitment to the welfare of the Palestine refugees, but also a political commitment to a just solution for their plight, and it must not waver. Indeed, a just solution for the plight of the Palestine refugees remains among the highest priorities for the Palestinian leadership. This is vital for the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole.

We thus once again urge the international community to intensify efforts to promote the resumption of an accelerated peace process towards the achievement of a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine in all its aspects, including an end to the Israeli occupation since 1967, the achievement of the independence of the State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just solution to the plight of the Palestine refugees on the basis of resolution 194 (III).

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.