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Statement by Ms. Feda Abdelhady Nasser, First Counsellor, before the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (4th Committee), Agenda item 52: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 31 October 2011:

Madame Chair,

Palestine reiterates congratulations to you and your country Romania on assuming the Chair of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, and expresses confidence in your ability and that of the Bureau Members - Senegal, Ireland and Venezuela - to wisely steer our work this session. This includes our work on the important agenda item on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - UNRWA - an agency deserving of full support for the invaluable role it has played for over six decades in service of the Palestine refugees and that is an exemplary model of the serious contribution of the United Nations in our world and the very real difference it makes in the lives of millions of people, especially the most vulnerable and needy among us.

Mme. Chair,

Since its establishment by resolution 302 (IV) (1949), UNRWA has steadily and responsibly promoted the well-being and human development of the Palestine refugees - 4.8 million of whom are registered with the Agency - and provided them with protection and safeguarded their rights, consistent with international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, and with its mandate, pending achievement of a just and lasting solution based on General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948. UNRWA has served as a constant in the lives of the Palestine refugees and its assistance has helped to sustain them through waves of conflict and upheaval, helping to alleviate the hardships and deprivation inflicted on them since the onset of the injustice of the 1948 *Al-Nakba* and their uprooting from their homeland, to which they have been denied their right to return ever since.

On behalf of Palestine, I therefore wish to take this opportunity to renew our gratitude and appreciation to the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Mr. Filippo Grandi, as well as to the Deputy Commissioner-General, Ms. Margot Ellis, for their dedicated leadership and commitment to UNRWA's mandate and their principled advocacy on behalf of the Palestine refugees. I thank Mr. Grandi for presentation of the annual report to the General Assembly and his briefing today about the work and challenges faced by the Agency this past year as well as the reality of the situation faced by the Palestine refugees, as they continue to await a solution to their plight and restoration of their rights.

We also reaffirm our gratitude to the UNRWA staff in all fields of operation - Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory - for their commitment to this important humanitarian mission, by which daily education, health, relief and emergency assistance is provided to the Palestine refugee community, under the guidance of the Agency's Field Directors, who are also to be highly commended. We salute the perseverance of all of these women and men, who are resolutely carrying out their work, often under difficult and dangerous conditions, and yet, regrettably, remain the only UN staff members in the area who do not receive hazard pay. We call for redress of this situation, particularly in light of rising challenges and demands on the Agency and its contribution to regional stability, an issue that we underscore in the context of the regional dimension of the Palestine refugee question.

In this connection, Palestine reiterates its gratitude to the Host Countries: Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, for their valuable contributions in helping care for the Palestine refugees and their consistent support for UNRWA's mission, ensuring that the Agency is able to effectively fulfill its duties in serving the refugee community. Moreover, we reiterate our appreciation to all the Members and Observers of the Advisory Commission and the Working Group on Financing for their efforts to support and advance the Agency's work. We look forward to welcoming Luxembourg to the Advisory Commission later this year following the adoption of our resolutions under this item.

Today, we also reiterate gratitude to the international community for its strong support of UNRWA and commitment to the well-being and rights of the Palestine refugees, as reflected in the longstanding support for the principles reaffirmed in relevant resolutions as well as in donor support for UNRWA. The voluntary contributions of donor countries over the decades have enabled the Agency to nobly uphold its mandate despite the cycles of crisis and financial strain it has faced. We urge continued generous funding of the Agency to help it to overcome the serious financial shortfalls and large funding gaps it continues to face and enable it to continue providing assistance to the refugees commensurate with their needs to allow them to lead healthy and productive lives, acquire knowledge and skills, have a decent standard of living and enable them to enjoy, to the extent possible, their human rights.

Mme. Chair,

The plight of the Palestine refugees remains of highest priority for the Palestinian leadership as it continues to exert all efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As we witness Israel's continued rejection of the basic principles and agreed terms of reference of the peace process, which stipulate the need for a just solution for the Palestine refugees, we must again underscore the centrality of this question for achievement of a comprehensive solution to the conflict and underscore the enduring rights of the Palestine refugees, which have not diminished with the passage of time.

It is of deepest regret and greatest concern for the Palestinian people that the rights of the Palestine refugees continue to be impeded and that this grave injustice continues, despite the determination made sixty-three years ago by the General Assembly in resolution 194 (III) and in countless resolutions thereafter that the refugees should be permitted to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors at the earliest practicable date and are entitled to compensation based on principles of international law and equity. The failure to justly resolve the question of Palestine, including the plight of the Palestine refugees, due to Israel's intransigence and total disrespect for international law, has only compounded the historic and tragic effects of their displacement and dispossession and enormously exacerbated the conflict.

As a result, the Palestine refugee question remains the largest and most protracted refugee question in the world. More than half of the Palestinian people worldwide are refugees, now spanning three generations. They are dispersed in the Diaspora, with millions still in camps in the region, while the remainder of the Palestinian people, including refugees, continue to suffer oppression under Israel's forty-four year military occupation of the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. Sadly, again this year, their situation remains unchanged and, as reflected in various UNRWA reports, poverty, humanitarian hardship and instability continues to afflict millions of refugee families. Most critical is the situation of the refugees in the camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in the Gaza Strip, who continue to suffer the constant violation of their human rights at the hands of the Israeli occupying forces, the endangerment of their safety by military raids and attacks, the severe impact of Israel's illegal settlement colonization campaign, imprisonment and detention, deteriorating socio-economic conditions, and constant affronts to their human dignity.

As we have been compelled to do in years past, we must reaffirm the following principles regarding the Palestine refugees, particularly in light of the fact that their plight not only remains but has even worsened in various aspects and in light of Israel's repeated attempts to deny and denigrate them:

- We reaffirm the right of the Palestine refugees to return and to just compensation for their losses and suffering on the basis of 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 reject Israel's provocative rhetoric and intransigent denial of the rights of the Palestine refugees and any responsibility for their plight. History is clear: since the onset of their plight, Israel has deliberately obstructed the return of the refugees, with the direct aim of reducing the Palestinian presence in the area under its control, breaching international law and UN resolutions and gravely compounding this human catastrophe. Despite the fact that the refugee question was determined to be a core final status issue from the start of the peace process, Israel has refused to ever seriously discuss this matter in good faith.
- We also reaffirm the right of the Palestinians displaced in the June 1967 hostilities to return to their homes and lands, and we stress the need for their accelerated return to their homes in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as called for by the General Assembly and in accordance with the occupying Power's legal obligations and the mechanism agreed to by the parties in this regard.

Mme. Chair,

Once again, the Commissioner-General's report reflects the vast scope of UNRWA's operations and the extraordinary efforts being exerted to provide assistance to the Palestine refugees, promote their well-being and protect them. Despite harsh socio-economic conditions, which have compounded the Agency's financial burdens, and the instability on the ground, and the constant and deliberate obstruction of its operations and access by Israel, the occupying Power, the Agency has continued to efficiently deliver services and provide emergency aid, including to those impacted by the crisis in the Gaza Strip as a result of the Israeli military aggression and the ongoing illegal Israeli blockade, including important social services for children, women and families traumatized by crises they have had to endure. In addition, the Agency continues its temporary employment, job creation and microfinance programs, providing many refugees with opportunities for livelihood and development.

The Commissioner-General's report and briefing cover the Agency's expansive efforts. Yet, I wish to highlight some efforts this year that deserve added recognition along with the Agency's core programs.

- In Jordan, host to the largest population of refugees, we commend efforts to reform core programs to ensure that the refugees, including the most vulnerable, receive quality, needed services in health and education. We support the modernization of school facilities and adoption of child-centered teaching approaches, stressing the great value of education for the future of our children.
- In Lebanon, we commend the ongoing efforts to reconstruct the Nahr el-Bared camp and assist the thousands of refugee families displaced by the crisis. We appeal for increased donor support to complete this important project. We are also grateful for progress made, via close cooperation with the Government of Lebanon, on the issue of Palestine refugees' right to work towards expanding their opportunities and improving living conditions, as well steps taken to secure wider coverage of health services to refugees.
- In Syria, we commend the focus on vocational training to address youth unemployment. We stress the value of the "Engaging Youth" initiative, which, inter alia, aims to reduce disaffection and frustration among young refugees and commend the partnership developed by UNRWA with UNICEF and the Syrian General Authority for Palestine Refugees. We are also grateful for UNRWA assistance to refugees affected by the recent instability.

- In the West Bank, we commend the efforts to provide emergency food aid to thousands of refugee families and assist the many who continue to be affected by illegal Israeli measures, such as settlement and wall construction, confiscation of property, home demolitions and evictions, which continue to displace and dispossess Palestinian families, including thousands of Bedouin families. We also commend the education recovery plan, Family and Child Protection program and the Operations Support Officer program, which is also in place in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.
- In Gaza, we are grateful for the emergency food aid provided to at least 650,000 refugees as well as the school feeding program and assistance to families most impoverished by the Israeli blockade. We recognize the Agency's ongoing efforts to repair thousands of refugee shelters and rehabilitate water and sanitation infrastructure in the camps. Once again, we commend the holding of the UNRWA Summer Games, which provided a quarter of a million children with sport, recreation and cultural activities, a highlight of their summer and a happy respite from the hardships they endure. We regret any damage caused to the Summer Games facilities by vandals. We also stress the importance of human rights school program and the microfinance and job creation programs in Gaza.

Regrettably, this year, we must again voice our grave concerns regarding Israel's deplorable continued undermining of the work of UNRWA and obstruction of refugee access to services in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, by a vast regime of illegal policies and measures, which also continue to affect all aspects of life for the refugee community. 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 on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations. Member States, who continue, including during these critical financial times, to be called upon to provide emergency funds to remedy the negative, costly repercussions of Israel's illegal occupation practices, must firmly insist on this as a matter of principle and demand that Israel cease its the impairment of Agency access to its beneficiaries, cease the harassment, humiliation and endangerment of the safety of the Agency's staff, and cease its imposition of taxes and levies on the Agency, all of which are in direct violation of the UN Charter, the 1946 Convention and the 1967 agreement between Israel and UNRWA.

Mme. Chair,

We reiterate Palestine's deep appreciation for the principled global support for UNRWA's mission, reflective of an abiding political and humanitarian commitment to the rights and well-being of the Palestine refugees. We appeal for the doubling of efforts on the basis of such principles in support of the peaceful endeavors of the Palestinian people to realize their rights, including their right to self-determination and the independence of their State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just solution for the plight of the Palestine refugees, which are central for the achievement of a just and lasting peace in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions and the internationally-endorsed parameters of the two-State solution of Palestine and Israel living side by side on the basis of the pre-1967 borders.

In conclusion, as stated by President Mahmoud Abbas in his statement before the General Debate of the 66th Session of the General Assembly, on 23 September 2011: "The time has come to end the suffering and the plight of millions of Palestine refugees in the homeland and the Diaspora, to end their displacement and to realize their rights..." Indeed, while over the years there have been many reports and statistics about the Palestine refugee question, we must recognize that the refugees are first and foremost human beings - elderly men and women who have suffered for decades in exile and yet have not lost the memories of their homeland and heritage; mothers and fathers who struggle every day to care and provide for their families despite the obstacles and miseries of their ongoing dispossession and displacement; young men and girls who, despite knowing only life in the camps or the hardships of life under occupation, still dream and strive for a better future; and children who play, learn and thrive despite all odds and whose eternal hope inspires us all. We must uphold our responsibilities to fulfill their longing for their rights and the stability, peace and justice they have been too long denied.