

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by Karen Koning AbuZayd
Commissioner-General of UNRWA to the Special
Political and Decolonization Committee**

31 October 2006

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

I first addressed you as Commissioner-General of UNRWA last year. While that day does not seem so long ago, it has been a year of dramatic and violent events in the Middle East. Our work at UNRWA has always been affected by a volatile and unpredictable operational context. Armed conflict and recurrent crises pose immense challenges to the safety, livelihoods and general wellbeing of Palestine refugees. At the same time, maintaining our operations in an unstable environment gives us the impetus to be as flexible and responsive as our resources allow us to be. I am pleased to have this opportunity to offer you a broad overview of UNRWA's programmes and to share with you my views on our most pressing challenges.

As in previous years, you will find a summary of events, accomplishments and challenges in my 2005 report to the General Assembly. You will have noticed that this year's report is in form and substance rather different from previous reports. To bring it in line with the budgeting and planning cycle, the 2005 annual report uses the calendar year as the reporting period. Moreover, it focuses on the most significant programme outcomes to reflect UNRWA's efforts to become more results-oriented in its programming. We are encouraged by the favourable reactions of stakeholders to the new format. Allow me to first present a brief outline of UNRWA's programmes.

Our mandate entrusts us with humanitarian and human development responsibilities towards Palestine refugees. We discharge our duty through a variety of education, health, social welfare, micro-credit and shelter services in five fields of operation: Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and Gaza. In times of acute crises we administer emergency programmes that offer temporary jobs, food aid, shelter and other activities that mitigate to some extent the harshness of daily life.

Education is the largest of Agency programmes, now serving half a million primary and preparatory school children, while our technical and vocational training programmes equip Palestine refugees with vital marketable skills. We consider it our duty to create and maintain an optimum learning environment in UNRWA schools and we continuously strive to improve the quality of education, despite the double shifting necessitated by lack of funds to build sufficient schools.

The Agency's 125 health centres deliver a range of primary health-care services whose cost effectiveness has been evaluated positively by the World Health Organisation. As the refugee population's morbidity

profile shifts towards chronic diseases that are more expensive to treat, there is an increasing need to provide care that is currently beyond the reach of the Agency.

UNRWA's relief and social services programme serves as a social safety net for refugees. It is a critical source of food, cash and other one time assistance and also promotes community participation by and for vulnerable groups. Since 2000, our emergency programme in the occupied Palestinian territory has been instrumental in meeting the needs of a population under severe economic and social stress. In 2005, the Agency provided food aid to 1.3 million refugees and created 2.3 million work-days through temporary jobs.

The micro-finance and micro-enterprise programme, almost 15 years old, is the largest provider of micro-credit in the occupied Palestinian territory and has now been extended to the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. Almost 16 million dollars in loans were financed in 2005, compared with some 18 million dollars the previous year. The decline can be attributed to the serious economic impact of armed conflict and the closure regime in the occupied Palestinian territory, which have decimated local economic activity.

This is an appropriate juncture at which to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of countries and authorities hosting Palestine refugees, namely, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. UNRWA's work and achievements would simply not be possible without their hospitality and the sacrifices they have made - and continue to make -- for the sake of the refugees. We owe them a special debt of gratitude and look forward to their continuing support in the years ahead.

The excellent cooperation we enjoy with the Syrian authorities is illustrated by the Neirab and Ein al-Tal project, whereby the Syrian government has facilitated the construction of 100 new housing units for refugees who had been living for decades in crowded World War II barracks. A newly-built water supply network is the government's most recent contribution to this ground-breaking project. The Syrian government further demonstrated its willingness to address hardship and find solutions for those in need by providing refuge to one group of Palestinians fleeing persecution in Iraq. We commend the Government of Syria for affording this group a place of safety on its territory, and we encourage regional governments to do likewise for the 330 Palestinians who have been stranded at the Al-Tanf border crossing between Iraq and Syria for more than four months. With winter approaching, their already deplorable living conditions will become untenable. As the persecution of Palestinians in Iraq continues, this is the time for governments to extend the same compassion and humanitarian spirit they showed towards Palestine refugees after the 1948 and 1967 wars.

In Jordan, where Palestine refugees uniquely enjoy a range of rights, privileges and freedoms, our cooperation with authorities at all levels and across sectors has been outstanding over the years. Recent examples of our extensive and fruitful collaboration include projects to improve sanitation, infrastructure and living conditions in Talbiyeh and Baqa'a camps, and an agreement signed in September to give needy refugees better access to affordable hospital services.

One of UNRWA's proven capacities is the ability to deliver assistance effectively in times of crisis. The most recent conflict in Lebanon affirmed this still to be true. Our 2,800 staff in Lebanon deserve particular commendation. They maintained UNRWA's health and relief services throughout the conflict; they delivered food and other assistance to those unable to reach distribution centers; and they helped to house displaced persons – both Palestinian and Lebanese – with families and in UNRWA school buildings until it was safe for them to go home. In total, approximately 20,000 displaced persons took shelter either inside the refugee camps or within UNRWA facilities.

Given the intensity of this conflict, which put non-combatants at severe risk, humanitarian and relief activities could be performed by the UN and other humanitarian organizations, such as the ICRC and Lebanese Red Cross only under extremely risky and difficult conditions. With much regret, I must mention that one attack claimed the life of an UNRWA staff member, Abdul-Rahim Atieh Sagher, just minutes after beginning his shift in Ein El-Hilweh Camp and only hours before the cessation of hostilities took hold.

The contribution of UNRWA staff in Jordan and Syria should not go unmentioned. They collaborated closely with other UN Agencies and the respective authorities to facilitate the evacuation of UN staff and others fleeing the conflict, and assisted them to return home to Lebanon after the cessation of hostilities. From the field perspective, the coordination among UN agencies was efficient and effective. UNRWA did its part, contributing to the wider UN effort with general logistics and infrastructure support as well as staff time in all three countries.

Prior to the conflict in Lebanon, the majority of those under UNRWA's mandate had already been living in conditions of chronic poverty. Even in peacetime, until a year ago, most Palestinians in Lebanon were excluded from regular, legal employment and were largely dependent on UNRWA and other agencies for their daily livelihoods. Some, who lived off the land, have now lost their livelihood because large quantities of unexploded ordnance, such as anti-personnel cluster bombs, make it impossible for them to resume their farming activities.

As a humanitarian agency, UNRWA deplores the loss of civilian life, the trauma and injury sustained by many and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure in Lebanon. Yet we realize that even tragic events provide an occasion for reflection and learning. In common with the rest of the UN humanitarian family, we have embarked on a process of internal evaluation of the lessons learned from this conflict.

My remarks on Lebanon would not be complete without paying special tribute to the exemplary role played by the Lebanese authorities. We were extremely gratified by the inclusion in Lebanon's early recovery plan of three million dollars worth of projects for the refugee camps. This underlines the Government's commitment to ensuring that improvement of refugee living conditions becomes an integral part of the reconstruction and rebuilding of Lebanon. A plan developed by UNRWA a year ago, preliminarily estimated to cost \$50 million, will enable a comprehensive rehabilitation of all refugee camps in the country.

We also appreciate that statements by senior government officials indicate a strong intention to grant to Palestine refugees wider enjoyment of their rights. We commend the Government of Lebanon in this regard and we look forward to working with the government in the coming period, to help Palestine refugees enjoy a better standard of living.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

I now wish to turn to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, a part of the world which has become a byword for violations of international law, and the hardship and deprivation of the Palestine refugee experience. As a Gaza resident since August of 2000, I witness the conditions of physical danger, material hardship, psychological distress and isolation under which Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank – about half of whom are refugees – are compelled to live.

The men, women and children of the occupied Palestinian territory have contended with the cumulative impact of Israeli occupation since 1967, two *intifadas* and – for the past six years - unrelenting armed conflict. Since January this year, the atmosphere of chronic crises has been further heightened by unprecedented levels of political crisis and internal armed conflict, with a *de facto* sanctions regime against Palestinian residents of the occupied territory precipitating a severe deterioration in living conditions. In July the abduction of an Israeli soldier triggered an escalation of the armed conflict to

levels not seen for many years. Reports indicate that between July and the end of last month, Gaza sustained 5,300, artillery shells and over 292 air strikes. In the same period 298 Palestinians were killed in Gaza, 49 of them children, and one thousand persons were injured, many of them multiple amputees, reportedly targeted by unusual new weapons. In the same period, two Israelis were killed and 28 injured from 424 home made rockets fired into Israel.

A striking and very worrying feature of the recent escalation in Gaza – as in the Lebanon conflict – is the apparent willingness to resort to increasingly more devastating methods and weapons of warfare, regardless of their impact on civilian lives. The boundaries of what may be regarded as permissible means of waging war seem to be rapidly receding. In the process, the restraining influences of international law are pushed to one side by the combatants. The result is that in the occupied Palestinian territory the scale of civilian deaths and injuries does not belong to the world envisaged by the United Nations Charter.

Death and serious injury from armed conflict is only one dimension of the tragic circumstances prevailing today in the West Bank and Gaza. Living conditions have been in steep decline for the past six years, and material hardship has reached an unprecedented level since March of this year. Recent surveys show that nearly 87% of Gaza and 56% of West Bank residents live below the official poverty line and are unable to support themselves and their families without international assistance. No salaries (other than “social allowances” extended under the Temporary International Mechanism to certain categories of health and education workers and families in deep poverty) have been paid to 165,000 Palestinian Authority employees since March this year. Their number must be added to the 120,000 out of work since the beginning of the *intifada* six years ago.

Widespread unemployment has generated a dramatic increase in demand for UNRWA’s emergency relief services. We have added to our food distribution rolls in Gaza alone some 23,000 Palestinian Authority employees—refugees previously not in need of assistance. They, like many other refugees who for generations have worked hard to become independent and self reliant, are now reluctantly obliged to turn to us for help.

Severe movement restrictions are a defining aspect of the condition of Palestinian life. Palestinians do not enjoy freedom of movement in entering or leaving Gaza. Male residents between the ages of 15 and 45 are subjected to such extreme restrictions that many of them never leave the Gaza Strip. Entry points for commercial goods and building materials have been closed for more than 50% of the time

this year, in contrast to closures for 20% of 2005. The constriction of the economy may be illustrated by reference to the sewing industry in Gaza, which, in December 2005, boasted 920 small factories employing 25,500 workers. This year, ALL these factories have had to close their doors, no longer able to export their products. If Gaza returns to "normal" conditions, there would be far fewer employers to relieve the unprecedented levels of unemployment.

In the West Bank, the barrier and its associated regime create hardships that are as severe and deplorable as those in Gaza. West Bank commerce is reduced to a trickle by the barrier around Jerusalem, the tri-sectioning and fragmentation of the West Bank and a draconian permit regime, which limits movement of people and goods, and prevents refugees and non-refugees alike from leading normal lives. Over the past 12 months, the number of internal checkpoints and fixed barriers in the West Bank has risen by 40 percent, to 528. Travel to and from Jerusalem is impossible for most Palestinians. As almost all of our staff in the occupied territory is Palestinian, these severe movement restrictions have a direct negative effect on our West Bank operations.

Settler violence has forced out over half the Palestinian population in some neighborhoods in the downtown area of Hebron. Elsewhere in the West Bank, land expropriations, house demolitions, incursions by Israeli Forces and the expansion of settlements continue. Military incursions are a daily occurrence in the northern West Bank.

Construction of the separation barrier in the West Bank continues apace. We are concerned that the impact of the barrier and its associated regime of movement controls for Palestinians seem to be fading from international attention. The closure regime humiliates Palestinians, splits families, denies them their livelihoods and strangles economic activity. It renders illusory the dream of a geographically unified Palestinian state.

It is especially frightening to see the impact of the prolonged crises on every aspect of the Palestinian body politic. Law and order is deteriorating, community cohesion is unraveling and the youth are increasingly radicalized. These trends are not in the region's or the international community's interests. The current condition of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is not compatible with the vision of a stable, prosperous and peaceful Palestinian state, living in peace with its neighbors and taking its proper place in the community of civilized nations.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

I would like to brief you as well on a few important institutional matters that have also absorbed our attention over the past year. Among them are management reform, the development of UNRWA's reinvigorated Advisory Commission, staff security and the Agency's funding situation.

While we are proud of UNRWA's record of public service to Palestine refugees over the years, we are conscious of the need to bring the way we work up to contemporary standards so that efficiency gaps can be bridged and services can be delivered more effectively. To this end, we have begun a long-term process of far-reaching reforms under the banner of "organisational development." An Organizational Development plan was discussed by our Advisory Commission at the end of June and again in September. We were encouraged by the positive response it elicited.

While these are still early days, we are pleased with the progress we are making in the areas of human resources management, programme development and streamlining of organizational processes. We acknowledge with appreciation the generous support from several donors that has made these initial steps possible. Management reforms are vital for UNRWA to improve its overall performance and the delivery of services to refugees, and we trust that our donors will provide the support we need to see it through to a successful outcome over the coming three years.

Another significant development in 2005 was the enhancement of the composition and role of our Advisory Commission with a view to strengthening its support and guidance functions. The Commission's membership has been expanded to 24 members and observers. Its intensified meeting schedule and the establishment of sub-committees on finance and programming, illustrate the pace with which it is growing into its revitalized role as a principal mechanism for substantive advice and support to me and my Agency.

On the question of staff security, I wish to draw your attention once again to the fact that UNRWA's Palestinian staff are the only UN employees in Israel and the occupied territory who do not receive hazard pay. As we have done repeatedly in past years, we appeal for your support in addressing this anomalous situation. While the issue of hazard pay has been an ongoing concern in West Bank and Gaza, it was brought into sharp focus by the vulnerability of our staff during the Lebanon conflict. Staff security has affected our operation in other ways. Since Phase IV was declared in Gaza in August 2005, most international staff in our Gaza headquarters have been temporarily relocated to Amman and Jerusalem. This has introduced delays and bottlenecks in some of our administrative processes.

As you are all aware, UNRWA's financial support comes entirely from voluntary contributions. We are grateful for the generosity of donor states, yet are often in a position where inadequate funding compels us to scale down services. UNRWA's programmes possess a unique public service character. This means that when funding deficits compel us to lower the quality of services or to reduce service delivery, refugees' fundamental rights to education, health and a decent standard of living are abridged or denied. This year, we are facing a deficit of some 107 million dollars, and we have raised 138 out of 171 million dollars for our 2006 revised Emergency Appeal. These shortfalls mean that we are simply failing to meet urgent needs.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

I hope that my briefing today and the annual report before you have provided a fair picture of conditions currently prevailing in UNRWA's areas of operation, and of the challenges the Agency faces as it strives – in constantly testing circumstances – to improve its delivery of services.

If the picture I have painted – particularly of Gaza and the West Bank - is dismal and depressing it is because the reality is dismal and depressing.

Although we live and work within that harsh reality, we in UNRWA strongly believe that the challenges are surmountable. We believe that there has never been a better time for the United Nations to invoke the ideals of the Charter and to heed the call for leadership founded on respect for humanity and the rule of international law. We believe this, because the conflict in Lebanon and the prevailing conditions in Gaza are grotesque monuments to the tragic futility of the resort to force. At the same time, the ceasefire in Lebanon and the current high-level international attention focused on bringing about a breakthrough in the current political impasse between Israel and the Palestinians provide an indication of what can be achieved when international political will is mobilized effectively.

The need for a political solution has never been more evident or more urgent. We ask that political actors find the courage and political will to test new, or to revitalize past, policy directions. Elements of reason and willingness to compromise for the sake of a larger cause than narrow self-interest can be found on both sides. These tendencies need to be cultivated and encouraged to grow, so that we can restore the belief in the possibility of achieving peace and a better future for all, by peaceful means.

We in UNRWA fervently hope the new Secretary-General will carry on the proud tradition of Secretary-General Annan and previous Secretaries-General who have placed their courage and conviction at the service of peace in the Middle East and the world.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, I thank you.