Remarks by Robert Piper, Coordinator for Humanitarian and UN Development Activities for the occupied Palestinian territory

Launch on the Humanitarian Response Plan, Gaza

9 March 2016

On behalf of the Humanitarian Country Team in the occupied Palestinian territory, thank you for attending today's launch of the Humanitarian Response Plan for the occupied Palestinian Territory for 2016. I would like to especially thank Mr. Naji Sarhan, Deputy Minister of Public Works and Housing for co-hosting this important event. The Government's active participation in the development of this year's humanitarian response plan is highly appreciated.

With your support, and the contributions of donors from all over the world, together we provided food assistance and vouchers to 1.4 million people across the oPt (mostly in Gaza) in 2015; cash assistance to almost 17,000 IDP families in Gaza; improved access to safe drinking water for 80,000 people in Rafah, Khan Younis and the Middle Area; and much more.

Every year poses its own unique humanitarian challenges, but there is of course one constant which essentially defines our work – the impact of nearly 50 years of Israeli occupation. We are clear that Israel's occupation is the main driver of humanitarian needs, and has left many Palestinians highly vulnerable. The fastest way to conclude the humanitarian operation in Palestine is to end the occupation.

Meanwhile, the needs continue. In 2016, we project 1.6 million people are in need of food assistance, about 1 million of them in Gaza alone. We need to assist around 90,000 people still displaced from the 2014 hostilities. We are very concerned that almost 300,000 children across the OPT – among those 225,000 in Gaza – are in need of psychosocial support. These children have been through too much and seen too much in these early years of their lives.

In light of this situation, our work in 2016 is organized around three big strategic objectives:

Our first priority must be about protection. Palestinians living under occupation need protection. Our protection work spans a range of actions, such as psychosocial support to children and their families; accompanying children at risk of settler violence to school; removing explosive remnants of war or ERWs, and providing legal aid to thousands of households.

Our second priority is to restore access to basic services, particularly water, health and education to those Palestinians who are currently denied this right by the occupying power. This priority is especially relevant here in Gaza of course, but people in Area C of the West Bank, for example, also need this kind of help.

Our third priority is to help vulnerable Palestinian households to cope with the protracted nature of this crisis and the repeated rounds of shocks. We will continue to provide food and cash assistance to prevent a further deterioration in food security for example, and promote basic livelihoods and safety nets. It should not be surprising to us that Palestinian households are facing each new crisis more depleted than the last. The long-term trend is clear.

To achieve our goals, we will need US$571 million in 2016 to address the most urgent humanitarian needs through 206 projects. To this end, $400 million – at least 65 per cent of this – is required for Gaza, where the results of 51-day hostilities in 2014 are compounded by the blockade and by internal Palestinian divisions. In Gaza, more than 60 humanitarian organizations, including UN agencies, national and international NGOs will implement these projects. It is a big team doing critical work.

Importantly, this year's requirements are nearly 20 per cent lower compared to 2015 for a reason that is important to stress here – because we have fewer people requiring temporary shelters in Gaza as reconstruction of partially demolished homes has been effective. The message is clear – the more we can accelerate the reconstruction of destroyed homes, the faster we can reduce these humanitarian shelter needs. This has got to be a top priority.

The challenges of Gaza are clearly the most acute in Palestine today, as the cumulative effects of occupation, blockade and repeated rounds of fighting take a heavy toll on everyone.

The context also poses particular challenges for the humanitarian operation. First and foremost, amongst these contextual challenges, of course, is dealing with the dual use list and the obstacles to accessing basic materials like wood, water pumps and medical equipment. For example, the very high proportion of refugees in Gaza creates potential conflicts between standards of assistance and expectations that we need to harmonize across all beneficiaries. The general absence of development investors from Gaza for a variety of reasons also places pressure on humanitarian funding to fund activities that are not strictly speaking of a humanitarian nature. Housing reconstruction, for example, is absolutely not a humanitarian activity but the question on what we are doing about it comes up all the time. And the profound structural challenges of life in Gaza – around energy, around water, around movement, around employment – remind us constantly that humanitarian interventions may alleviate but cannot solve development or political challenges. We must not over-sell our ability to change such fundamentals. Others must also not be unreasonable in their expectations either.

It needs to be said that the ongoing disunity between Ramallah and Gaza is also having a humanitarian impact on innocent Gazans. Shortages of essential medical drugs, hospital operating theatres that are closed due to lack of staff, the lack of fuel for essential facilities like hospitals, waste treatment plants, and unpaid salaries for dedicated civil servants are the result of a divided Palestinian governance. This is one major challenge that Palestinians *can* solve themselves. And *must* solve before the toll becomes greater still. As Humanitarian Coordinator for Palestine I use this occasion to implore the leaders of the various parties to bridge this political divide in the interests of their citizens.

Our commitment to the people of Palestine remains firm. I will end where I started – almost 50 years of occupation is the primary driver of humanitarian suffering in Palestine. We can do a lot to alleviate that suffering with the ongoing generosity of donors and the partnership with Government and non-Government actors, local and international. But there can be no substitute for a just and lasting peace.