PRESS STATEMENT

Remarks by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

UN Secretary-General's remarks on the sustainability of UNRWA

5 May 2016
New York

Your Excellency Ms. Dina Kawar, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Jordan, Your Excellency Mr. Olof Skoog, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Sweden,

Distinguished representatives of Member States, Observer States and Regional Organisations who support UNRWA, including those States generously hosting Palestine refugees,

Thank you for taking part in this important meeting.

The unresolved plight of Palestine refugees -- a community of 5.2 million people -- is a great source of pain to me – as I know it is for you.

In today's precarious Middle East, Palestine refugees are especially vulnerable.

The places where they reside are either overwhelmed by conflict or heavily stretched by the spillover effects from neighbouring areas.

It is against this unstable background that UNRWA and its 30,000 staff provide vital human development and emergency relief services to Palestine refugees.

It is vital, first and foremost, to the refugees themselves, in providing education, health, social services, protection, dignity and a chance in life.

It is also vital because UNRWA plays a stabilising role in supporting Palestine refugees in a volatile region.

Who would support Palestine refugees -- a poor, vulnerable but remarkably resilient community -- in the absence of UNRWA?

There is no doubt that sustaining UNRWA's operations for Palestine refugees is in our collective interest.

Yet, barely nine months after my appeal to the General Assembly for UNRWA support, the Agency is again in dire need of resources.

Of course this is not a one-way conversation.

Donors have supported UNRWA over many years and need to be confident that it continues to operate efficiently and effectively, and that tough measures are being taken to deepen efficiencies.

UNRWA Commissioner General Mr Pierre Krähenbühl will speak to these issues in detail.

At the same time, UNRWA continues to advance the universal values of the United Nations.

I will never forget my visit to Gaza shortly after the end of the devastating conflict in the summer of 2014. I saw first-hand how UNRWA's 252 schools went from providing quality education to 240,000 children, to offering sanctuary to 300,000 displaced in Gaza.

Soon after hostilities ceased, UNRWA schools were remarkably up and running with barely a delay to the academic year.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I encourage you to reflect on the human dimension of Palestine refugees - their hopes, dreams, and quest for justice and dignity.

As my report to the World Humanitarian Summit states, there is "One Humanity" and we share a collective responsibility to protect, support and sustain that humanity.

UNRWA has been a pioneer in providing Education in Emergencies, a key theme of the WHS, and has developed innovative distance learning techniques and “safe spaces” to ensure education for Palestine refugee girls and boys.

UNRWA is also rebuilding Palestine refugee homes and communities shattered by the conflict in Gaza and will be asked to do the same in Syria whenever the conflict ends there.

In March, I saw for myself UNRWA’s extraordinary work in Lebanon. I visited the Nahr El Barad camp, destroyed in 2007, and witnessed the progress to rebuild it.

Yet over half of the refugees displaced there still have no homes. I am pleased that Austria is hosting a meeting later today with partners to seek the necessary support so that UNRWA can complete the rebuilding of the camp.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I appeal to you today to do your utmost to support and sustain UNRWA in its work. The current deficit of $81 million must be overcome as a matter of priority for 2016.

The budget uncertainties are a costly distraction. They play with the fate of people who are already living on the edge. They add a needless extra layer of suffering and anguish.

It is far more financially responsible to put UNRWA on a sustainable footing. This is not only good management, it will also allow people to better plan their lives under the intense stress that they already endure each and every day.

In practical terms what would sustainability mean?

It would mean Palestine refugees never having to question whether UNRWA schools would be open; never doubting whether crucial medical services would be available; or whether the food would be on the table for dinner.

Let us never forget the human consequences if we let Palestine refugees down: more young people driven into despair; an increased risk of extremism; more poverty, loss of hope and dignity and a Middle East region even more riven by conflict.

As we continue the search for a just and lasting solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine in conformity with international law and UN resolutions, I count on your support for UNRWA.

Thank you.

– Ends –

Background information

UNRWA is confronted with an increased demand for services resulting from a growth in the number of registered Palestine refugees, the extent of their vulnerability and their deepening poverty. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions and financial support has been outpaced by the growth in needs. As a result, the UNRWA Programme Budget, which supports the delivery of core essential services, operates with a large shortfall, projected for 2016 to stand at US$ 81 million. UNRWA emergency programmes and key projects, also operating with large shortfalls, are funded through separate funding portals.

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and mandated to provide assistance and protection to some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, protection and microfinance .

For more information, please contact:

Christopher Gunness
UNRWA Spokesperson
Mobile: +972 (0)54 240 2659
Office: +972 (0)2 589 0267
c.gunness@unrwa.org
Twitter: @ChrisGunness

Sami Mshasha
UNRWA Arabic Spokesperson
Mobile: +972 (0)54 216 8295
Office: +972 (0)2 589 0724
s.mshasha@unrwa.org