OFFICIAL STATEMENT

Statement by UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl



UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl. © 2017 UNRWA Photo by Marwan Baghdadi

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Not for the first time in its proud history, UNRWA faces a formidable challenge in upholding its mandate – an expression of the will of the international community - and preserving key services like education and health care for Palestine Refugees.

Today, the US government has announced a contribution of $60 M, in support of our efforts to keep our schools open, health clinics running, and emergency food and cash

distribution systems functioning for some of the world's most vulnerable refugees. While important, this funding is dramatically below past levels. The total US contribution in 2017 was above $350 M.

Since UNRWA began its operations in May 1950, every US administration - from President Truman onwards - has stood with and provided strong, generous and committed support to our Agency. The US has consistently been UNRWA's largest single donor, something we sincerely thank the American people for, and countless American decision-makers – presidents, members of Congress, diplomats and civil servants, who embodied the commitment of assisting a vulnerable people through UNRWA.

Funding UNRWA or any humanitarian agency is the discretion of any sovereign member state of the United Nations. At the same time, given the long, trusted, and historic relationship between the United States and UNRWA, this reduced contribution threatens one of the most successful and innovative human development endeavors in the Middle-East.

At stake is the access of 525'000 boys and girls in 700 UNRWA schools, and their future. At stake is the dignity and human security of millions of Palestine refugees, in need of emergency food assistance and other support in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At stake is the access of refugees to primary health care, including pre-natal care and other life-saving services. At stake are the rights and dignity of an entire community.

The reduced contribution also impacts regional security at a time when the Middle East faces multiple risks and threats, notably that of further radicalization.

In addition, the US government has consistently commended our high-impact, transparency and accountability. This was reiterated, once again, during my latest visit to Washington in November 2017, when every senior US official expressed respect for UNRWA's role and for the robustness of its management.

Faced with the responsibility to preserve operations while now confronted with the most dramatic financial crisis in UNRWA's history, as Commissioner-General, I am today:

- Calling on the Member States of the United Nations to take a stand and join UNRWA in saying to Palestine Refugees that their rights and future matter.
- Calling on our partners - the host countries and our donors including those in the region - to rally in support and join UNRWA in creating new funding alliances and initiatives to ensure Palestine Refugee students continue to access education in our schools and the dignity of Palestine refugee children and their families is preserved through all our services.
- Calling on people of good will in every corner of the globe where solidarity and partnerships exist for Palestine Refugees to join us in responding to this crisis and #FundUNRWA to ensure that Palestine Refugee girls and boys can stand strong.

- Launching in the next few days a global fundraising campaign to capture the large-scale commitment to keeping our schools and clinics open throughout 2018 and beyond.

At this critical time, I also turn to:

- Palestine Refugees in all of our fields of operations and say: we are working with absolute determination to ensure that UNRWA services continue.
- the students in our schools for example in Aleppo and Damascus, Syria, in Burj El Barajneh and Rashidieh, Lebanon, in Zarka and Jerash, Jordan, in Jenin and Hebron, West Bank, in Jabalyia and Khan Younis, Gaza, to the boys and girls in all Palestine refugee camps and communities, I say: the schools remain open so you can receive your cherished education and remain confident that the future also belongs to you.
- the patients in our clinics, the recipients of our relief, social services, micro-finance and other forms of support, I say you will receive the care and assistance to which you are entitled.
- UNRWA's full-time 30'000 professional and experienced staff – doctors, nurses, school principals and teachers, guards and sanitation laborers, social and psychosocial workers, administrative and support staff: be at your duty stations to serve the community with the same dedication and commitment that you have always shown. This is a moment for internal cohesion and solidarity. Times are very critical but we will do our utmost to protect you.

We see a Middle-East where conflict, violence and polarization remain ever present and impact the lives of millions of people. We observe a world in which anger reigns, not trust; a world in which power frequently rules, not justice; a world in which what divides is often valued more than what unites, includes and brings together.

The state of the world and the situation of Palestine Refugees is however far too serious and important, to allow ourselves to indulge in pessimism or despair. UNRWA stands for hope, for respect of rights and for dignity. When things are difficult, our determination grows. When the way seems lost, we invest all our energy in search of new paths, keeping our eyes on the horizon and looking for different solutions.

I recall the profound responsibility assumed by the international community of states to assist the Palestine refugees, until a just and lasting solution is found to their plight and the Middle East can finally put this cruel conflict behind it. I also give homage to people of good will around the world who have shown solidarity with Palestine Refugees when they need it most. Now more than ever, the refugees need your support.

Let us draw our strength from the Palestine Refugees who teach us every day that giving up is not an option. UNRWA will not give up either. I ask you to stand with us.

Pierre Krähenbühl