UNRWA statement
Statement by Sami Mshasha, UNRWA Spokesperson

American Government Accountability Office report affirms UNRWA's unwavering commitment to UN values

10 February 2019

Jerusalem - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) operates an educational system for over 532,000 girls and boys at its 715 schools in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The agency provides students with a quality education, the centerpiece of which is UNRWA's commitment to delivering a curriculum consistent with the broader UN development goals and the values and principles of the UN.

UNRWA works actively with all its partners, host governments and donors, to constantly improve its performance in the field of education. In 2017, the investigative arm of the U.S. Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), reviewed the amount of U.S. funding that had been provided for education in the West Bank and Gaza, how UNRWA identified and addressed potentially problematic content in educational materials, and State's reporting on these issues to Congress.

The recently de-classified GAO report affirms UNRWA's unwavering commitment to UN values. GAO confirmed UNRWA's curriculum framework emphasizes neutrality, human rights, tolerance, equality and non-discrimination with regard to race, gender, language, and religion throughout the teaching and learning process. GAO also

validated UNRWA's scrupulous textbook review process in which it found that approximately three percent of the material was not in line with UN values.

As noted in the report, UNRWA openly discussed with GAO the challenges associated with addressing problematic content in textbooks. With new educational materials having been issued since the report was prepared, some of GAO's conclusions in this regard are already outdated. UNRWA is continuously adapting its enrichment materials and addressing these challenges. UNRWA has identified and categorized the key issues in relation to the current textbooks. As part of the "teacher-centered approach", education staff are provided with key documents that enable them to determine, from a small number of options, the enrichment approach most suited to their students in addressing the specific identified issues to ensure that the curriculum delivered is aligned with UN values. It is mandatory for teachers to address all issues identified.

UNRWA uses Host government textbooks, the content of which States globally view as a matter of national sovereignty, and there are separate processes for the international community to raise concerns with the relevant authorities such as the Education Sector Working Group that supports the PA in reviewing the curriculum.

UNRWA thanks the GAO for reporting on this important issue. Quality education is of the highest importance to UNRWA, and we are committed to continuously reviewing the material taught in our schools and finding effective solutions for any passages that are not in line with UN values. Education is among the key services UNRWA provides to Palestine refugees pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.

Background:

UNRWA runs 715 schools for over 532,000 boys and girls. Since its establishment and consistent with UN practice in refugee situations globally, UNRWA uses the curriculum of the "host country" in its schools. This ensures Palestine refugees can integrate into host educational systems at any level and more broadly participate in the social and economic life of the host country.

UNRWA reviewed all 149 Palestinian Authority issued textbooks for the 2018-2019 school year on the basis of neutrality and bias, gender equity, and age-appropriateness and discovered that about three percent of the total material did not comply with UN values. As a result, UNRWA has identified these passages in the textbooks and instructed its staff to select from a menu of enrichment material options to ensure that the curriculum delivered is aligned with UN values. Implementation is underway and ongoing.

UNRWA no longer uses the curriculum enrichment material approach described in the GAO report, as the new approach is better aligned with UNRWA's curriculum framework and more easily and effectively implementable.

Unique among schools in the region, UNRWA has been teaching Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) in its schools for many years. The HRCRT program is designed to create an environment where human rights are practiced and experience in the daily life of the whole school community. To this effect human rights education is integrated in all subjects taught in UNRWA schools with students provided with guidelines and examples of what this means.

In addition, each school has a student parliament where boys and girls are democratically elected to serve the student body and to forge links with the broader community. The World Bank has been examining learning outcomes at UNRWA and found that outperform students attending public schools by more than one year of learning. UNRWA invests heavily in teacher training and uses modern teaching pedagogies to facilitate student learning and outcomes. On several occasions students have traveled to the UN General Assembly to address Member States about the value of UNRWA's education system.

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