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for palestine refugees in the near east

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STATEMENT BY UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL PHILIPPE LAZZARINI AT THE OPENING OF THE UNRWA PLEDGING CONFERENCE

12 July 2024



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UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini at the opening of the UNRWA Pledging Conference © UN News

12 July 2024, New York

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

I would like to thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this conference.

I am also grateful to the Secretary-General for his presence and strong support to UNRWA at an exceptionally challenging time.



United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

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Palestinians and Israelis have experienced terrible suffering.

Israel experienced on October 7 the most abhorrent attack in its modern history.

I echo the call of the Secretary-General for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

Gaza is decimated.

More than two million people are trapped in a living hell.

They have been displaced repeatedly across a ravaged and increasingly lawless territory.

Children and women are bearing the brunt of this brutal war.

Acute food insecurity is claiming the lives of children and severely affecting women who often eat last and least.

Thousands of children have been killed. Thousands more are struggling with new disabilities.

Many have lost their limbs to amputation, their hearing to blasts, and their speech to shock and trauma.

In the shadow of Gaza, another tragedy is unfolding in the West Bank.

More than 500 Palestinians have been killed since October, including at least 130 children.

Attacks by Israeli settlers, military incursions, and the destruction of homes and critical infrastructure, are part of a system of oppression.

The Israel-Lebanon border is simmering, threatening full-blown war.

Millions of Palestine Refugees across the region are anxious and afraid.

Most have lived in camps for generations, awaiting a political solution to their plight.

Palestinians are witnessing today their greatest tragedy since 1948.

And, as they have done for 75 years, they are looking to UNRWA for help.

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The independent review concluded that UNRWA personnel, some of whom were working to reinforce 190 installations have been damaged or destroyed, killing more than 500 people, including United Nations protection workers. As of today, UNRWA planned funding and making new contributions to the Agency. As of today, UNRWA personnel detained by the Israeli Forces have reported mistreatment and torture.

UNRWA is the backbone of the humanitarian relationship of trust with the community allow us to rapidly introduce and scale-up our activities. UNRWA has been used as a tool to sow the seeds of hatred, fear, and the future of conflict. UNRWA can provide education groups, including camps, and the future of conflict. UNRWA can provide education groups; and culminates in a return to formal education in schools. Excellencies, UNRWA Our convoys have come under attack despite coordinating movement.

In the West Bank, UNRWA's operational space is shrinking. In Gaza, we need an immediate ceasefire and safe, arbitrary measures imposed by Israel severely restrict the presence and movement of our staff. Millions of children, women and men will pay a heavy price.

Violent protests outside our premises in East Jerusalem culminated in arson attacks.

In more than 30 years of humanitarian work, I have never encountered such blatant disregard for the protected status of humanitarian workers, facilities and operations under international law.

Turning a blind eye to these attacks sets a dangerous precedent, undermining respect for the rules-based international order in other conflicts.

Excellencies,
Efforts are underway to dismantle UNRWA and change the established political parameters for peace in the occupied Palestinian territory.

This includes fierce attacks on social media, and legislative proposals to evict the Agency from its premises in East Jerusalem and to label it a terrorist organization.

UNRWA is targeted because of its role in safeguarding the rights of Palestine Refugees, and because it embodies an international commitment to a political solution.

Failing to push back will leave other UN entities and international organizations exposed to similar attacks.

Mr. President,
Amid these extraordinary challenges, I received serious allegations that UNRWA personnel in Gaza were involved in the horrific attacks of October 7.

If proved true, this would constitute an appalling betrayal of Palestine Refugees and UNRWA.

The UN took firm and immediate action.

I terminated the appointments of the accused individuals.

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) opened an investigation, and the Secretary-General launched an independent review of how UNRWA upholds neutrality in its work.



The STOS investigation into allegations against individuals is ongoing. An independent review concluded that UNRWA has policies, mechanisms, and procedures in place to ensure compliance with the principle of neutrality.

The review confirmed that the Agency has a more developed approach to neutrality than similar UN or other entities, including in addressing breaches through disciplinary sanctions.

The review, however, makes recommendations to reinforce neutrality in a complex and polarized political environment.

UNRWA is committed to implementing these recommendations with the support of donors and host countries.

Excellencies,

I have warned repeatedly that UNRWA's funding model is incompatible with its mandate to provide public-like services.

More than a decade of chronic underfunding and severe austerity measures have eroded the quality of our services.

Weakened by snowballing financial deficits, the Agency nearly imploded earlier this year.

Following the allegations against individual personnel, 16 Member States suspended funding to the Agency.

We have worked tirelessly with partners to restore confidence in the Agency. As of today, almost all have resumed funding.

I am immensely grateful for your trust and support.

However, the fundamental fiscal challenge remains – UNRWA lacks the resources to deliver its mandate.

The Agency's ability to operate beyond August depends on Member States disbursing planned funding and making new contributions to the core budget.

For the occupied Palestinian territory emergency appeal – driven primarily by the war in Gaza – we are appealing for \$1.2 billion to cover critical humanitarian needs until the end of the year.

This appeal, and the emergency appeal for Syria, Lebanon and Jordan are less than 20 percent funded.

Mr. President,

UNRWA is the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza.

The Agency will remain critical for the transition from ceasefire to "day after", providing essential services, notably, primary healthcare and education.

Before the war, UNRWA met 70-80% of **primary healthcare** needs in Gaza.



Our extensive network and relationship of trust with the community allow us to introduce and scale up critical services such as mental health and education for Palestine refugees in the near east

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Education is also a priority in Gaza, where every second child is a refugee. https://donate.unrwa.org/-/landing-page/en_en

Palestinians value education highly – it has been the only investment from which they could not be dispossessed.

More than 625,000 deeply traumatized children are out of school. Half went to UNRWA schools before the war.

Today, they spend their days scavenging in the rubble and waiting to collect water in blistering heat.

They are at risk of violence and exploitation, including recruitment by armed groups.

If we fail to bring them back to learning, we will lose an entire generation and sow the seeds of hatred, resentment, and future conflict.

UNRWA can provide education for all children in Gaza, when the security situation allows.

Together with partners, we are already rolling out a plan to resume learning.

It starts with providing mental health and psychosocial support; transitions to teaching reading, writing and math in informal settings; and culminates in a return to formal education in schools.

Excellencies,

UNRWA was created 75 years ago as a temporary agency, pending a political answer to the question of Palestine.

The Agency exists today because a political solution does not.

It exists in lieu of a state that can deliver critical public services.

If the international community commits to a political solution, UNRWA can resume its intended role supporting a time-bound transition, delivering education, primary healthcare, and social support.

Let me conclude with three requests:

First, I urge you to safeguard UNRWA now and within the framework of a transition.

And here, I would like to thank the 118 Member States that have signed the shared commitment to support the Agency.

The notion that the Agency can be dismantled without triggering the collapse of the humanitarian response in Gaza, and causing chaos in other areas of operation is naïve at best.

UNRWA must continue providing services until a political solution is at hand.

Second, we must scale up and enhance service delivery to Palestine Refugees.



In Gaza, we need an immediate ceasefire and safe, unfettered access to aid at scale.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Strong partnerships that complement and preserve UNRWA's mandate.

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The mandate must be matched by adequate, predictable and flexible funding from Member States.

Finally, I seek your support to implement the recommendations of the independent review on neutrality.

Upholding neutrality is a shared responsibility.

To succeed, we need financial and in-kind support from Member States.

In closing, I must reiterate that the world has changed drastically since we last met.

UNRWA is under greater pressure than ever before.

If we maintain the status quo, the Agency will crumble and millions of children, women and men will pay a heavy price.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Background Information:

UNRWA (<https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unrwa.org%2F&data=05%7C01%7CHQ-PI0%40UNRWA.ORG%7C7edfcbc8399c400e4a6c08dafba2254d%7C262f6a4120e941408d3efdf>) the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.

UNRWA operates in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, The Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods due to the 1948 conflict continue to be displaced and in need of support, nearly 75 years on.

UNRWA helps Palestine Refugees achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

Your support is crucial to help us provide emergency aid (<https://bit.ly/3rXMZ0P>) to displaced families in Gaza (<https://bit.ly/3rXMZ0P>)



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