

*Permanent Observer Mission
of Palestine
to the United Nations*



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Statement by

*H.E. Ambassador Dr. Riyad Mansour
Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations*

*before
the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (4th Committee)*

*on Agenda item 31:
“United Nations Relief and Works Agency for
Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)”*

*31 October 2006
New York*

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I wish to reiterate my delegation's congratulations to you upon your election to chair the Special Political and Decolonization Committee as well as to all the members of the Bureau, and to express our confidence in your ability to effectively steer the important work of this Committee during the 61st session.

Mr. Chairman,

I wish to express our deep appreciation today to the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Mrs. Karen Koning Abu Zayd, for the comprehensive report she has presented to the Committee on the work of the Agency and the situation of the Palestine refugees in the past year. We would also like to take this opportunity to commend Commissioner-General Abu Zayd for her adept leadership and management of UNRWA in the one year since she assumed the post, a year in which the Agency faced rising challenges due to the deteriorating situation in the region and the consequent negative impact on the living conditions of the Palestine refugees.

The Commissioner-General's report is a sobering reminder of the continuing difficulties of life for the Palestine refugees, young and old, and of the crucial need for the assistance provided by UNRWA to the refugees for basic needs and also during emergency situations for the refugees and the displaced persons. The efforts of the Agency in this regard must be recognized and strongly supported for it has been vital in alleviating the suffering of the Palestine refugees and in preventing the total destabilization of their situation throughout the various waves of upheaval and crisis in the region over the years, including during the recent reporting period. Moreover, UNRWA - in line with the permanent responsibility of the United Nations towards the question of Palestine until it is resolved in all its aspects - has been instrumental in preserving the rights of the Palestine refugees throughout the more than half century that a just solution to their plight has remained elusive. As stated in the Commissioner-General's report, "*UNRWA is an advocate of - and seeks to safeguard - the rights of Palestine refugees, and acts as a witness and a protecting presence in areas of humanitarian crisis and conflict*". Today, as we meet to address this issue more than 58 years since the onset of the tragedy of the Palestine refugees, we are reminded once again of the humanitarian suffering borne by the refugees and of the indispensable played by UNRWA.

Mr. Chairman,

The plight of the Palestine refugees is one of a people who continue to be denied their natural and inherent right to return - a right that, in accordance with the rules and principles of international law, is abiding, inalienable and cannot be altered or diminished regardless of the passage of time. The U.N. General Assembly affirmed the right of the Palestine refugees to return to their homes in resolution 194 (III) in 1948, and the international community has continuously reaffirmed and safeguarded this right since then. The just resolution of the plight of the Palestine refugees, in accordance with resolution 194, remains one of the highest priorities for Palestine, and the conviction of the refugees themselves in the commitment of the international community to the ultimate achievement of just resolution of their plight has been a major source of the resilience that has sustained them through the many years of hardship they have had to endure.

In addition to this collective right of the Palestine refugees to return or to just compensation, in accordance with resolution 194, it is also necessary to recall the individual right to private ownership, including of land. The Palestine refugees, as documented in the records of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), are the owners of 5.5 million dunums of land and this ownership must be recognized by Israel and its restitution or fair compensation, if accepted by the owners, must also be part of any fair settlement of the refugee problem.

The passage of nearly six decades has in no way diminished these rights and the refugee problem remains a core issue of the question of Palestine. However, the passage of time and the many events since have deeply compounded the tragedy of the Palestine refugees, who now number more than 4 million people, with millions of them continuing to live in refugee camps, many in the most impoverished, unstable and underprivileged conditions - all due to the intransigence of Israel, which continues to reject international law, to deny their right to return and refuses to even acknowledge its responsibility with regard to their plight.

Further, there are hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were displaced from their homes and lands in 1967 by Israel, the occupying Power, who also continue to endure difficult conditions. We reaffirm their right to return, which was first affirmed by the Security Council in resolution 237 (1967) and has been annually reaffirmed by the international community. Moreover, the two sides already agreed upon a mechanism for the return of the displaced persons in the Declaration of Principles of 1993. Yet this has not been implemented and their right to return remains unfulfilled as well due to Israel's continued disregard for U.N. resolutions, international law, and the agreements it has signed.

In sum, it is an undeniable fact that if Israel had respected and complied with international law and with the resolutions of the U.N. - as all Member States are fundamentally obligated to do - the problem of the Palestine refugees and the displaced persons would have long ago been resolved, and the international community would not be faced with the extensive troubling and challenging humanitarian and political issues that persist as a result of this ongoing crisis that deeply affects not only the Palestinian people but the region as a whole. Until a just and comprehensive solution is achieved, however, we remain reassured by the international community's longstanding support of UNRWA as a sign of its commitment not only to the basic survival and well-being of the Palestine refugees but also to the realization of their rights in accordance with international law.

Mr. Chairman,

I wish to now briefly refer to the report of the Commissioner-General on the work of UNRWA and the situation of the Palestine refugees in the past year in specific. Within its limited resources, the Agency continued during this period to operate its hundreds of facilities to provide essential education, health, relief and social services to Palestine refugees throughout Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and also continued to carry out its innovative micro-finance and enterprise programme as a measure aimed at poverty alleviation, economic development and self-reliance for the refugees.

However, as stated in the report, the events in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, once again dominated the environment in which UNRWA carried out its operations during the year. The grave deterioration of the political, socio-economic and security situation in the Occupied Territory, as well as in Lebanon in recent months, seriously impacted the already difficult situation of the Palestine refugees and thus inevitably affected the Agency, increasing the demand for

services and compelling it to expand its emergency programmes and launch more emergency appeals for funding to provide urgent humanitarian aid to besieged and needy refugees. This distressing cyclical pattern that we have repeatedly witnessed over the years has been the direct result of unlawful Israeli actions – there is a clear cause and effect relationship that cannot be denied and the ultimate responsibility of Israel for this situation must be properly addressed and it must be held accountable for its actions.

In recent months in particular, hundreds of refugee families, including children, women, elderly and disabled, have suffered from loss of life and injury and further dispossession and displacement as a result of Israel's intensified military aggression against the Palestinian people under its occupation and against the sovereign nation of Lebanon. Sadly, the refugees, civilians entitled to protection under international law, have suffered inordinately from such grave breaches committed by Israel. The decline in living conditions caused by the military assaults and the destruction of homes and vital infrastructure has had a vast human impact, sharply increasing hardship cases and forcing the Agency to exert extraordinary efforts and expenditures to provide emergency assistance, including food, medical care, and shelter for thousands of displaced refugees as well as for the repair and reconstruction of thousands of damaged or demolished homes.

In addition to the escalation of conflict, the situation of the refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, further deteriorated during the reporting period as a result of the disastrous impact of other ongoing illegal Israeli practices, including in particular the severe restrictions imposed on the freedom of movement of persons and goods by means of the closure regime, more than 500 checkpoints and the continued construction of the Wall. These unlawful actions have devastated the Palestinian economy and debilitated the normal development and functioning of Palestinian society in all areas. Moreover, the suspension of international assistance to the Palestinian people and Israel's withholding of tax revenues belonging to the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the January 2006 elections has caused a vast financial crisis, deepening the already critical humanitarian situation. As stated in the report, this "*de facto sanctions regime*" has "*brought socio-economic and living conditions to new lows*".

As a result, poverty, unemployment, food insecurity and instability have dramatically risen among the already vulnerable refugee population, of which more than 23,000 are employees of the PA who now receive no income along with the thousands of other unemployed workers since 2000. In order to alleviate the consequent hardships being experienced by the refugees, UNRWA has further expanded its emergency operations. In addition to its largest emergency activity, namely food aid for millions of refugees, the Agency has been focusing on a huge job creation programme, the provision of mobile medical services, and monetary assistance for the neediest refugees.

As stated earlier, all of these negative developments have affected UNRWA's work and overburdened its financial and human resources. In addition to the need for more funding to address declining socio-economic conditions among the refugees, the closures and restrictions imposed by Israel, the occupying Power, have seriously undermined the Agency's operations. These restrictions have obstructed the movement of the Agency's staff and vehicles throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including into and out of East Jerusalem, affecting its ability to provide essential and emergency services and causing delays to numerous of its projects, inflicting greater financial loss on the Agency. In addition, during the reporting period, the occupying Power continued to harass, arrest and detain Agency staff and to cause damage to UNRWA facilities, including several schools, which also affected the Agency's functioning.

Mr. Chairman,

Clearly, such actions by Israel against UNRWA staff and facilities and the hindrance of the Agency's humanitarian work constitute blatant violations of international law. The international community must call upon Israel, the occupying Power, to immediately lift all restrictions on the movement of the Agency's staff, vehicles and supplies and ensure their safety as they carry out their vital work. Also, Israel must reimburse the Agency for storage and transit charges levied and compensate it for any destruction caused to its facilities. The U.N. Charter, the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel and the Comay-Michelmore Agreement between UNRWA and Israel, as well as all of the relevant provisions of the 4th Geneva Convention must be respected. The international community must hold the occupying Power accountable for its actions and must demand compliance with its legal obligations.

We commend the Commissioner-General and the entire staff of UNRWA for their efforts and their dedication to their mission in the face of all such difficulties and challenges and often times under extremely dangerous circumstances. The Agency has been resourceful and innovative in its attempts to overcome the many obstacles on the ground and its efforts should be recognized. In this regard, we commend in particular the Agency's Operations Support Officer programme in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which has been instrumental in facilitating the access of UNRWA staff and vehicles, including ambulances and humanitarian convoys, as well as in monitoring and reporting on the humanitarian crisis, monitoring UNRWA facilities, and providing a measure of protection to the Palestine refugees.

Nevertheless, we stress once again that UNRWA, like all other U.N. agencies and humanitarian organizations, is entitled under international law to carry out its mandate free from such restrictions, harassment, and obstruction, and that the Agency should not have to expend its energies and funds on addressing such constant challenges and problems. In addition to the exacerbation of the dire humanitarian conditions of the Palestine refugees, these issues must remain of acute concern to the international community because of the enormous strain placed on the Agency's financial resources and the consequent increased demands placed on the donor community to assist the Agency to meet the challenges that continue to arise as a result of such unlawful Israeli actions.

Mr. Chairman,

At this time, reiterate our deepest appreciation to the host countries that have shared in the burden of caring for the Palestine refugees over the long decades. We encourage the continued cooperation of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria with UNRWA and appreciate their efforts as members of the Advisory Commission and as host countries to assist and facilitate the Agency's work.

Today, I also wish to reiterate our deepest gratitude to the donor community for their continuing generous contributions to and support of UNRWA, including those members and observers of the Advisory Commission. In this regard, we wish to commend the Agency for the organizational reform measures that have been undertaken, aimed at modernize and strengthening the Agency's management and thus enhancing its use of funding and its ability to

more effectively address the needs of the refugees. We commend also in this connection the Agency's Medium Term Plan for 2005-2009 and its efforts to move towards needs-based planning. We once again urge all donors to increase their contributions and to respond to the emergency appeals to the extent possible in order to enable the Agency to deliver the essential and indeed vital services it provides for the refugees in all fields of operation. The international community's unwavering support of UNRWA, along with its continued political support, pending a just and lasting resolution of the Palestine refugee problem, are crucial for the welfare and stability of the refugees and of the region as a whole.

Before closing, I wish to once again express our thanks and appreciation to Commissioner-General Abu Zayd for her report and for all of her efforts in leading the important work of UNRWA, and to also reiterate our deep appreciation to UNRWA's staff for the exceptional work they perform daily to provide vital assistance to the Palestine refugees until a just resolution to their plight is achieved.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.