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Chair: Mr. Goldea (Vice-Chair) (Hungary)

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In the absence of Mr. Kemayah, Sr. (Liberia), Mr. Goldea (Hungary), Vice-Chair, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Agenda item 54: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(continued) (A/73/13, A/73/296, A/73/323, A/73/338, A/73/349 and A/73/482)

1. **Mr. Mounzer** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the situation of the Palestine refugees was not merely a humanitarian issue, but also a political, legal and ethical issue. Since 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had continued to play an important role in alleviating the suffering of over 5 million Palestine refugees, who had been systematically displaced from their homeland by the Israeli occupation. Regrettably, the United Nations remained unable to implement General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and other resolutions on the occupation of Arab territories by Israel and its continued crimes, which had clearly emboldened Israel to persist in systematically displacing Palestinians from their homeland and denying their right of return.

2. His Government would continue to treat Palestine refugees as Syrian citizens, without discrimination, until they could exercise their right of return. It spared no effort to help them secure decent livelihoods and protect them from attacks by armed terrorist groups, which had infiltrated refugee camps, displaced many inhabitants and denied them humanitarian assistance until the Syrian Arab army had liberated the camps. Those attacks were part of a larger plot to disperse the Palestine refugees still further in order to prevent them from ever returning to their homes in accordance with the relevant international resolutions.

3. Israel had always been the primary reason for the plight and suffering of the Palestinian people, driving them from their homes under the threat of murder, atrocities, repression and terrorism. It continued to deny their right to return to their homes with arrogance and to criticize UNRWA for providing humanitarian assistance to them. The Agency must fulfil its tasks and secure sufficient and sustained donations for its budget from donor countries and the United Nations. In that connection, his Government had contributed 58 billion Syrian pounds to assist refugees living in the country in 2017 and had provided all necessary assistance to UNRWA to carry out its duties. It categorically rejected any option that would end the Agency's health, education or social services, which would constitute a violation of international law, as well as any transfer of

those services to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or any other United Nations body. Furthermore, the Secretary-General must take immediate action to address the financial shortfall resulting from the reduction in donations by some parties and should work with UNRWA to secure sufficient and sustained funding. The Agency should continue to carry out its work in accordance with the mandate set forth in General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) in order to ensure that Palestine refugees received fair compensation and could return to their homes.

4. **Ms. Bahous** (Jordan) said that UNRWA had been created out of a desire to protect Palestine refugees, but those hopes faced numerous challenges. Peace and stability in the Middle East were threatened, and refugees continued to be denied their right to prosperity and to return to their homes and villages. The work of UNRWA was a priority for Jordan, which hosted the largest number of refugees. Her Government continued to make every effort to mobilize international political and financial support for the Agency so that it could carry out its tasks, as mandated by the United Nations, and protect the rights of over 5 million Palestine refugees to live in dignity, to return to their homes and to receive compensation according to international resolutions, as well as the right to education for over 500,000 children. The Agency's financial shortfalls would have negative repercussions on the humanitarian situation of refugees, and any decrease in services would deepen frustrations, causing young people to fall prey to extremism. Attempts to undermine the Agency's role would also have negative repercussions, especially in the absence of any prospect to end the occupation and settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the two-State solution, which would guarantee the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

5. The status of refugees could not be denied simply because they had been granted citizenship in a State to which they had been forced to move as a result of the violations perpetrated against them and where they remained while awaiting justice under international resolutions. Jordan had welcomed the Palestine refugees and had granted them citizenship in order to alleviate their suffering and allow them to live in dignity. However, that should not affect their inalienable rights, particularly their right to return to their own land.

6. The efforts made by several States to address the financial shortfall of UNRWA were to be commended. Jordan, along with Egypt and Sweden, had co-chaired the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in Rome,

Italy, in March 2018. In cooperation with Germany, Japan, Sweden, Turkey and the European Union, Jordan had also held a ministerial meeting on the margins of the General Assembly in September 2018 to discuss funding. As a result of those efforts, the deficit had been reduced from \$446 million to \$64 million, thereby allowing the Agency to open schools and continue to provide services. Nevertheless, the challenge would remain in the forthcoming years and would require concerted, collective efforts to find creative solutions to sustain the Agency's critical work. Its role was currently as important as it had been when it had been established and would remain vital until a just solution to the question of Palestine had been found.

7. **Mr. Naouali** (Tunisia) said that his delegation commended the continuous efforts of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, the Secretary-General's leadership in mobilizing support for the Agency and all efforts aimed at resolving its financial crisis. It also commended the tremendous efforts of neighbouring countries in accommodating Palestine refugees. Given the heightened vulnerability in Gaza and across the Palestinian territory, which was exacerbated by the lack of resources, his delegation urged the international community of donors and relevant United Nations agencies to enhance their support for efforts to strengthen national institutions and improve the economic and social conditions of the Palestinian people. More must be done to overcome the Agency's unprecedented financial deficit, which put schools and humanitarian aid at risk. The inability to meet the protection, relief and education needs of Palestine refugees would upend the lives of approximately 5.4 million Palestinians and increase the risk of pushing helpless and frustrated young people to radicalization.

8. Forced displacements, movement restrictions, the destruction of homes and the loss of economic opportunities in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, negatively affected the living conditions of Palestine refugees and hindered the fulfilment of the Agency's mandate. The international community must therefore urge Israel to abide by its legal obligations and responsibilities under international law, including its obligation to cease, immediately and completely, all settlement activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, in accordance with Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), in order to save the two-State solution and reverse the negative trends on the ground. Furthermore, the international community must depoliticize humanitarian funding to prevent the risk of compromising the humanitarian aid system.

9. Tunisia was committed to alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people, including Palestine refugees, at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. Transforming the socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions of Palestinians was crucial to achieving a just, lasting, comprehensive and peaceful solution to the question of Palestine in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

10. **Mr. Saleh Azzam** (Lebanon) said that, under the Israeli occupation, there had been seven decades of forced disappearances and displacements. Generations of refugees had been deprived of their homeland and their right to citizenship, property and a decent life. With each year, the refugee issue became increasingly relevant, and every new generation of refugees was doubly committed to exercising their inalienable right of return. Despite the challenges they faced, international law was entirely on their side. His delegation commended UNRWA and its staff for their efforts and sacrifices to implement the Agency's mandate to provide development and humanitarian services to over 5 million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the occupied Palestinian territories. Nevertheless, the extraordinary challenges facing UNRWA as a result of the funding crisis gave cause for concern.

11. Lebanon had been one of the main host countries for Palestine refugees since 1948. It was currently hosting 469,000 refugees from Palestine and an additional 54,000 other registered persons, according to the Commissioner-General's report (A/73/13). As a host country and a member of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, Lebanon was directly impacted by the funding crisis and was closely following those challenges. His delegation regretted the decision of the United States of America to disassociate itself from the current report of the Working Group and deplored the sudden abdication of its responsibilities to Palestine refugees, particularly in withdrawing its support for the Agency. Assisting those refugees was a shared international responsibility, and his delegation welcomed the numerous conferences hosted by various countries to address the funding crisis. However, the international community must commit to providing sustainable and predictable funding in order to ensure that the 2018 financial crisis did not become an annual crisis.

12. Since its creation, UNRWA had met the needs of millions of refugees in terms of education, health care and livelihoods. It had also contributed to maintaining the discussion on the right of return while awaiting a radical solution to the question of Palestine, based on a

just and lasting peace brought about by the end of the occupation and the creation of an independent Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and relevant international resolutions, particularly General Assembly resolution 194 (III). His delegation condemned the attacks on the right of return, one of the key pillars of peace, and reiterated its condemnation of the Israeli settlements and all the occupying force's practices aimed against the Agency, including the closure of its offices in East Jerusalem and the toxic statements that called into question the status of refugees, which went against international law and customs.

13. **Mr. Hattrem** (Norway) said that, in 2018, UNRWA had experienced an unprecedented financial crisis, and there had been heightened tensions in the region. As a result, the humanitarian situation for 2 million Palestinians in Gaza was critical. The Palestinian economy was under great pressure and faced a possible collapse. Additionally, Palestine refugees continued to be displaced by the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. In the absence of a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, UNRWA played an indispensable role as a service provider, employer, vehicle for economic activity and regional stabilizer. There was no alternative organization that could provide basic services to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees.

14. The Agency's financial situation gave cause for concern. With the withdrawal of the United States, long-term donors must do what they could to achieve a more sustainable financial situation for the Agency. His delegation welcomed the extent to which old and new donors had come forward to provide support, as well as the Agency's strong efforts to reform and improve cost efficiency. Those painful steps were necessary to maintain its ability to deliver essential services to the most vulnerable populations. In that connection, his Government had allocated additional resources, having contributed over \$34 million to UNRWA in 2018.

15. **Mr. Mahfouz** (Egypt) said that the issue was first and foremost a humanitarian issue that related to providing vital services to millions of Palestine refugees and assisting Arab host States, which were dealing with a critical situation that they had not caused, as the result of the occupation of the Palestinian territory. His delegation deeply regretted the financial crisis facing UNRWA and called on all States to avoid politicizing the matter and discussing any issues that had already been settled by international law or were final status issues. Any disagreement over the work of the Agency was legitimate and could be discussed openly and transparently. However, there should be no

disagreement over the fact that the absence of UNRWA could lead to a humanitarian disaster and create additional burdens that would be carried by host States and the Gaza Strip.

16. While the injustice that had befallen the Palestine refugees as a result of the absence of a political settlement was well known, it was important to remember that entire generations had been born under occupation. He wondered how Palestinian children and young people could understand that they would be denied their right to access the modest services provided by UNRWA and how the tens of thousands of children living in inhumane conditions in Gaza could understand that the international community would add to their injustice for no apparent reason and deny them their right to education and health care. He commended all UNRWA staff for their efforts to support Palestine refugees and provide for their needs, which contributed to the security and stability of the entire region. His delegation was grateful to donor countries and welcomed the new pledges announced in 2018 that had allowed the Agency to continue its work in the Gaza Strip, despite the severe financial crisis. Nevertheless, addressing the shortfall in 2018 did not ensure that the same problem would not occur in the following year. His delegation therefore supported all proposals aimed at providing sufficient, sustainable and predictable funding for UNRWA, which it had worked to achieve as Chair of the Agency's Advisory Commission.

17. **Mr. Al-Muzaini** (Kuwait) said that his delegation appreciated the efforts of all UNRWA staff to carry out their humanitarian duty in an insecure environment and amid significant challenges in order to meet the obligations of the United Nations to improve the deteriorating situation of over 5 million Palestine refugees and provide them with health-care, education and relief services across all areas of operation. Providing support to humanitarian efforts was a pillar of his country's foreign policy. His delegation therefore reaffirmed its commitment to assist UNRWA, especially in light of its unprecedented financial crisis. Kuwait had contributed \$50 million in response to the critical shortfall in the Agency's budget, which threatened to jeopardize the programmes and services provided to Palestine refugees in the occupied territories and host countries unless the international community addressed the crisis in earnest, in accordance with its responsibility to support humanitarian causes.

18. The Commissioner-General's report (A/73/13) detailed the suffering of Palestine refugees as a result of the occupying Power's persistent policy to control all aspects of daily life in the refugee camps. His delegation once again called on the international community to

work sincerely to end that suffering and bring pressure to bear on Israel to comply with all relevant international resolutions and its commitments under international humanitarian and human rights law. It should end the blockade of Gaza and all restrictions of movement and goods in the occupied territories pending a just, permanent and comprehensive solution to the question of Palestine in accordance with international resolutions, the principle of land for peace, the Quartet road map and the Arab Peace Initiative, under which Israel must withdraw from all Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territory to the 1967 borders and all final status issues must be addressed, so that the Palestinian people could exercise its legitimate rights, including the right to self-determination and to establish an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

19. **Ms. Pereira Sotomayor** (Ecuador) said that her delegation commended all UNRWA staff for their dedication and unstinting efforts to maintain the Agency's regular and emergency services in the extremely challenging operational circumstances. UNRWA would no longer be needed once a peaceful, negotiated, definitive and just resolution had been reached for the question of Palestine, based on the two-State solution. Her delegation acknowledged the crucial role played by the Agency since its establishment in 1949 to improve the difficult situation of Palestine refugees by providing education, health care, social assistance and emergency services and recognized its ongoing work in areas relating to infrastructure, microfinance and protection. The Agency's effective operation was essential for the well-being, human development and protection of Palestine refugees. Her delegation commended the international community for its efforts to ensure continuation of the Agency's essential programmes in 2018.

20. The Agency's lack of funding had been exacerbated by the reduction in the voluntary contribution of its main contributor. The resulting financial fragility worsened the concerns of refugees about the international community's ability to meet their most basic needs and not leave them behind. According to the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA (A/73/349), there were currently 5.3 million Palestine refugees, which represented 25 per cent of the refugee population in the world, and that number was projected to reach 6.4 million by 2020. The issue therefore continued to be a topic of interest and human sensitivity. Her delegation supported the ongoing work of the United Nations to ensure that all Palestine refugees could exercise their right to return to their homes in accordance with numerous General Assembly resolutions, including resolution 72/81.

21. **Mr. Ashby** (Australia) said that his delegation valued the Agency's continued role in providing vital services and humanitarian assistance to over 5 million Palestine refugees in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. Those services also played a crucial role in maintaining a degree of stability in the volatile region. All UNRWA staff should be able to undertake their work free from the threat of harassment or violence. His delegation commended UNRWA for its handling of the uncertain budget environment, as well as those donors that had provided new funding or brought forward existing funding to support the Agency in 2018. However, UNRWA must continue to reach out to new or non-traditional donors and private sources to lessen its reliance on the core group of traditional donors. His Government had contributed to UNRWA for over 50 years and had made a multi-year commitment of \$80 million, which would enable the Agency to plan ahead. His delegation encouraged other donors to consider multi-year funding arrangements as well.

22. The Agency's neutrality was one of its most important assets and was fundamental to its viability. It had taken positive steps in that regard and should redouble efforts to improve its internal oversight functions. The future for Palestine refugees ultimately rested on a political solution by which Israel and a Palestinian State existed side by side in peace and security within internationally recognized borders. His Government called on the parties to resume direct negotiations towards that end as soon as possible.

23. **Mr. Vieira** (Brazil) said that UNRWA played a vital role in providing health, education and other basic services to approximately 5.3 million refugees. By alleviating their suffering and instilling much needed hope, the Agency contributed to bringing stability and peace to the region. As a result, its current financial crisis concerned the entire international community. As a member of the Agency's Advisory Commission, Brazil supported more adequate, predictable and sustained funding for the Agency, whose essential operational costs should be met by the regular budget of the United Nations. Such a proposal had been endorsed by the Secretary-General and a large majority of Member States across all regional groups, and his delegation hoped that the General Assembly would soon be able to adopt a resolution in that regard. His delegation reaffirmed its commitment to UNRWA and its mandate and reiterated its belief that only a two-State solution, with Palestine and Israel living side by side in peace and security within internationally recognized borders, would bring sustainable peace to the region.

24. **Ms. Oku** (Japan) said that her delegation highly valued the Agency's work in providing necessary services to Palestine refugees, who found themselves in increasingly challenging conditions, as well as the crucial role it played in maintaining stability in the Middle East. In September 2018, Japan had co-hosted a ministerial meeting to discuss the Agency's financial situation, during which participants had made additional pledges that had reduced the funding gap to \$64 million. Japan had also pledged an additional \$4.5 million to support solar power projects in Gaza, bringing its total contributions for 2018 to approximately \$45 million. Her delegation hoped that the Agency's educational programmes would help prepare the next generation for peace and stability rather than confrontation by providing a fair and balanced education.

25. While the international community's collective efforts had allowed UNRWA to continue its work through the end of 2018, its funding situation for the following year remained uncertain. Her delegation urged the Agency to continue improving efficiency and reducing costs to ensure transparency and accountability. It should also continue to implement management reforms to ensure its sustainable operation, which would also attract contributions. The Agency had recognized the need to expand its donor base and promote private sector involvement and had creatively sought new fundraising opportunities that would hopefully provide reliable financing in the future. In order to expand the Agency's donor base in the region, Japan and Thailand had co-chaired the third ministerial meeting of the Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development in June 2018. In addition, UNRWA had begun a new crowdfunding project in cooperation with the Japanese private sector. Her Government continued to provide assistance to Palestine refugees in cooperation with the international community and stood ready to discuss how UNRWA could improve its efficiency and broaden its donor base to carry out its important mission going forward.

26. **Mr. Keçeli** (Turkey) said that UNRWA staff worked under very difficult conditions to provide critical services to Palestine refugees so that they could enjoy their fundamental rights. The Agency also played a vital stabilizing role in the region, and it was simply unfair to disregard its work. As the Chair of the Advisory Commission and the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, his delegation was doing its best to support the Agency. In 2018, the Government had increased its financial and in-kind assistance and had worked to mobilize the international community in that regard. Turkey had organized a meeting during the high-

level week of the General Assembly, in partnership with Japan, Jordan and other States. In 2017, Turkey and Switzerland had created a steering committee, which had recommended establishing a World Bank endowment fund and waqf fund managed by the Islamic Development Bank.

27. The political discussion surrounding UNRWA was the result of an attempt to discredit the Agency and delegitimize the rights of Palestine refugees. Its mandate was clear, and any attempt to redefine or question the rights of Palestine refugees had no legal basis. In 2019, the General Assembly would discuss the extension of that mandate. His delegation encouraged all Member States to support the continued work of the Agency without a change to its mandate.

28. **Mr. Kumar** (India) said that his Government had increased its annual financial contribution to UNRWA to \$5 million in 2018 and planned to contribute \$5 million in 2019 as well. As part of its ongoing capacity-building programmes focused on institutions, services and personnel training in Palestine, his Government provided 150 places for Palestinians each year in its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme. In addition, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations provided 100 scholarships to meritorious students, for which Palestine refugees were also eligible. In 2017, the Government had begun an annual youth exchange programme with Palestine, and the number of participants, which had also included Palestine refugees, had doubled in 2018. Under a development partnership between India and Palestine, 17 agreements had been signed in the fields of agriculture, health care, information technology, youth affairs, consular affairs, women's empowerment and media, and approximately \$70 million of financial support and project assistance had been provided over a five-year period.

29. Although UNRWA was responsible for the welfare of 5.4 million Palestine refugees, all of its resources came from voluntary contributions from a limited donor base. As a result, even core services, notably in the fields of education, health, and assistance to the most vulnerable, were susceptible to interruption. His delegation appreciated the response from donors to ensure that those services were uninterrupted, which had temporarily reduced the financial shortfall. Given that the criterion for membership in the Agency's Advisory Commission was to have contributed \$15 million in the previous three years, his delegation hoped that members would scale up future contributions where necessary. Furthermore, the Commissioner-General should expand measures to enhance efficiency, which had resulted in approximately \$100 million in savings. However,

austerity measures were not the only means by which UNRWA could deliver on its mandate. Adequate, sustainable and predictable funding was also necessary. Additional resource allocation from the regular budget could be considered. His delegation urged other traditional donors to consider enhancing their contributions and non-donor Member States to consider making a contribution as a practical way of expressing their continued solidarity with Palestine refugees.

30. **Mr. Atan** (Malaysia) said that the deteriorating situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, continued to pose a grave threat to the survival of the Palestinian people, including Palestine refugees. In addition, the impact of armed violence on the Agency's ability to safely deliver its most crucial services, including health and education, gave cause for concern. His delegation reiterated its unwavering support for UNRWA in providing assistance, protection and advocacy for over 5 million Palestine refugees and remained steadfast in its support to restore the inalienable rights of Palestinians, including their right to establish an independent sovereign State of Palestine on the basis of the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. As a firm supporter and regular contributor to the Palestinian cause, his Government had provided financial and in-kind assistance, particularly for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Palestinian communities. Malaysian non-governmental organizations also regularly provided relief to the Palestinian people. His delegation would continue to work closely with UNRWA and all relevant parties to alleviate the suffering of refugees and ensure that the rights of the most vulnerable Palestinians were preserved and protected.

31. **Ms. Krisnamurthi** (Indonesia) said that, sadly, over 5.2 million Palestine refugees bore the consequences of the current political impasse on the question of Palestine. Her delegation once again rejected the politicization of the Agency's work; refugees should never be used as bargaining chips on a political chessboard. The United Nations had a responsibility to ensure adequate, sustainable and predictable funding for UNRWA because the refugee problem was a global problem, and the international community must bear those challenges, as it failed to grant Palestine refugees the right of return and the right to live in peace and human dignity.

32. The Agency's finances had already been in a terrible state when the United States had reduced its contribution by \$300 million, leaving UNRWA with a shortfall of \$446 million. While its partners had mounted an extraordinary response that had generated \$238 million within six months, the United Nations had

been able to provide only a minimum contribution of 6 per cent. The Organization must do more. In August 2018, the United States Government had announced that it would no longer fund UNRWA, in contradiction to its history of support for refugees, further compounding the Agency's situation. Commitments from the international community were paramount in responding to the financial constraints faced by many international humanitarian agencies. In that connection, Indonesia had increased its contribution to UNRWA in 2018. The people and the Government had contributed approximately \$1.36 million to a number of projects, including the establishment of an Indonesian cardiac centre in Gaza and various capacity-building programmes. Furthermore, the international community and UNRWA must explore innovative ways to strengthen the Agency's capability. Stronger collaboration with various stakeholders, including the private sector, civil societies and philanthropists, could significantly support its work.

33. **Mr. Yao Shaojun** (China) said that, in providing health, education and other services to 5.3 million Palestine refugees, UNRWA upheld their rights and dignity and eased pressures on host countries. The Agency also played an active role in promoting regional peace and stability and in stemming the spread of extremist ideology and terrorism. In the face of rising humanitarian demand, UNRWA had been working actively to improve efficiency and overcome underfunding and movement restrictions. Nevertheless, the international community must continue to increase its political and financial support to the Agency and ensure that it received more adequate, predictable and sustainable funding. In that connection, his delegation applauded the increased contributions made by various parties in 2018 and called on all parties to intensify their support. China had contributed to UNRWA for over 30 years and also provided assistance to Palestine refugees through bilateral channels, including support for relief projects in host countries. In 2018, the Government had made an additional donation of \$2 million, to complement its annual contribution of \$350,000.

34. The current instability and volatility in the Middle East had exacerbated the security and humanitarian challenges in Palestine, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and host countries were under tremendous economic and social pressure. All parties should step up their support to host countries, and Israel should cooperate with international aid efforts by lifting the blockade on the Gaza Strip. The ongoing Palestinian national reconciliation would also be conducive to alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The Palestine refugee issue could be resolved only when peace was achieved

between Palestine and Israel. China firmly supported the two-State solution and the just cause of the Palestinian people seeking to reclaim its legitimate rights.

35. **Mr. Umar** (Nigeria) said that his delegation called for a just and speedy resolution to the lingering question of Palestine refugees in accordance with international law and relevant United Nations resolutions, including General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The alarming humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the near collapse of its infrastructure as a result of the Israeli blockade and military action should be of grave concern to the international community. The freedom of movement, human rights and dignity of all Palestinians, including refugees, must be respected in accordance with international humanitarian law and relevant United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution [1860 \(2009\)](#).

36. Resolving the question of Palestine refugees was tied to broader Middle East peace. His delegation therefore called on all parties to work closely with the United Nations and its agencies to achieve the shared objective of a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine existing side by side on the basis of pre-1967 borders. It also called on States with influence over the concerned parties to encourage them to re-engage in dialogue based on relevant United Nations resolutions, the Madrid principles, the Quartet road map, the Arab Peace Initiative and other existing agreements. Furthermore, his delegation encouraged Israel to take concrete steps to freeze and reverse all settlement-related activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and implement relevant United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution [2334 \(2016\)](#). In addition, Palestinian leaders must signal their readiness to return to the negotiating table by enhancing efforts to forge unity and address militancy and other internal security challenges. It was clear that violence and unilateral actions would not resolve the long-drawn-out conflict.

37. Nigeria reaffirmed its support for the rights of the Palestinian people, particularly their right to freedom of movement, self-determination, dignity and access to religious sites in occupied East Jerusalem, as well as their inalienable right to live without fear of persecution in pursuit of their political, economic, social, cultural and religious aspirations.

38. **Ms. Al-Hammadi** (United Arab Emirates) said that her delegation appreciated the tireless efforts of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA and its staff as they worked to ensure that the Agency could fulfil its important mission and support Palestine refugees, particularly by launching numerous initiatives to bridge

the funding gap in its budget. UNRWA played an important role in providing basic, crucial assistance to over 5 million Palestine refugees who were suffering under difficult humanitarian conditions. Through its education programmes and other important services, the Agency contributed to building a better future for Palestine refugees and protecting their rights. It also played an important role in promoting security and stability in the region.

39. Donor countries should therefore continue to provide funding contributions to the Agency. The United Arab Emirates was one of its main donors and had contributed over \$173 million in 2017 and 2018. Under its foreign aid policy, her Government focused on education and training for trainers in order to build a bright future for young people. As part of those efforts, it had contributed an additional \$50 million to support the Agency's education programmes in 2018. It had also provided \$2 million in February 2018 in support of health-care services to ensure that there was enough fuel to power hospitals in the Gaza Strip.

40. Her Government was focused on finding a just and sustainable solution to the Palestinian issue to end the suffering of the Palestinian people and create an independent Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with relevant international resolutions. It was committed to honouring its duty to support all humanitarian causes across the world and would continue to work with international partners and United Nations agencies in that regard.

41. **Mr. Husni** (Sudan) said that the tragic situation and suffering of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territory and beyond as a result of the occupying Power's blockade, violations, violence, displacement, killings, detentions, confiscations, demolitions and continued restrictions on livelihoods had been exacerbated by the arbitrary reduction in support to UNRWA. As a result, the Agency had been unable to cover the costs of schools, hospitals, poverty reduction programmes and other social services. Reducing contributions to UNRWA would not ensure stability and security in the region. In fact, depriving children of an education might be more dangerous for the occupying Power than war or bombings because it was an investment in hatred, war and extremism. Educated children were agents of peace and coexistence. There was no justification for ceasing assistance to a defenceless people that had been languishing under occupation for more than 70 years and had been subjected to discrimination and displacement simply for seeking to establish its own independent State with Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with relevant

United Nations resolutions and international law. The bleak situation of the Palestinian people would inspire it to stand its ground and continue to fight until it achieved its goals, especially the right of return. Those goals were in reach, and the desire for peace across the world was on the rise. Historically, challenges such as the blockade and the financial crisis had unified nations. His delegation called on all peace-loving nations to continue supporting and funding UNRWA so that it could carry out its noble mission.

42. **Mr. Listov** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation had consistently advocated for adequate funding for UNRWA. Given the high standards of education and health care that the Agency provided in the region, it was unfortunate that its largest donor, the United States Government, had decided to cease funding. The Agency also carried a huge burden in providing emergency assistance to Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic, where refugee camps needed to be reconstructed, including Yarmouk, which had long been controlled by terrorists from Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the Nusrah Front. Unlike many international humanitarian organizations, UNRWA had maintained a neutral position over many years, in spite of external pressures, and had avoided politicizing its efforts to fulfil its broad mandate.

43. His Government had allocated \$10 million to be transferred to the Agency over a period of five years, from 2017 to 2021, and had made the first and second instalments. As a permanent member of the Security Council and an active participant in the Quartet, the Russian Federation was keen to develop mutually respectful relations with Palestinians and assist in the Middle East peace process. The issue of refugees was a political and final status issue and should be resolved in direct negotiations between the parties concerned. Any attempt to present the situation otherwise was futile and deviated from the internationally agreed foundation for Middle East peace, with the two States living side by side in peace and security.

44. **Archbishop Auza** (Observer for the Holy See) said that a fully functional UNRWA remained the best means to prevent the situation in the Middle East from worsening, at greater cost to the international community. In Gaza alone, where unemployment stood at approximately 43 per cent, UNRWA provided jobs for over 13,000 people. Despite its invaluable work, the Agency now faced the largest funding shortfall in its history, as its needs far exceeded the voluntary financial contributions it received. The international community must therefore show greater sensitivity to the plight of refugees across the region and provide the Agency with

the financial assistance necessary to adequately serve them.

45. Some States wished to limit the status of Palestine refugees to those who had fled Palestine in 1948, excluding those descendants who were eligible for registration through the paternal line. Such a restrictive understanding gave cause for concern, as it would deprive the stateless descendants of the first wave of refugees of any claim to support. The international community had a grave responsibility to facilitate the settlement of the millions of refugees concerned and protect their right to a homeland, where they could live in peace and security.

46. Despite the setbacks and seemingly insurmountable difficulties, the Holy See reaffirmed its unwavering support for the two-State solution as the only viable, long-term option to address the extended statelessness of Palestinians. The international community must refocus its efforts on a return to meaningful negotiations, as the Agency's work would not be complete until such negotiations produced tangible, lasting results. Its current mandate, which was scheduled to end in 2020, must receive the political support necessary to enable the Agency to continue its work as long as it was essential to the welfare of Palestine refugees. As the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approached, the international community must renew its commitment so that all peoples, including Palestine refugees, could celebrate and enjoy the fundamental rights enshrined in the Declaration.

47. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)) said that, in light of the Agency's unprecedented financial challenges, there had been no certainty in January 2018 that it would have been able to continue to deliver its services uninterrupted. He therefore expressed his appreciation to the host Governments, donor community and Member States that had supported UNRWA. The Agency's mandate was exclusively humanitarian in nature, as determined by the General Assembly, and focused on men, women and children in very extreme circumstances. Despite some criticism, UNRWA would remain steadfast in its determination to implement its mandate, guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality. It did not participate in political discussions or consultations to negotiate a solution to the conflict. Furthermore, the Agency had not and could not define its own mandate. That responsibility belonged exclusively to Member States, through the General Assembly. UNRWA had been tasked with providing assistance and protection to

Palestine refugees until a just, lasting and inclusive solution could be found, and any suggestion to the contrary was misleading.

48. It was a misrepresentation to suggest that Palestine refugees were somehow a unique community under international law and the only group to enjoy the transfer of refugee status across generations. Under international law and the principle of family unity, the children of refugees and their descendants were also considered refugees until a durable solution was found. Both UNRWA and UNHCR recognized the descendants of refugees on that basis, which was a practice that had been widely accepted by the international community. Protracted refugee crises existed in many places in the world, and Palestine refugees were not treated any differently in that regard.

49. The Agency's ongoing existence was proof that a refugee community could receive meaningful, lasting support that preserved opportunities and hope with the assistance of Member States. However, it was also a reminder of the abysmal failure of the parties and the international community to bring about a solution to the conflict. Under the Oslo Accords, a transition phase of 5 to 10 years had been foreseen, during which UNRWA would have handed over its installations, some of its staff and its responsibility to the nascent Palestinian Authority. That vision should continue to guide the international community. However, as had always been clearly established by the General Assembly and its Member States, a just, lasting and inclusive peace must be established before UNRWA could hand over its equipment and installations.

50. It was sometimes tempting to point the finger at humanitarian actors in times of difficulty. However, the responsibility to resolve conflicts rested with the parties and the international community. Since taking office two years earlier, the Secretary-General had highlighted the need for more energy to be invested in conflict prevention and resolution. The Agency's staff did not want it to remain in existence forever, but they lived and worked on the front lines of human suffering and were perfectly placed to observe the human consequences of unresolved armed conflict. They called on the international community and on the parties to address the underlying causes with greater courage and determination. Even if UNRWA ceased to exist, there would still be Palestine refugees under international law whose needs would have to be addressed, and there was no real alternative to UNRWA in that regard, as many participants had noted.

51. The rules and obligations under the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law, which

governed armed conflicts, applied to all parties, both State and non-State actors. While it was human nature to spend more time focusing on the violations of the opposing party, it took great courage to recognize and discuss the violations committed by one's own party or a supported party. More courage was needed in a context like Israel and Palestine, as there were extremely concerning developments every day in that regard.

52. The financial generosity of Member States and the strength of their expressions of support and trust in the Agency were remarkable. Many had mentioned that 2019 would remain a significant challenge. However, a number of Member States had indicated their determination to maintain the current year's funding levels, and many States had already embarked on multi-year agreements. In conflict zones, it took decades to rebuild infrastructure and re-establish service delivery at the national and international levels. The Agency had 711 schools, 140 health-care centres and dozens of other installations that were part of the institutional backbone of the Middle East. Once a peace agreement was reached, those institutions could be handed over to an independent Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

Statements made in exercise of the right of reply

53. **Mr. Bachman** (Israel) said that his delegation appreciated the humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA to the Palestinians and wished to remind the international community of the events leading to the Palestine refugee problem. In 1947, Jews had joyfully accepted General Assembly resolution 181 (II), which had suggested the establishment of two States. However, the Palestinians and the Arab world had categorically rejected it and had staged a war against Israel, operating under the notion that they would eliminate the so-called State of Israel because a Jewish presence made up mainly of Holocaust survivors would not be able to withstand the strong, organized Arab militaries. However, Israel had miraculously won the war, and the Palestinian problem had existed ever since.

54. The tradition of blaming Israel for that problem had become a ritual, but it should be reconsidered, as the Palestinians and the Arab world did not bear less responsibility. They could and should help to solve the problem, rather than perpetuate it for the purpose of strangling the State of Israel. There had been no goodwill on behalf of the Palestinians to negotiate with Israel. Through the Organization, they attempted to achieve politically what they had been unable to achieve militarily. In the United Nations, the vast majority of votes supported Palestine, while Israel, a small democracy in the Middle East, had just one vote to offer.

Although decisions were made by a majority, which was very democratic, in too many cases, the decisions and resolutions taken were not the right ones and obviously did not support peace in the Middle East.

55. The right of return was referenced by some Member States as if it were the only solution to the Palestine refugee problem. However, other bodies that were dedicated to alleviating the suffering of refugees, such as UNHCR, also offered alternative solutions. While repatriation was a policy preference, it was not a right and it was not a requirement. It did not trump all other considerations or have to be protected at all costs. Unlike UNRWA, UNHCR also worked to integrate refugees into asylum States or to resettle them in third countries, particularly in situations of ongoing conflict, as was the case for Palestinian and Israel. Such solutions were needed to address the Palestine refugee problem, given that the Organization's traditional approach of focusing on the right of return was a mistake that played into the hands of those who sought to perpetuate the conflict by increasing the number of refugees. General Assembly resolution 194 (III), which was not legally binding, did not grant Palestine refugees the right of return. In fact, Arab countries had rejected the resolution at the time precisely for that reason, as well as its implied recognition of Israel. Nevertheless, they now subjectively and incorrectly interpreted it as granting Palestine refugees an exclusive, unique, individual, superior and non-negotiable right. Providing humanitarian aid did not mean giving false hope to millions of people in suggesting that they would enjoy the right of return to a homeland that they had never left or lived in. Such a position exacerbated the situation of the Palestinians and made peace less attainable.

56. The Palestinians had never shown even the slightest willingness to roll back their dream of greater Palestine in place of Israel. In the political, educational and cultural spheres, Palestinian society continued to perpetuate the goal of return, contrary to their rationale of reconciliation and peace. It was disingenuous to simultaneously call for the creation of a Palestinian nation State and demand the right to settle in yet another State, in Israel. No such right existed under international law, nor had one been created by relevant United Nations resolutions or agreements reached between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

57. Resettlement was not possible under the mandate of UNRWA. The United Nations must turn to solving the Palestine refugee problem rather than allowing it to inflate over time. Unfortunately, his Government's offers to make peace had been rejected by the Palestinian people, who were now split into two territories. One squarely rejected the very existence of

the State of Israel and the other talked about peace but was not actually acting to achieve it. His delegation called upon the Palestinians to reconcile and understand that the refugee problem would not be solved by the right of return. There would be no return to Israel; a Palestinian State would be established for Palestinians, including the refugees.

58. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that, while each country had its national narrative, one that distorted and negated history was called propaganda, which was offensive and should have no place in diplomatic discourse. The events being discussed had taken place just over 70 years earlier. In 1947 and 1948, over 800,000 Palestinians had been driven from their homes in Mandate Palestine. Some had been forcibly expelled, while others had fled the terror, killing and destruction imposed by Jewish militias. Regardless of which party had initiated the conflict, the Palestinians had been deliberately uprooted and prevented from returning; it had not simply been the collateral damage of war. They should have been able to return to their homes, their lands and their properties when hostilities had concluded under the General Armistice Agreements of 1949. However, it was a well-known fact that Israel had not wanted the Palestinian Arab population living in what had become the State of Israel. It had deemed it acceptable to hold onto the land that it had conquered and seized in the war, far beyond what it had been allotted in the Palestine Plan of Partition, but not to allow hundreds of thousands of civilians waiting in refugee camps in 1949 to return to their homes to live in peace. The history of that intentional and deliberate ethnic cleansing had been fully documented, foremost by Israeli historians. Israel bore the main responsibility for that human tragedy. It refused to allow further return and razed homes and villages to callously pretend that the Palestinians had not even existed and to claim that they had no rights, particularly the right of return.

59. For the Palestinian people, it was not a claim of return; it was a right, as was the case for any refugee in the world. Israel could not continue to be selective when it was convenient, citing General Assembly resolution 181 (II), which had partitioned Palestine and led to the establishment of Israel, and then boasting that General Assembly resolutions were not binding when deriding the Palestinian people's right of return, as affirmed in General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The right of return had been reaffirmed and recalled over 150 times in international legislation, practically transforming it into customary international law. On the basis of resolution 194 (III) and in line with the fundamental

tenets of international law, Palestine refugees unquestionably and unequivocally had rights.

60. She called on the representative of Israel to stop dehumanizing the Palestinian people and disparaging the rest of the international community for having repeatedly reaffirmed their rights. Acknowledging those rights and the injustice, hardships and indignations that the Palestinians had been forced to experience was the first step to finding a just and agreed solution in accordance with resolution 194 (III) and the Arab Peace Initiative, to which her Government was committed. The Israeli Government could begin to truly envision and create genuine peace and coexistence once the legitimate national aspirations of the Palestinian people were realized and accepted, which the Palestinian leadership was fully committed to and had negotiated in good faith for over a quarter century, since the Oslo Accords. Despite the current rhetoric of Israel, her delegation remained committed to a peaceful solution based on international law, relevant resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative. Her Government awaited an Israeli partner to achieve that peace, as opposed to the current Israeli Government that undoubtedly sought to impose greater Israel, in complete violation of international law, United Nations resolutions and the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. Lastly, her delegation was grateful to the international community for its reaffirmations of support.

61. **Mr. Bachman** (Israel) said that his Government had acknowledged the right of the Palestinians to establish their own State and had accepted the idea of a two-State solution. The Palestinians must resolve the Palestine refugee issue within the framework of their future State. However, it was not possible to have both the right to return to Israel and a Palestinian State.

62. His Government wished for Palestinians to have the greatest life possible. The problem was that the Palestinians were divided and their leadership had repeatedly led them down the wrong path. The rift was incredibly severe; it was possible that the only thing that both parties hated more than Israel was one another. His Government wished to see the Palestinians speaking in one voice under a leader with whom it could negotiate peace. However, the Palestinian President, who had served for 13 years, surpassing his original mandate without holding elections, could not even visit half of his constituency in Gaza. He therefore wondered how Israel was considered the obstacle to peace. His Government called on the Palestinians to be a little more frank with themselves in order to acknowledge the truth. The State of Israel existed, and discussing other solutions to the Palestine refugees issue was not a recognition of Israel. If 5.4 million Palestinians came to

their homes, the State of Israel would cease to exist. Consequently, he reiterated that there would be no right of return. A solution to the Palestine refugee issue must be found within the framework of a future Palestinian State.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.