



# General Assembly

Seventy-third session

Official Records

Distr.: General  
10 December 2018

Original: English

## Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

### Summary record of the 24th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 9 November 2018, at 3 p.m.

*Chair:* Mr. Alhakbani ..... (Saudi Arabia)  
*later:* Mr. Kemayah, Sr. .... (Liberia)

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*In the absence of Mr. Kemayah, Sr. (Liberia), Mr. Alhakbani (Saudi Arabia), Vice-Chair, took the Chair.*

*The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.*

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

*Statement by the Commissioner-General of UNRWA*

1. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)) said that the Agency had faced sudden and unprecedented challenges to its work on the ground in 2018. UNRWA had addressed those challenges with resolve and creativity and was on a path to overcoming the greatest financial predicament in its history, thanks in large part to the remarkable support extended by Member States. Pending a just and lasting solution to the Palestine refugee question, the international community's commitment to the human development of the refugee community remained essential to human dignity, regional stability and the preservation of strong multilateralism.

2. Palestine refugees in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, were a diverse community in a fragmented region, bound by a common identity shaped by dispossession and the unresolved political circumstances at the heart of their prolonged refugee status. They had been deeply marked by the effects of ongoing conflict, itself exacerbated by the lack of political progress, announcements on Jerusalem and pressures on the Agency's funding and operations. In Gaza, Palestine refugees had joined the Great March to the border with Israel, where the use of armed force had injured more Palestinians than the entire 50-day war in 2014. Thousands of Gazan young people, many of them refugees, would carry debilitating injuries for years to come, with medical treatment outside the Strip restricted and the public medical system inside it in a state of near collapse.

3. It was difficult to describe the depth of despair resulting from the combination of conflict, occupation and blockade in the Strip, where 13 UNRWA schoolchildren aged 11 to 16 had been killed during the marches. The commitment of Member States to supporting the Agency's services was essential, as the children of Gaza had no alternative to the UNRWA school system.

4. In the West Bank, the threat of forced displacement hung over many communities, symbolized by the Bedouin hamlet of Khan al-Ahmar, whose demolition was imminent. Access to the essentials of life, to family and to East Jerusalem was precarious. Confronted with the pervasive effects of the occupation, Palestine refugees in the West Bank and East Jerusalem had in UNRWA the only consistent and dedicated service provider concerned about preserving their well-being and dignity.

5. In the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, years of brutal siege had given way to mass destruction that year, and most of the Palestine refugees who had called the camp home had nothing to return to. In Idlib, 6,000 Palestine refugee families were inaccessible and at risk. Six students aged 12 to 15 had been killed by mortar and gunfire in 2018.

6. In Lebanon, refugees remained cut off from government services and most formal employment. Driven into despair by poverty, some were taking risks to flee. A five-year-old Palestine refugee had been among the dead when a boat carrying migrants had capsized on the dangerous journey to Europe.

7. Palestine refugees living in Jordan had experienced great vulnerability despite the broad inclusion they enjoyed in that country. Many, including persons displaced from Gaza, relied on UNRWA for services and the most basic assistance to alleviate poverty.

8. With refugee need at the highest level UNRWA had seen in decades, the Agency had been forced to contend with a massive shock when \$300 million in funding had been cut following an abrupt decision by the United States of America, its largest single donor, to scale down its support to \$60 million for 2018. The United States had since announced that it would not contribute any funds as of 2019. While recognizing that funding a humanitarian organization remained a sovereign decision, he regretted that Government's decision to end its funding because it had been such a generous and historically formidable partner to UNRWA.

9. As the sole provider of essential services to millions in unstable environments, the Agency's resulting unprecedented financial crisis and \$446 million shortfall had been staggering. Equivalent to 40 per cent of its operating income, that shortfall had threatened its entire service system in and around 58 camps in the region. Those services included general education for 525,000 students in UNRWA schools, deemed a global public good by the World Bank; essential primary care for some three million patients

through a network of 140 clinics delivering health outcomes equivalent to those of middle-income countries on a per capita health expenditure closer to those of low-income countries; and food assistance for 1.7 million refugees in complex emergencies including Gaza and Syria, where the Agency had been reaching 95 per cent of targeted beneficiaries – the most effective intervention of its kind in the Syrian conflict.

10. Given its responsibility to assist and protect refugees on behalf of Member States and the tensions felt by UNRWA staff serving in highly polarized settings, suspending operations had been exceptionally difficult for the Agency. In response, it had launched the #DignityIsPriceless global campaign, sparking a broad wave of collective mobilization accompanied by diplomatic engagement at the highest levels. Ministerial meetings in Rome and New York had mobilized \$100 million and \$122 million in pledges respectively; as co-Chair of both meetings and host to the largest number of Palestine refugees, Jordan merited recognition, along with Egypt, the European Union, Germany, Japan, Sweden and Turkey as co-Chairs.

11. Since January, donors had contributed or pledged an additional \$382 million, bringing the Agency's shortfall down to \$64 million. The gap remaining until the end of the year, though modest, was money UNRWA needed for essential expenditures, lest it swell the 2019 shortfall. However, several countries had given indications of additional contributions.

12. He paid tribute to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the European Union High Representative and the Secretaries-General of the League of Arab States and of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation for their roles in the positive results achieved. Led by Saudi Arabia, the Agency's Arab partners had been among the most generous donors in recent years, accounting for 50 per cent of additional pledges in 2018. Sustaining their substantial increase in funding for core activities was indispensable to the operational stability of UNRWA moving forward.

13. Over the previous year, 40 countries and institutions from every regional grouping had increased their contributions to the Agency. Notably, host Governments had increased direct support in addition to the extraordinary economic, political, social and other responsibilities they had assumed in accommodating the Palestine refugees. However, important pledges made throughout the year had yet to be disbursed; that must happen swiftly.

14. As an operational agency reliant on voluntary funding, UNRWA practiced efficiency and financial discipline in its planning, management and delivery.

Without the rigid cost controls applied to its 2018 budget, the Agency's shortfall of \$446 million would have reached \$538 million. In addition, between 2015 and 2017 UNRWA had fast-tracked difficult reforms, enforced Agency-wide austerity and saved \$197 million. In the face of rising refugee needs and operating costs, UNRWA had avoided service cuts, a feat unimaginable for any other humanitarian organization. He appreciated the recognition of stakeholders, notably major donors, of the Agency's continuing effort to achieve efficiencies.

15. Increasingly, several assertions about Palestine refugees had been raised in the media, in various political forums, and with the Commissioner-General directly during his visits to donor capitals and throughout the region. One of those assertions was that unlike the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only UNRWA registered the children and grandchildren of refugees. The claim that the Agency was inflating the number of Palestine refugees was an outright misrepresentation. Children born to refugees, and their descendants, were recognized as refugees by both UNRWA and UNHCR under their respective mandates. Refugees from other countries had been displaced for decades and, naturally, had continued to raise families in the countries hosting them. Their descendants were recognized as refugees and assisted as such by UNHCR until lasting solutions were found.

16. In response to the assertion that UNRWA was perpetuating the Palestine refugee question by calling for a return to a place of origin – in contrast to UNHCR, which was presented as finding solutions by resettling refugees in third countries – he stressed that unlike UNRWA, UNHCR had a mandate to seek solutions, whether via return or resettlement. Under international law, the preferred solution for all refugees was voluntary return in safety and dignity.

17. He was disturbed by the notion that Palestine refugees were a problem or an obstacle to the search for peace in the Middle East, as if they were responsible for the unresolved conflict or could be disregarded. What they were was a community of people who had experienced extremes of violence, suffering and injustice. No matter how often attempts were made to minimize or delegitimize their individual and collective experiences, their rights under international law were undeniable and could not be wished away. The responsibility for their situation lay squarely with the parties and the international community for its lack of will or utter inability to bring about a negotiated and peaceful resolution of the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

18. For over 20 years, Palestinian textbooks had come under scrutiny on a regular basis, with a focus on content relating to Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Agency had taken the initiative to review the textbooks, and was unique in doing so through the lens of United Nations values. It was deeply important to UNRWA to deliver an education that respected both United Nations values and the Palestinian people's history.

19. Palestine began introducing new textbooks into its schools in 2016. While the vast majority of primary school textbooks had presented no problems, some of the new content had triggered concerns. UNRWA had reviewed all new textbooks, focusing on political bias, neutrality, age appropriateness and gender representation, and found issues on just over three per cent of thousands of pages. Those issues had been raised with Palestine at both technical and senior levels, and teachers had been provided with updated guidance and direct support.

20. UNRWA was on the cutting edge of education in a region hit hard by conflict and extremism. Remarkable progress had been made towards instilling a vision of human rights and other United Nations values in the Agency's gender-balanced education system, and multi-year reforms were fostering critical and independent thinking in a rising generation of Palestine refugee children.

21. The Agency took neutrality extremely seriously, embracing it as an active principle crucial to preserving access, trust and credibility in highly polarized environments. The recent financial crisis had affected capacity in some neutrality-related functions. Internal arrangements were being made to ensure resources were directed to critical areas. The Great Marches to the Gaza border had posed another challenge in the social media sphere, as heavy loss of life and massive injuries had sparked widespread outrage. To date, there had been no allegations of social media violations by UNRWA staff, a testament to their dedication to the Agency's mission.

22. In 2017, events in Gaza had created some of the Agency's most serious neutrality challenges in recent memory. When an UNRWA investigation had found that two staff members had held or been elected into senior political positions in Hamas, the Agency had swiftly terminated their employment. Tunnels discovered by UNRWA under two of its Gaza schools during repair works had been sealed with concrete, and the Agency had issued strong public condemnation and protested vigorously to Hamas. UNRWA would remain vigilant and would not hesitate to take action to respond to similar incidents in the future. Given the Agency's exceptional challenges in sustaining its humanitarian

mission, he asked Member States to ensure that the work of UNRWA was not politicized and to help the Agency preserve its independent, humanitarian character.

23. While there was no doubting the pain of Palestine refugees, compounded by their protracted displacement, it would be incorrect to limit them to an identity of victimhood, given their great strength and creativity. Moreover, with the recent opening of UNRWA schools on time despite immense financial pressures, there was much to celebrate. UNRWA operations remained as important as they had been at the time of the Agency's inception; together, UNRWA and Member States had contributed to one of the most successful human development processes for a refugee community in recent history, including major steps towards attaining vital Sustainable Development Goals. The Agency's installations were part of a vital institutional backbone, fostering conditions that supported the international community's search for peace. A crucial component of that search was to help the parties rediscover the humanity in the other, a task incumbent upon the international community in the Middle East conflict.

24. Aseel, a Palestine refugee girl from Lebanon and Ahmad, a Palestine refugee boy from Jordan, accompanying him to the high-level session of the General Assembly, had declared that they wanted to be recognized for their skills and desire to contribute to global solutions. They and many others embodied the humanity of a generation of refugee youth determined to rise above adversity. UNRWA drew inspiration from that humanity and would continue to champion the Palestine refugees' quest for dignity.

25. *Mr. Kemayah, Sr. (Liberia) took the Chair.*

#### *Interactive dialogue*

26. **Ms. Donatirin** (Indonesia) said that her delegation would welcome information on measures taken by the Agency to meet the basic needs of and provide health and education services to the 400,000 Palestine refugees remaining in camps in Syria and those who had fled elsewhere in the region.

27. **Mr. Husni** (Sudan), lauding the Commissioner-General's committed service to Palestine refugees in Gaza, asked how donor support for UNRWA was expected to evolve over the next two years. He thanked all donors that had pledged at the recent pledging conferences in Rome and New York, and wondered whether the Agency planned to organize pledging conferences in collaboration with such organizations as the African Union, the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Lastly, he enquired whether UNRWA might provide Palestine

refugee students with scholarships to study abroad. The Sudan stood ready to grant Palestinian students scholarships for study in Sudanese academic institutions.

28. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine), thanking the Commissioner-General for his tireless and humane advocacy, said that the Agency's commendable humanitarian and development programmes extended vital assistance to Palestine refugees in spite of unstable operational circumstances and a perennial financial shortfall. UNRWA initiatives for youth were especially important, as they provided opportunities to learn and grow, giving them a much-needed sense of hope and dignity and enabling them to engage positively with their communities, societies and nation. She asked the Commissioner-General to elaborate on current and forthcoming initiatives for youth and how such initiatives correlated with the Agency's efforts to promote the Sustainable Development Goals.

29. **Mr. Bachman** (Israel) said that his Government thanked the Commissioner-General for the humanitarian assistance the Agency provided to Palestinians. However, the facts on the ground showed that very few Palestinians met the legal criteria for refugee status; only tens of thousands could be considered refugees under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and 2.2 million were citizens of Jordan. In no other situation in the world would a citizen of a country be allowed to hold refugee status. In addition, 2.1 million UNRWA beneficiaries in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had never left the territory, which had been part of the British Mandate over Palestine, and therefore could not be considered refugees from Palestine. The Agency's mandate permitted it to differentiate between those it considered refugees and others who were descendants of refugees. Its failure to do so was a political decision that directly caused a spike in the Agency's budgetary needs.

30. He asked why UNRWA inflated the number of so-called refugees, how it justified classifying millions of Jordanian citizens and people who never left as refugees, how the problem of refugees and descendants of refugees would be solved, and which entity would address it if the Agency's mandate did not include resettlement of refugees. Lastly, he wished to know how UNRWA was functioning in the Gaza Strip with so much terrorist activity in the territory, including against Agency officials, some of whom had been withdrawn from their posts as a result of aggression perpetrated by the very beneficiaries of UNRWA services.

31. **Mr. Mounzer** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that UNRWA reports continued to neglect his Government's active role in supporting Palestine refugees and the Agency itself. Under General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), the UNRWA mandate encompassed the provision of health, education, relief and social services for Palestine refugees. Moreover, before the terrorist war on Syria had begun, Palestine refugees had enjoyed security and protection and had been treated like Syrian citizens in every respect by the Syrian Government, which continued that policy to date. The displacement, killing and devastation wrought in Palestine refugee communities and in certain refugee camps had been perpetrated by the armed terrorist groups that his Government had requested UNRWA and the United Nations to expel from refugee camps, where they had wrought havoc until the camps had been liberated by the Syrian Arab Army.

32. The Agency's reports must address the adverse effects of the shortfall on emergency funding, which did not exceed 40 per cent in the best of times, on support for Palestine refugees. It was incumbent upon UNRWA leadership and donors to mobilize larger contributions in order to meet refugee needs and fund the Agency's reconstruction of the camps. UNRWA reports also neglected the fact that the Syrian Arab Republic had placed 57 government schools at the Agency's disposal, free of charge, to replace the schools it had lost to the depredations of armed terrorist groups. When those groups overran the Yarmouk refugee camp, his Government had escorted students out of the camp, facilitated their examinations and enrolled them in different institutions. Finally, any and all vandalism and destruction of Agency installations had been committed by armed terrorist groups prior to being liberated by the Syrian Arab Army.

33. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that prior to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, UNRWA operations in that country had served a community of 560,000 Palestine refugees in which heads of household had enjoyed access to employment and thus covered most of their families' needs themselves. In comparative regional terms, the Agency's budget in Syria was one of its smallest, with the refugee community mainly using UNRWA education and health care services. The war had transformed that relatively favourable economic situation in deep and painful ways. Over 120,000 Palestine refugees had since fled, either to neighbouring countries or farther afield. The situation of the Palestine refugees who had remained in Syria was one of deep displacement because many camps had been affected by conflict dynamics, the attendant destruction or loss of property and uncertainty

regarding the future. UNRWA officials in the field were doing tremendous work under difficult circumstances to alleviate the impact of the crisis on Agency beneficiaries in Syria, where the conflict had claimed the lives of 18 UNRWA staff, with another 25 reported missing. UNRWA service delivery in Jordan and Lebanon had integrated Palestine refugees fleeing from Syria; as the Agency did not operate in Turkey or beyond, its focus was limited to those two neighbouring countries as mandated areas of activity.

34. The Agency was providing gender-balanced education to some 280,000 girls and boys in the embattled Gaza Strip, most of whom had never left the territory. Quite apart from political considerations or preferences, the isolation of an entire youth community from its counterparts across political and ethnic divides did not bode well for the future of the region; whereas older generations of Palestinians had worked and lived alongside Israelis, present-day youth were unable to reap the benefits of such direct contact. Investment in efforts to enable each community to rediscover the humanity in the other was therefore crucial.

35. He expressed gratitude for the extraordinary diversity of the collective support for the Agency, reflecting the diversity of the very General Assembly that had given UNRWA its mandate. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority's close collaboration with UNRWA and its consistent support for the Agency's outreach efforts in such troubled times were greatly appreciated.

36. Recognizing the importance of initiatives for the young, UNRWA had invested significantly in protecting the education system from the impact of necessary austerity measures, which had unfortunately resulted in larger classroom sizes. Meanwhile, Palestinian youth aspired to continue developing their skills and capacities. Although the Palestinian Authority had taken the lead in seeking scholarships for Palestinian students in and beyond the region, the Agency was prepared to join that effort. Student parliaments in UNRWA schools fostered youth participation and engagement; he hoped that Palestine refugee youth would also become involved in international forums and events and thereby experience what it meant to be a global citizen.

37. Despite the Agency's differences with Israel on assessments and questions pertaining to its mandate, he noted that Government's acknowledgement of UNRWA's humanitarian work. However, the manner in which the Agency registered refugees and handled the descendants of refugees was fully in line with General Assembly resolutions and had been approved by that body. That there were certain features unique to the

situation of Palestine refugees was indisputable. Moreover, UNHCR and UNRWA agreed that refugee status was passed down from generation to generation. Although the Agency did not have a role in resettlement, the problem, as with all refugee issues, could only be addressed in the context of political resolutions of conflict. Regrettably, over the previous two decades, very few conflicts around the world had been resolved politically. Unresolved political circumstances, not the humanitarian work of agencies like UNRWA, were responsible for prolonging refugee situations, displacement and the suffering resulting from war.

38. Regarding the security implications faced by the Agency, he averred that neutrality was a guarantee that a humanitarian actor would set his or her personal feelings about a particular situation aside, maintain access to beneficiaries and preserve their trust. UNRWA had temporarily withdrawn nine of its 16 international staff after weeks of demonstrations by Palestinian staff protesting their loss of employment. The Agency had been forced to terminate 118 contracts after the United States Government had cut funding to UNRWA, effectively depriving it of money for emergency appeals. The terminated staff had protested vigorously because of the abysmal job prospects in Gaza, where unemployment had reached 50 per cent. While he deeply disagreed with the methods of protest, which had degenerated into violence and threats against Agency officials, he understood the pressure on the families of local UNRWA staff; as loan guarantors for many others in their communities, losing the ability to earn an income meant risking imprisonment for defaulting on loans. The withdrawal of nine international staff members out of a total of 12,500 staff had not constituted a drawdown of UNRWA services but had instead been intended as a tactical message to the de facto Hamas authorities, to convey the Agency's displeasure with their unwillingness or inability to provide adequate security. The message had brought about changes and therefore achieved the desired result.

39. While he would have to verify the issue raised by the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, he recalled that UNRWA regularly recognized that country's historic role in welcoming and supporting Palestine refugees. Before the war, the Agency had used 100 school buildings in Syria to serve the 66,000 students in its education system. About half of those buildings had indeed been damaged, destroyed or rendered inaccessible by the conflict, and UNRWA had reached an agreement with the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education to make public school buildings available to Palestine refugee students during afternoon shifts. The Agency had

acknowledged as much in reports and other briefings and was prepared to provide additional clarification if necessary.

40. The rehabilitation of UNRWA schools and clinics and other favourable conditions had made it possible for Palestine refugees to return to certain areas of the country. Furthermore, the Agency was currently in dialogue with the Syrian Government regarding the situation in the Yarmouk refugee camp following a first assessment mission, examining the possibility of rehabilitating UNRWA installations there and in other camps, conditions permitting.

*Statement by the Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA*

41. **Mr. Halvorsen** (Norway), introducing the report of the Working Group (A/73/349), said that the Agency was facing an unprecedented financial shortfall that threatened the human development of Palestine refugees and stability in the region. The Working Group was seriously concerned at the decision of certain Member States to withdraw their support from UNRWA. Despite measures to improve the cost effectiveness of the Agency's programmes and additional contributions from several traditional and non-traditional donors, there was currently a shortfall of \$64 million in the programme budget. The General Assembly and the international community were responsible for ensuring that the Agency could fulfil its mandate and maintain its services at an acceptable level.

42. The Working Group urged all Governments to increase their contributions to the Agency, particularly to its programme budget, and to sustain them over several years. Contributions should reflect appropriate international burden-sharing and announced contributions should be swiftly disbursed, keeping keep pace with the growing needs of the Palestine refugee population, and should take the effects of inflation and other cost factors into account.

43. Noting the recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General on the operations of UNRWA (A/71/849) and all resolutions relating to Agency financing intended to address recurring budget deficits and support the Agency's vital work, the Working Group commended UNRWA for its efforts to increase efficiency while maintaining the quality of its services to Palestine refugees. The Working Group invited all Member States to consider those recommendations when assessing possible UNRWA funding in 2018 and beyond. The Agency had made progress in containing its costs, and the Working Group encouraged Member States to accompany those

measures with adequate funding for UNRWA as it continued to serve more than 5 million Palestine refugees in the Middle East.

*General debate*

44. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that her delegation was profoundly grateful for the indispensable political and financial support extended by the international community through UNRWA, in recognition of the plight and needs of Palestine refugees. As a just solution to the question of Palestine remained elusive, the cooperation and support of host countries, donor countries and organizations and the work of all Agency staff were invaluable for upholding its mandate to protect and assist Palestine refugees.

45. Widely considered a model of effective humanitarian development assistance, the Agency's workforce mainly comprised refugees who served their communities with dedication and resilience, despite the difficult conditions and personal hardship that had multiplied with the unprecedented financial shortfall. The crisis faced by UNRWA had jeopardized its essential services, causing widespread distress among the refugee population, and had been severely exacerbated by the punitive decision by the United States to terminate funding and undermine the Agency's credibility and Palestine refugee rights. While the Agency continued to struggle with the funding gap, her delegation was heartened by the support for UNRWA and to Palestine refugees, consistent with humanitarian principles and obligations, international law and relevant United Nations resolutions.

46. Her delegation rejected baseless rhetoric aimed at redefining Palestine refugees in an attempt to strip them of their status and rights. As clarified by the United Nations, under international law and the principle of family unity, children of refugees and their descendants were considered refugees until a lasting solution was reached. Palestine refugee status and rights must therefore be respected in accordance with the relevant resolutions, international conventions and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. The right to return must be seriously and humanely addressed in the context of a just and lasting solution, as it was not a claim but rather an individual and collective right to which all refugees were entitled, as affirmed in General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and reaffirmed in numerous subsequent resolutions. Such a right could not simply be negated to accommodate the narrative and schemes of Israel to ensure a Jewish majority.

47. All attempts to discredit UNRWA and delegitimize Palestine refugees must be denounced. Far from the offensive claim that it perpetuated the refugee problem, UNRWA had helped alleviate the impact of a human tragedy for both Palestine refugees and host countries. Despite extraordinary challenges, it had ensured the well-being of refugees across generations and prevented further spillover of the crisis. The Agency had provided exemplary humanitarian and development assistance, including its education programme and promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals, thereby tangibly contributing to regional stability.

48. Her delegation appreciated the convening of several high-level meetings to address the financial shortfall and avert the risks posed to the Agency's operations, which reflected serious resolve to remedy the crisis and sent a crucial message of solidarity to the refugees. It was also deeply grateful for the generosity of traditional and new donors and Arab partners, many of whom had accelerated and significantly increased their contributions that year, helping to ensure continuity of the Agency's vital programmes.

49. Forced displacement and dispossession continued to afflict refugees as their rights were repeatedly denied by Israel. Millions of refugee families suffered pervasive insecurity and deprivation in the form of conflict, poverty, unemployment and socioeconomic decline. The consequent critical loss of hope had been intensified by the lack of a political horizon and opportunities, which was particularly damaging for youth as it made them more vulnerable to radicalism. Any interruption or suspension of UNRWA services would significantly exacerbate their hardship and destabilize the fragile situation on the ground. The Agency's cost-cutting measures and the funding cut by the United States had stoked fears among refugees of abandonment by the international community.

50. Unease among refugees was particularly acute in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, resulting from the intensity of the illegal occupation and human rights violations by Israel, which were most severe in Gaza. UNRWA remained a lifeline for refugee families throughout the region, including Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon and particularly the Bedouin community. The essential humanitarian and emergency assistance provided by UNRWA must be sustained until a just solution was reached to restore the rights, dignity, security and prosperity that the refugees had so long been denied.

51. Palestine called on the international community to firmly support refugee rights and the mandate of UNRWA and urged the endorsement of the resolutions

being considered. It was crucial to address the recurrent financial shortfall and to generate sufficient and predictable funding. Her delegation advocated increased and sustained voluntary contributions and support for Agency efforts to expand and diversify its donor base. There should also be engagement to implement the World Bank trust fund and the establishment of a Waqf Fund by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Efforts must be redoubled to end the grave injustice, and political and moral will must be mobilized to hold Israel accountable for its crimes and to promote a just, lasting solution to the question of Palestine.

52. **Mr. Moncada** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), speaking on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, said that the Movement firmly supported the Agency and its mandate, and commended the valuable assistance to Palestine refugees provided by UNRWA and the bravery and dedication of its staff in adverse situations. The international community's firm support was essential to ensure the continuity of services, particularly in light of recurrent financial shortfalls. The funding crisis triggered by the punitive, unjustified decision by the United States to withdraw contributions was regrettable. It not only affected the most vulnerable of the Palestine people and the provision of humanitarian assistance, but also threatened regional stability. The Israeli authorities' announced closure of Agency offices in occupied East Jerusalem was concerning, and his delegation called for respect for the Charter of the United Nations and the privileges and immunities of the Organization.

53. The current Israeli occupation constituted a daily, constant and severe protection crisis, occasioning existential threats and increasing poverty and desperation among the refugees. A series of crises in the region, including the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, had intensified the need for humanitarian assistance and triggered the flight of many refugees to other countries. The Movement was seriously concerned at recent developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, particularly the unprecedented rise in forced displacements, widespread settler violence, escalating demolitions of homes and economic assets, all intended to expand its illegal settlement campaign and consolidate its occupation of Palestine land. The restrictions on movement and access faced by Palestine refugees and Agency staff were also deeply troubling, and continued to degrade the living conditions and well-being of the Palestine refugees.

54. The illegal, inhuman blockade of Gaza imposed by Israel, the occupying Power, continued to inflict inestimable harm on the region and the Palestine people by obstructing humanitarian assistance and basic



supplies, hampering economic and social recovery and increasing dependency on UNRWA assistance to address the poverty and food insecurity currently affecting over 80 per cent of the Gaza population. His delegation urged Israel to fulfil its obligations under international humanitarian law and United Nations resolutions to allow the Agency to freely fulfil its obligations without impediments or additional costs.

55. The Movement remained seriously concerned at the Agency's persistent funding shortfall, and regretted the inability of the General Assembly to follow up on the recommendations made in the report of the Secretary-General on the operations of UNRWA (A/71/849) for ensuring sufficient, predictable and sustainable funding. The Movement hoped that Member States would continue to support the provisions of the draft resolution on UNRWA operations (A/C.4/72/L.19).

56. **Mr. Bin Momen** (Bangladesh), speaking on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), said that his delegation appreciated the work of UNRWA staff in upholding the Agency's mandate and reaffirmed the need to maintain the moral, political and legal commitment to the rights of Palestine refugees and the alleviation of their suffering, pending the achievement of a just solution.

57. The unprecedented funding crisis risked worsening the plight of Palestine refugees and was severely exacerbated by the United States decision to cut its contributions, jeopardizing essential education, health, relief, social and emergency programmes in all areas, including in the Gaza Strip, where the situation was especially dire. The present meeting was therefore timely and must send a message of hope and collective political commitment to upholding the rights of Palestine refugees.

58. To mitigate the refugees' suffering, all international actors should work collectively towards meeting the Agency's funding requirements. Accordingly, the OIC was cooperating with the Islamic Development Bank to establish a Waqf Fund with a view to mobilizing increased resources for UNRWA. It reaffirmed its unwavering support for the Palestinian people's exercise of the right of return, and called on the international community to assume its responsibility of finding a just and lasting political solution.

59. **Mr. Chatzisavas** (Observer for the European Union), speaking also on behalf of Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and the stabilization and association process country Bosnia and Herzegovina, said that impeding the Agency's humanitarian activities could cause instability across the Middle East, thereby serving

the interests of extremists. Accordingly, the European Union was the largest contributor to the Agency's budget and would continue its strong, reliable and predictable support. It had also been among the first to respond to the call for additional funds during the current financial crisis. The European Commission had increased its funding to UNRWA by \$40 million, raising its overall contribution to \$146 million for the year. All partners should make multiannual contributions to the Agency.

60. Fully supporting the implementation of the UNRWA mandate was crucial for protecting and assisting Palestine refugees and ensuring transparency and accountability in its programmes. The Agency's work to counter the shortfall and mitigate its impact was commendable. To meet the following year's increasing challenges, UNRWA and its donors must intensify efforts to ensure financial stability while focusing on the mandate. The international community must support the Agency's work until a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution was reached.

61. **Ms. Jáquez Huacuja** (Mexico) said that the work of the Agency would remain indispensable until the final status of Palestine refugees was resolved. The steady increase in refugees had led to regional instability and grave consequences for the economic, social and humanitarian situation of the civilian population, particularly affecting women and children. The Agency's operations were crucial in fostering stability in the region and implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

62. The Agency's current funding crisis posed a risk to the civil population that was unlike any challenge faced previously. In response, Mexico had contributed \$500,000 to UNRWA in 2018 to help the Agency and the international community to continue their humanitarian assistance work benefiting the most vulnerable segment of the Palestine population, thereby contributing to regional stability. Political will was needed to address the fragile situation in the Middle East, so as to progress towards stability, reconstruction and sustainable peace.

63. Mexico reaffirmed its commitment to collaborating with the international community in pursuit of an integrated solution to the conflict, that took into account the rights of both parties and enabled peaceful coexistence within safe, internationally recognized borders, in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions.

64. **Mr. Peñaranda** (Philippines) said that the work of UNRWA to provide critical services and support to the Palestinian people was commendable. Accordingly, his

delegation would contribute \$10,000 to the Agency's programme budget for 2018.

65. **Mr. Srivihok** (Thailand) said that the work of UNRWA remained critical, given the current challenges faced by the Palestinian people. The unpredictable nature of funding was of grave concern and impacted the Agency's programmes and, most importantly, the lives of Palestinian refugees.

66. Thailand had consistently made financial contributions to UNRWA since 1978, and had responded to the appeal to help those affected by the devastating conflict in the Gaza Strip in 2014. It would continue to fulfil its commitment to make significant contributions to the Agency for the period 2017–2021, which it hoped would help improve the predictability of funding.

67. To ensure sustainable funding, his delegation encouraged UNRWA to continue diversifying its donor base, and called on Member States to maintain their support of the Agency. It also supported the Agency's reform agenda to strengthen its management capacity. Thailand would continue humanitarian assistance to mitigate the adversity that Palestine refugees faced. The solution to the crisis lay in the elimination of the conflict itself.

68. **Mr. Rivero Rosario** (Cuba) said that, despite operating with a deficit and having faced first cuts and then a complete cessation of funding from its largest contributor, UNRWA had been able to continue delivering its mandate. Lauding the work of UNRWA staff amidst extremely trying conditions, where they had even been subject to live Israeli fire and bombardment, his Government also recognized the host and donor countries, including Gulf States, that had pledged an unprecedented \$150 million. Through their support and the Secretary-General's valorous efforts to mobilize a rapid global response, UNRWA had been able to continue its operations. It was unfortunate that the largest contributor to UNRWA sought to suffocate its humanitarian work based on ridiculous and baseless allegations. A campaign of distortions was underway to change how Palestine refugees were defined, registered, and counted, with the goal of blackmailing the Palestinian people to its knees, even after it had shown its deep patriotism and conviction in the justice of its cause through more than 50 years of Israeli occupation. Member States of the United Nations must exercise political will to ensure sufficient, foreseeable, and sustained financing for UNRWA throughout its mandate. Against the current backdrop in the Middle East, the Agency's financial situation could only lead to an increase in violence, marginalization, displacement and poverty.

69. Cuba would continue to support a comprehensive, just and lasting two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, allowing the Palestinians to exercise their right to self-determination and to establish a free, independent and sovereign State within the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as their right of return.

70. **Mr. Al-Maawda** (Qatar) said that UNRWA was of critical importance for millions of Palestine refugees as they continued to await a just, durable and comprehensive settlement of the Palestine question, including a right of return for refugees in accordance with international law and relevant United Nations resolutions. More than five million Palestine refugees currently depended on UNRWA's health care, education, nutritional assistance and social services.

71. The Agency faced a chronic funding gap, which had worsened to the point of threatening its operations and basic services. Ensuring sustainable funding for UNRWA and improving its efficiency and use of available resources were thus of vital importance. Qatar had increased its donations to the Agency's programme budget, particularly in the areas of education and school building and renovation, enabling schools to open on time for 2018, and had announced a \$50 million donation at the 2018 extraordinary ministerial conference in Rome. As one of the leading States in providing humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people, Qatar had pledged \$1 billion at the Cairo International Conference on Palestine: Reconstructing Gaza, which had already led to the completion of housing, infrastructure, and public facilities projects in the Gaza Strip. Additionally, at the instruction of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, it had provided \$150 million in urgent humanitarian assistance as well as fuel to supply electricity. Qatari humanitarian assistance stemmed from its desire to further the stability needed for achieving a sustainable peace. It would continue its assistance to the Palestinian people, its support for their inalienable rights, and its support for UNRWA and its mandate.

72. **Mr. Tshabalala** (South Africa), applauding the critical humanitarian and development assistance that UNRWA provided to some five million refugees amidst extremely trying circumstances, said that further cuts in the Agency's funding were of great concern, threatening the lives of many vulnerable people, women and children included, and undermining the progress achieved towards a peace agreement and resolution of the conflict.

73. All Member States should continue to honour their commitments to support the good work of UNRWA,

which had created the conditions for the self-determination of the Palestinian people. South Africa had long been a vocal champion of and remained committed to a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A solution would allow beneficiaries to rely less on humanitarian support, and contributions to UNRWA represented an investment in the future of the Palestinian people and the stability of the region and the world.

74. **Mr. Al-Mouallimi** (Saudi Arabia) said that, some 70 years after UNRWA's founding following the Nakbah and Israeli expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and their land, some 5.4 million refugees were deprived of the ability to enjoy a dignified life in their homeland and forced to live in the hope of return. Palestinian suffering continued to grow as the situation in the Occupied Territories deteriorated, with the ongoing illegal siege of Gaza and continued illegal settlement building in the West Bank nearly extinguishing any remaining chance of a two-State solution. At the same time, the Government of Israel remained obstinately opposed to the Arab Peace Initiative, which presented a just and comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict by establishing an independent State of Palestine with its capital in East Jerusalem and finding a just solution for the question of Palestine refugees.

75. Saudi Arabia viewed the Palestine question as its number-one priority, as enunciated by King Salman bin Abdulaziz at the 2018 Arab League Summit in Dhahran. Since 2000, the Kingdom had contributed approximately \$1 billion to UNRWA, with other contributions to the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, the Alquds Fund and the National Committee for the Relief of the Palestinian People as well as projects regarding housing, medicine, education, food security, orphans and the wounded, infrastructure and construction. Additionally, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre had carried out numerous projects and other humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees.

76. Saudi Arabia would continue supporting Palestine refugees and would make every effort to find sustainable solutions to UNRWA's financial challenges, since the Agency represented the first line of defence against the spread of extremist ideologies. Contributing States and financial institutions must redouble their contributions that the Agency might fund its programmes and services, which were all the more needed given continued Israeli aggression, increasing numbers of refugees and funding shortfalls. The United Nations should allow UNRWA to make the best use of its annual budget, its programme budgets, and other available sources of funding.

77. The Government of Saudi Arabia backed efforts to address the root causes of the refugee crisis by ending Israeli occupation of Palestine and other Arab Territories, withdrawing to the pre-1967 borders, working towards the implementation of a two-State solution and granting the Palestinian people an independent State with its capital in East Jerusalem. The right of return was not a dream but an international obligation, and failure to support the right of return represented a stain on the international community.

78. **Mr. Bachman** (Israel) said that, while Israel had cooperated with UNRWA to provide crucial humanitarian services to the Palestinian people, the international community should gradually redirect support into other international channels. Notwithstanding the Agency's humanitarian and development work and proven operational capacity, Israel objected to the Agency's politicization of its definition of refugees; the decision by the United Nations to merge every refugee agency but UNRWA with UNHCR; and its maximalist agenda, including in nurturing the Palestinian demand for so-called "return" to the State of Israel.

79. Unlike UNHCR refugees, UNRWA refugees had a special status that was automatically passed down to future generations. Over the years, that unique status had played a direct and biased role in the conflict by perpetuating and worsening the Palestine refugee problem, turning some 750,000 Palestine refugees in 1948 into more than 5 million. The Palestine refugee population was also unique worldwide in having a dedicated United Nations organization assigned to it, even though the vast majority of UNRWA beneficiaries did not even qualify as refugees under international law. They could obtain citizenship from other countries while maintaining their refugee status, as in the case of 2.2 million beneficiaries who were citizens of Jordan. Additionally, 2.1 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were considered refugees despite never having crossed an international border. In all other cases, a person must be forced to leave one country and cross an international border in order to be considered a refugee by the United Nations. Over time, the growing number of beneficiaries would place ever-greater budgetary strains on UNRWA and render it bankrupt.

80. The roots of the special treatment afforded to the beneficiaries of UNRWA dated back to Arab rejection of Israel and desire to maintain an active Palestine refugee problem as an affront against the United Nations and a weapon against Israel. By not resolving the Palestine refugee crisis in 1949, the hope was kept alive of the so-called "return" – of a population that by 2018 numbered millions of refugees – to homes that no longer

existed or where they had never lived, thus erasing the State of Israel by demographic might. By clinging to the claim of return, the Palestinians were refusing to accept the Jewish right to self-determination. Ultimately, support for a two-State solution and support for the claim of return were mutually exclusive.

81. Israel still wished for a solution to the conflict, and to that end UNRWA's mandate must end, with its services gradually reorganized. True Palestine refugees must be treated no differently than any other refugee population and should receive completely apolitical humanitarian aid.

82. **Mr. Gertze** (Namibia) said that UNRWA had been a stabilizing element in the region by providing essential and basic development and humanitarian assistance to Palestine communities. In 2017 in the West Bank, it had provided education to tens of thousands of children as well as health care, food rations and microfinance loans. Under the Israeli blockade in the Gaza Strip, UNRWA represented a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of students and recipients of health care and nutritional assistance.

83. The 5.3 million Palestine refugees as of 2018 represented 25 per cent of refugees worldwide. Their growing numbers increased the need for UNRWA assistance and consequently increase the Agency's financial burden. The recent decision by the Government of the United States to cut \$300 million in funding to UNRWA was thus a matter of grave concern, with immediate impact on the work and services of the Agency. While other Member States had made generous contributions to fill the gap, the lack of stable and predictable funding for the Agency was detrimental to its activities. At the same time, his delegation recognized UNRWA's significant reforms and its leadership's commitment to transparency and accountability. Namibia also commended its improved cost containment and minimal budget growth even in the face of inflationary pressures and drastic increase in demand.

84. UNRWA's continued existence was contingent on the ongoing conflict. Accordingly, Israel should demonstrate civility and cease illegal settlement activities in the Occupied Territories, including halting its ongoing destruction of Palestinian homes and infrastructure; all parties should resume negotiations to ensure that the Palestinian people could exercise its inalienable right to self-determination and independence in an independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

*Statements made in exercise of the right of reply*

85. **Mr. Bachman** (Israel), referring to the so-called right of return under General Assembly resolution 194 (III), said that the resolution was not legally binding, did not grant the Palestine refugees a right of return that would be unique worldwide, and had in fact been rejected by the Arab delegations at the time because it did not give Palestine refugees such a right and implied recognition of the State of Israel. The new Arab interpretation that the resolution in fact granted an exclusive, unique, superior and non-negotiable right of return was subjective and invalid. The root cause of the Palestine refugee problem and the reason it continued lay in Palestinian refusal to recognize Jewish sovereignty over any part of the land. While the Jews had accepted the Palestine Plan of Partition of 1947, the Arabs had rejected it and launched a war to wipe Israel off the face of the Earth. However, when the Arabs lost the war against tiny Israel, populated at the time mostly by Holocaust survivors, they found themselves with an unexpected refugee problem. Had the Palestinians accepted the partition plan at the outset, there would have been an Israeli State and a Palestinian State living side by side in peace, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would not exist. The war was devastating for Israel, which lost 1% of its population, including many who had just been liberated from Nazi death camps. Were it not for that war, not one Palestinian would have become a refugee, but, under a policy of rejectionism, the Palestinian leadership had abandoned every negotiation effort and threatened to walk away from a peace plan they had not yet even seen.

86. UNRWA had exacerbated the problem by allowing refugee status to be passed down through the generations. That policy had led to there being 5 million so-called Palestine refugees in 2018, even as most of those refugees had never been to the land they claimed as their own, had not left the land in the first place, or held citizenship of other States. No other refugee population enjoyed similar privileges. Under UNRWA's current mandate, the number of so-called Palestine refugees would only increase, and peace would be pushed further and further away. While UNRWA did provide essential humanitarian services, its budgetary crisis would continue forever, regardless of the quality of its management, since under its mandate it must serve an ever-growing number of refugees. Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA had not resettled a single refugee, leaving the problem to continue to grow. The world must look the situation in the eye and build a foundation for peace between the two peoples.

87. As for the Gaza Strip, as long as the Hamas terrorist organization directly threatened Israeli citizens,

his Government would take all necessary action to defend them. Israel supported the entry of goods into Gaza in principle, but since the Hamas coup in 2007, Israel had faced nothing but terror, even though it had unilaterally withdrawn in 2005, leaving Gaza free to be built into something better. Instead, Hamas had constructed a network of terror tunnels and built thousands of rockets to fire into Israel, with the end goal of destroying it. The restrictions on the entry of goods into Gaza were necessary measures to curb the danger from Hamas and would be taken by any State that was subjected to a similar threat.

88. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that, while in 1993 the Palestine Liberation Organization had recognized the right of the State of Israel to exist, Israel had never reciprocated that recognition to the Palestinian people or the State of Palestine. Meanwhile, the Palestine refugee problem had existed before and continued to exist after that recognition. Palestine refugees did not have an exclusive right of return and had the same rights as any other refugees worldwide under international law. It was Israel that had made the Palestine refugees an exceptional case by refusing to allow them to return to their homes, beginning immediately after the war with the General Armistice Agreements of 1949. That Israeli refusal sprang from a desire to impose a Jewish majority on the land, regardless of international law, human rights and the minimum requirements of decency and morality.

*The meeting rose at 6:00 p.m.*