



General Assembly

Seventy-fourth session

Official Records

Distr.: General
11 February 2020

Original: English

Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 22nd meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 11 November 2019, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Bacher (Vice-Chair) (Austria)

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In the absence of Mr. Bahr Aluloom (Iraq), Ms. Bacher (Austria), Vice-Chair, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Agenda item 50: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(continued) (A/74/13, A/74/307, A/74/332 and A/74/337)

1. **Mr. Kakanur** (India) said that his delegation commended the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), as well as the support of host Governments and donors, and supported the three-year extension of the Agency's mandate.

2. The financial situation of UNRWA was dire, putting core services to the Palestine refugees at risk, notably in the fields of education, health and assistance to the most vulnerable. Given that the Agency's resources came primarily from voluntary contributions and a limited donor base, restoring the faith of donors in UNRWA was critical. In that connection, India noted with appreciation the Secretary-General's efforts to address allegations of managerial misconduct at UNRWA. It also welcomed the Secretary-General's confirmation that the allegations under investigation did not relate to any fraud or misappropriation of operational funds provided by donors. UNRWA had overcome similar funding gaps in the past through innovative fundraising, outreach and cost-saving measures. While such efforts should continue, they might not be adequate in 2019.

3. His Government had increased its annual financial contribution to UNRWA to \$5 million in 2018 and 2019 respectively and planned to contribute \$5 million in 2020 as well. As part of its ongoing capacity-building programmes in Palestine, his Government provided 150 places for Palestinians each year in the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme. In addition, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations provided 100 scholarships to meritorious Palestinian students. In 2017, the Government also had begun an annual youth exchange programme with Palestine. 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 \$72 million of financial support and assistance for such projects had been provided.

4. The Advisory Commission of UNRWA played a critical role in the governance of the Agency. Given that

the criterion for membership in the 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, 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 the Palestine refugees.

5. **Mr. Sinirlioğlu** (Turkey) said that despite attempts to question the mandate and functions of UNRWA over the decades, the Agency had always been part of the solution to the Palestinian issue, consistently supporting the Palestine refugees. As the illegal occupation continued, the alienable rights of the Palestine people were under constant threat and unilateral attempts to redefine the refugee status of the Palestine people were afoot; supporting UNRWA both politically and financially was therefore more essential than ever.

6. As the Chair of the Advisory Commission and the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, Turkey had recently transferred \$10 million to the Agency and was working hard to widen the donor base and mobilize the international community. As a result, Qatar had become a member of the Advisory Commission and a waqf fund at the Islamic Development Bank was in operation, which would help to provide sustainable financial support to the Agency.

7. UNRWA staff worked under very difficult conditions to help Palestine refugees enjoy their fundamental rights, and played a key role in the stability of the region. Political discussions to discredit the Agency and its staff should not be allowed. It was therefore the duty of the international community to support the Agency and extend its mandate.

8. **Mr. Elhomosany** (Egypt) said that the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories had continued to deteriorate in the absence of a clear plan to resolve the Palestinian issue in line with United Nations resolutions and the peace process, particularly the Arab Peace Initiative, all of which supported the establishment of a Palestinian State based on the 4 June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel was continuing its egregious practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, such as settlement expansion, home demolitions, construction of new settlement units, separation of the city of Jerusalem from the surrounding Arab territory, repeated raids on the Haram al-Sharif and the siege of the Gaza Strip, which all exacerbated the suffering of the Palestinian citizens.

9. Against that backdrop, UNRWA played an important role in providing the necessary support to Palestinian refugees, alleviating their suffering and ensuring security and stability in their host States pending the fulfilment of Palestinian aspirations and the establishment of an independent State. Since its inception in 1949, UNRWA had been caring for Palestinian refugees in the Arab region, embodying the lofty values enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and affirmed by all human rights instruments and United Nations resolutions related to the Palestinian issue.

10. For decades, UNRWA staff had put their lives on the line in providing relief to the Palestinians, who had been waiting to exercise the legitimate rights to freedom, independence and dignity enjoyed by the rest of the world. Attempts had been made to exploit recent developments in order to undermine the reputation of UNRWA as one of the most important humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, and some had even gone so far as to demand that UNRWA be dissolved and that an alternative be sought, on the basis that it was an impediment to a solution to the Palestinian issue.

11. Recent developments had presented an opportunity to improve the work of UNRWA pending a solution to the Palestinian issue. All States should therefore support the renewal of the UNRWA mandate for three years and resume their financial contributions to the Agency so that it could continue to play its vital role, particularly in light of the findings of the preliminary investigation report that funds from international donors had not been misused, and given that refugees would be the primary victims of any cuts in aid.

12. **Ms. Siblini** (Lebanon) said that seven decades had passed since the Palestinian Nakbah, the forced displacement of Palestinians caused by the Israeli occupation, which had created generations of refugees who had been deprived of the right to a decent life and who held to their homeland as a north star in their quest for even the barest of rights. Every successive generation of Palestinians was resolved to obtain the sacred right of return.

13. UNRWA staff were to be commended for the sacrifices they had made in fulfilling the mandate entrusted to the Agency by the General Assembly and in securing humanitarian and development services for the more than 5 million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Since 1948, Lebanon had been a major destination for Palestinian refugees, and as at the beginning of 2019, the country was host to 465,000 registered Palestinian

refugees, in addition to thousands more who had fled the crisis in Syria. As a member of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, Lebanon had first-hand knowledge of the importance of the Agency's work and was greatly concerned about the funding crisis affecting the Agency. Future shortfalls in funding could have dire consequences, including cuts to education and vital health programmes.

14. Lebanon called on friendly States to continue to support the Palestinian refugees and not to punish them by withholding funds from UNRWA because of the Agency's current administrative crisis. Lebanon welcomed initiatives by friendly States to address the funding crisis, especially the pledges made at the pledging conference held in June 2019 and at the 26 September meeting held on the margins of the General Assembly. In his statement to the General Assembly in September 2019, the President of Lebanon had reiterated his Government's categorical rejection of any amendment to the mandate of UNRWA and warned against any reduction in its services as a result of funding cuts.

15. From its inception in 1949, UNRWA had assumed a great humanitarian mission, providing millions of refugees with basic education, health and livelihood, and had served as a social safety net. In so doing, it had kept alive the Palestinian hope for the right of return pending a political solution to the refugee crisis, represented in a comprehensive and lasting peace, an end to the Israeli occupation, the establishment of a Palestinian State based on the 4 June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a fair solution to the refugee issue in line with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and the Arab Peace Initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002. Attacking UNRWA, and, by extension, the rights of refugees, was to target the right of return, one of the pillars of the sought-after peace. Lebanon reiterated its commitment to the right of return and condemned any actions that might weaken the role of UNRWA.

16. **Ms. Cui Lu** (China) said that UNRWA had long played an important role in humanitarian relief, providing assistance and protection to over 5 million Palestinian refugees, upholding their rights and dignity and promoting socioeconomic development, while easing the pressure on the host countries. Moreover, the Agency had made a positive impact in terms of promoting regional peace and stability and preventing the spread of terrorism and extremist ideologies in the refugee camps despite facing a serious financial crisis and challenges over the previous two years. In that connection, her delegation called on all parties to continue providing sufficient and predictable financial

support to UNRWA and to support the renewal of its mandate. China had increased its annual contribution to the Agency and would offer support to the Palestinian people through bilateral channels, including support for relief projects.

17. All relevant parties should take concrete measures to ensure the normal and unhindered functioning of the Agency. The Palestine refugee issue could only be resolved when peace was achieved between Palestine and Israel; in that regard, China firmly supported the two-State solution as the only way to resolve the issue. On the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative and relevant Security Council resolutions, the international community must stay committed to advancing a comprehensive, just and lasting solution through negotiations, to achieve the ultimate goal of establishing a fully sovereign State of Palestine based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

18. **Ms. Faye** (Senegal) said that the Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria made up a diverse community in a fragmented region, connected by a common identity forged through a shared experience of dispossession and a political situation that had remained unresolved for too long. The refugees had been deeply affected by the conflicts in the region, exacerbated by the absence of political progress, controversial announcements relating to the status of Jerusalem and the pressure on the funding and operations of UNRWA. The result was an overwhelming existential crisis that would stay with thousands of young people forever. The situation was largely due to the inability of the international community to find a negotiated and peaceful solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Beyond condemnations and declarations of intent, sustainable support for the development and the safeguarding of the dignity of the Palestinian refugees was the only way for the international community to demonstrate its true commitment to their well-being. Furthermore, the best way to bring solace to the Palestinian refugees was to support UNRWA.

19. As shown by the consequences of the unprecedented financial crisis that affected the entire service system in and around 58 camps, the humanitarian programmes and services of UNRWA were indispensable for the well-being, development and protection of the Palestinian refugees as well as for stability in the region. Any interruption or suspension of UNRWA services would considerably exacerbate the distress of the refugees and the fragile situation on the ground. Cost reduction measures were already a source of deep concern among the refugees, heightening their feeling of abandonment by the international community.

That feeling, combined with their fragile living conditions and the total denial of their right of return, created a fertile ground for radicalization and violent extremism.

20. The renewal of the mandate of UNRWA would contribute to correcting the consequences of a human tragedy that had lasted too long. All delegations should continue to support UNRWA by voting in favour of all the resolutions on the agenda, as a true embodiment of strong multilateralism that left no one behind.

21. **Mr. Wahib** (Iraq) said that the humanitarian crisis faced by the Palestinian refugees must be considered a shared international responsibility until a just and permanent solution was found to their plight. UNRWA services included education, health care, relief, infrastructure, camp improvements, community support, micro-lending and emergency response. In the absence of a thoroughgoing solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, the General Assembly had repeatedly renewed the UNRWA mandate, most recently extending its work until 30 June 2020.

22. The role of UNRWA had great political and moral significance with respect to the Palestinian issue and was as important as the right of return, as the Agency offered hope to millions of Palestinian refugees that they would be granted the justice that had been stolen from them when they were turned into refugees. Owing to that symbolic importance, Israel had made strong attempts to eliminate UNRWA through a series of proposals, including a request for States to refrain from paying their financial contributions and the suggestion that UNRWA duties be taken up by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which dealt with all matters relating to refugees and not only those relating to the Palestinian refugees. Such proposals had always been rejected by Arab States and host countries out of an awareness of the symbolic importance of UNRWA and its strong connection to a critical and complex humanitarian question. The work of UNRWA could only be concluded after the Palestinian refugees had returned to their original homes. Specifically, General Assembly resolution [302 \(IV\)](#), which had established the Agency in 1949, provided that the mandate of UNRWA was linked to the implementation of General Assembly resolution [194 \(III\)](#) on the return of Palestinian refugees.

23. The mandate of UNRWA should be renewed pending a just solution to the Palestinian refugee question in accordance with United Nations resolutions, as it was a vital organization that provided services to millions of Palestinian refugees and contributed to stability in the region. Iraq was deeply concerned by the

continuing deterioration of the socioeconomic conditions of the Palestinian refugees, especially in the light of the violence, displacement, destruction of homes, loss of economic opportunities and inhumane restrictions they faced. In addition, the Israeli authorities carried out brutal killings and detentions of many Palestinians, including women and children, and even humanitarian workers and journalists.

24. During the June 2019 donor conference, UNRWA had received exceptional support from many Member States, and State representatives had agreed on the Agency's role in preserving the rights and dignity of the Palestinian refugees. The international community must exert pressure on the Israeli authorities to halt their violations against the Palestinian people and to respect its obligations under international humanitarian law, international refugee law and United Nations resolutions. In addition, Iraq affirmed the Palestinians' right to property and the revenues derived therefrom, according to the principles of fairness and justice.

25. **Ms. Furman** (Israel) said that Israel had been cooperating with UNRWA since the Agency was established to provide crucial services to the Palestine refugees and to support the stability of its neighbouring countries. Until the Palestinian people could provide themselves with such services, the international community should continue providing humanitarian support. While Israel strongly criticized UNRWA, it did not wish to impede assistance to the Palestinian people.

26. Every year, Israeli representatives objected to the misconduct and political agenda of UNRWA and cautioned against its corruption. They had warned that, instead of focusing on relief and humanitarian assistance, the Agency chose to divert donor contributions toward promoting a controversial political agenda, which included the so-called right of return. They had also warned that members of Hamas, rightfully considered a terrorist organization, held key positions in UNRWA. They had warned that supporting a political organization constituted a misuse of the funds of the international community. Their questions to the former Commissioner-General had been disregarded and dismissed, and the international community had been ignoring the misconduct of UNRWA for years, until the recent cases of corruption. The corruption and ineffectiveness of UNRWA went beyond the behaviour of its leadership; all its activities should be examined closely by the international community and donor countries.

27. Although the need for humanitarian activities was clear, Israel wondered whether the political advocacy of UNRWA contributed to the well-being of those in need

or whether it instead served to promote the Palestinian anti-Israel agenda and to prolong the conflict. In fact, the Agency was no longer just a humanitarian organization; it had also become a political organization and its political activities were overshadowing its humanitarian activities.

28. The budgetary crisis at UNRWA was not a one-time phenomenon, nor could it be solved by restructuring the budget. Rather, it was an issue that would recur each year, as a consequence of the Agency's definition of refugees. When UNRWA had been established in 1948, its mandate had covered 750,000 refugees. Today, the Agency estimated that there were 5.5 million Palestinian refugees, leading to questions over how that number had increased so dramatically. The political definition of a refugee used by UNRWA was different from that used by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Under the mandate of UNHCR, the eligibility of individuals to refugee status was checked on a case-by-case basis. By contrast, UNRWA used a blanket policy to grant that status to all descendants of Palestinians who became refugees in 1948. That definition of a refugee was counterproductive, as 5.5 million people held on to the false hope of returning to homes that no longer existed, or in which they themselves had never lived. It was also unfair, both to Palestinians, who were left with an eternal refugee status, and to Israelis, because if that hope of return was realized, it would effectively bring about the end of Israel as the home of the Jewish people. Such an outcome would beget neither peace nor justice. UNRWA also considered people who had resettled and become full citizens of other countries as refugees; money was therefore being redirected away from those who truly needed it. The Agency prioritized increasing the number of refugees over helping people to resettle or integrate, in order to bolster its political cause.

29. Because UNRWA was one of the largest employers in the area under its control, the Palestinian leadership had a vested interest in perpetuating the refugee problem and ensuring that it was never solved. The majority of UNRWA workers were also beneficiaries of the Agency; some of those in Gaza worked for UNRWA during the day and were Hamas activists at night. Supervision of the conduct and activities of UNRWA must be strengthened and efforts must be made to ensure that there was no collusion between Hamas and UNRWA in Gaza.

30. In light of the latest investigation of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the information supplied by UNRWA should be questioned and checked carefully when considering financial assistance. In order to help

the Palestinian refugees, better channels of assistance should be found, to allow the provision of humanitarian assistance without financing politics and corruption. Israel remained hopeful that a political solution could be reached. To that end, the mandate of UNRWA must end and its humanitarian services must be gradually reorganized. Those in need deserved genuine and apolitical humanitarian aid.

31. **Mr. Kvalheim** (Norway) said that UNRWA played a key role as an employer, a vehicle for economic activity and a regional stabilizer. Therefore, its continued ability to deliver basic, essential services remained critical, as there was no alternative provider of such services to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees.

32. The financial situation of UNRWA remained a cause of great concern. Norway had increased its contribution for the previous and current years to ensure the Agency's continued ability to deliver on its mandate. The increased contributions by existing and new donors had closed the budget shortfall in 2018, showing the strong international commitment to Palestine refugees and to ensuring the operationality of UNRWA. The Agency had taken the necessary steps for reform and greater cost-efficiency in the organization, which remained key in light of continuous budgetary shortfalls. The management crisis suffered by the Agency in 2019, in addition to its financial crisis of 2018, was also regrettable. The findings of the Office of Internal Oversight Services report must be followed up both expeditiously and thoroughly.

33. It was important to maintain the focus on the key role played by UNRWA in serving the needs and rights of Palestine refugees, which went beyond immediate management concerns. Norway would support the extension of the Agency's mandate for another three-year period during the consideration and adoption of the relevant resolutions, as such an extension was key to ensuring the continued delivery of essential services to the Palestine refugees.

34. **Mr. Koba** (Indonesia) said that Indonesia had always stood in solidarity with the Palestinian people and unequivocally supported the two-State solution based on the relevant United Nations resolutions and internationally agreed parameters. Palestinian refugees were among the most vulnerable in their communities, suffering from poverty, rising unemployment, discrimination, marginalization and limitations on the full enjoyment of their human rights. The unrelenting illegal actions of Israel, particularly the settlement activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, had aggravated the situation.

35. The international community was collectively responsible for the fate of the Palestine refugees. Therefore, the humanitarian issues that affected them must be jointly addressed until the achievement of a just and durable solution, in accordance with international law, including relevant United Nations resolutions. Palestinian families needed protection, as they continued to be violently displaced and dispossessed of their homes and livelihoods. UNRWA played a vital role in safeguarding and advancing the inalienable rights of Palestine refugees, including the right of self-determination and the right of return and fair compensation.

36. The United Nations must ensure sufficient, sustainable and predictable funding to UNRWA, as the Agency faced an increasingly abysmal financial situation. His Government had provided additional support to the Agency through its contribution of \$1 million in 2019. While improvement of the Agency's management was crucial, discontinuing funds or shutting down UNRWA was unthinkable. The Secretary-General's swift administrative measures, which should bolster the credibility of the Agency, were therefore welcome. All Member States should continue strongly supporting all draft resolutions submitted under the current agenda item, particularly in relation to the renewal of the Agency's mandate.

37. **Mr. Ndong Mba** (Equatorial Guinea) said that ongoing instability in the region where UNRWA operated was regrettable and demands on the Agency were increasing as the current situation escalated. As a result of the financial crisis faced by the Agency and the turmoil taking place in Gaza, the population remained in the midst of a critical humanitarian situation. The Palestine economy was faltering, putting the authorities under great pressure to improve services to the people, and conflict in the region had a significant impact on Palestine refugees, who continued to be displaced. Consequently, increased resource mobilization for the UNRWA budget was necessary.

38. Until a sustainable political solution was reached between the Israelis and the Palestinians and while other conflicts persisted in the Middle East, the Agency would continue to play an indispensable role in providing services, creating jobs and serving as an instrument for economic activity and stability in the region. The international community should continue its resolute support of UNRWA in order to strengthen the Agency and enable it to continue its crucial humanitarian work without interruption.

39. **Mr. Mohsin** (Pakistan) said that entire generations of Palestinian people had suffered dispossession and

displacement and an illegal occupation continued to deny them the fundamental right to return to their homeland. The role of UNRWA remained both imperative and inevitable, particularly as a just settlement of the Palestine issue remained elusive. However, UNRWA activities could not be maintained without sufficient, predictable and sustainable financing. Following the unprecedented resource shortfall faced by the Agency the previous year, it was encouraging that both traditional and new donors had increased their contributions to help bridge the gap. However, the challenge was not over and the international community must not fail the Palestinian refugees by placing partisan interests over their humanitarian needs. His delegation remained firmly committed to the Palestinian people and, as an expression of solidarity, had made an additional contribution of \$250,000 to UNRWA over the previous two years.

40. **Mr. Azizan** (Malaysia) said that UNRWA played a pivotal role in preserving the rights and dignity of Palestine refugees. Malaysia was deeply concerned by the deteriorating situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The increase in violent attacks had severely disrupted the Agency's ability to provide basic services to Palestinians, particularly in health and education. Equally concerning were the continuous restrictions and challenges faced by UNRWA personnel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

41. His delegation called for the restoration of the inalienable rights of Palestinians, including the establishment of an independent and sovereign State of Palestine, based on pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and rejected any unilateral action regarding the final status of Jerusalem. The international community was collectively responsible for alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people, particularly those who were most vulnerable. Malaysia would continue to provide assistance to the Palestinian people within its capacity and means, and reaffirmed its support for the renewal of the Agency's mandate, to allow it to continue to provide vital services to the Palestinian refugees.

42. **Ms. Konieczny** (Luxembourg) said that UNRWA was the guarantor of stability for the more than 5.5 million Palestinian refugees, providing them with indispensable services in terms of economic development, access to education, health and other basic social services. The Agency had continued to fulfil its humanitarian mission despite the increasingly precarious nature of its work, particularly in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in Syria, where the civilian population was subject to an increasing number

of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The bravery of UNRWA staff, who were often working in life-threatening conditions, was commendable.

43. It was essential to find a just and lasting solution to the question of the Palestine refugees through a negotiated peace agreement based on the coexistence of two States: a sovereign, independent and democratic State of Palestine, living in peace and security alongside the State of Israel, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States. The international community could not show apathy in the face of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Palestine refugee situation.

44. Luxembourg supported the work towards internal reform in UNRWA and was committed to maintaining support for the Agency to allow it to fulfil its mandate. Given the crucial role of UNRWA in ensuring stability in the region and the critical financial situation of the Agency, her delegation urged all donors to fulfil their commitments. Significantly reducing the Agency's capacity to support the Palestinian refugees would have serious humanitarian consequences. Her delegation would continue to support the work of UNRWA and gave its full support to renewal of the Agency's mandate.

45. **Mr. Kirabaev** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation had consistently advocated 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, had decided to cease funding. The Commissioner-General of UNRWA should be commended for taking unprecedented measures to allow the Agency to overcome its grave budgetary crisis. Unlike many international bodies working on humanitarian issues, the Agency had been able to maintain a markedly balanced and impartial approach, carrying out its broad mandate and avoiding politicization in spite of the pressures it faced.

46. His Government had allocated \$10 million to be transferred to the Agency before 2021 and had paid the first three 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 to assist in the Middle East peace process. The issue of refugees was a political and final status issue. Any attempt to present the situation otherwise was futile and deviated from the internationally agreed foundation for Middle East peace. Providing assistance and comprehensive support to UNRWA would move the Middle East peace process forward on the basis of international law, building a solution based on two

States living side by side in peace and security. Lastly, the Russian Federation supported the extension of the Agency's mandate for a further three years.

47. **Mr. Sanchez Kiesslich** (Mexico) said that the work of UNRWA was essential for ensuring the well-being of Palestine refugees and the exercise of their human rights and would remain indispensable as long as the final status of the Palestine refugees was unresolved. The experience of the Agency since its establishment had given it an unparalleled insight into the needs of its beneficiaries and the changing socioeconomic and political circumstances that impacted the population. The ongoing instability in the Middle East had had grave consequences for the economic, social and humanitarian situation of the civil population, affecting women and children in particular. The recent crisis in the region had resulted in a sustained increase in the number of Palestine refugees and displaced persons.

48. The international community must join efforts with the Agency to enable the necessary humanitarian assistance to be delivered. Not only did the services of UNRWA constitute a tangible contribution in humanitarian terms, but they should also be considered as central in the context of regional instability. UNRWA was therefore key in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in that region, in the sense that the Palestine refugees must "not be left behind". The lack of resources made it difficult for the Agency to carry out its essential activities, affecting the provision of basic services to millions of Palestine refugees throughout the region. Accordingly, the Government of Mexico was currently evaluating the possibility of making an additional contribution to UNRWA.

49. 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.

50. **Mr. Islam** (Bangladesh) said that millions of Palestine refugees continued to endure decades of forced displacement in exile and the denial of their legitimate rights in one of the most regrettable and long-standing crises in human history. The ongoing socioeconomic decline of the Palestinian people was deeply concerning, particularly the challenges they faced in the realization of the 2030 Agenda. It was regrettable that since the creation of UNRWA, a

peaceful, just and viable political solution to the crisis remained elusive.

51. The Israeli occupation had been contributing directly to the prolonged poverty, unemployment and humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The international community must deliver on its commitment to leave no one behind by addressing the needs and legitimate rights of the Palestinians in light of their political, social, economic and cultural hardships, ensuring that funding for UNRWA was both predictable and sustainable. Bangladesh would continue to play its part in its modest capacity. The humanitarian programmes and services of UNRWA remained indispensable for the well-being, development and protection of the Palestine refugees and for regional stability. The Agency also depended on sufficient resources to deliver its mandates. The financial crisis of recent years jeopardized the Agency's essential health, education, relief and emergency programmes of assistance to the Palestinians.

52. The safety and security of UNRWA staff was a matter of serious concern; their protection should be accorded the highest priority as they served in volatile and complex situations on the ground. Bangladesh strongly supported the renewal of the Agency's mandate and would remain engaged with the international community in working towards that end.

53. **Mr. Viera Salazar** (Ecuador) said that his delegation commended UNRWA and its staff for all its work and the assistance provided to Palestine refugees. The Agency played a crucial role on the ground, contributing to regional stability and to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It also contributed to the well-being and human development of several generations of Palestine refugees.

54. Ecuador reaffirmed its support for the Agency and the mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and development to the affected population, as well as for the efforts to protect over 5.5 million Palestine refugees in all its areas of operation. Given the financial difficulties facing the Agency, his delegation called upon all those States that were in a position to increase their voluntary contributions to do so, in order to ensure sufficient, predictable and sustainable funding for the Agency.

55. His delegation trusted that essential reforms would be put in place during the leadership transition at UNRWA, in order to strengthen its transparency and accountability mechanisms. Lastly, forced displacements, violence and the grave economic situation in Palestine remained, due to the constant increase in Palestine refugees and displaced persons.

His delegation called for tangible progress to be made towards reaching a peaceful, definitive and just political solution for the parties, based on the existence of two States.

56. **Mr. Husni** (Sudan) said that the Palestinian people, both within the Occupied Territories and elsewhere, faced a deteriorating humanitarian situation and dwindling opportunities for livelihood as a result of declining support for UNRWA, which for decades had been overseeing the affairs of some 5.5 million Palestinian refugees. As a result, UNRWA was struggling to cover the operating costs of schools, hospitals, poverty alleviation programmes and other social projects. However, with the help of partners, it had succeeded in keeping schools open and hospitals running with adequate medical staff. The Sudan commended UNRWA for following a financial rationalization and control policy that had allowed it to save \$500 million during the previous five years, and called for the continuation of the policy until UNRWA could overcome its funding difficulties.

57. Efforts by donors, especially by the 42 States that had become first-time donors or had increased their contributions, were welcome. States should fulfil the pledges they had made at the World Humanitarian Summit as well as those, totalling \$110 million, made at the fundraising conference held in New York in June 2019. UNRWA should continue its online campaigns to mobilize individual support, in cooperation with States whose citizens wished to make constructive humanitarian aid contributions.

58. The Sudan called on UNRWA to continue with its digital campaign to secure the support of individual countries that were willing to participate in its noble humanitarian endeavours. It also called on all donor countries to continue their support and funding for UNRWA, to enable it to continue providing education, health care, employment and shelter to the Palestinian refugees. The Sudan fully supported the extension and renewal of the mandate of UNRWA for the next several years, and stressed its full support for the right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

59. **Ms. Samai** (Algeria) said that the hostile and oppressive policies of Israel, the occupying Power, against the Palestinian people, as well as its systematic violations of holy places, expansionist settlement plans and rejection of peace were the principal reasons for the protracted nature of the conflict, the exacerbation of the suffering of the Palestinian people and heightened tensions in the region. Algeria valued the considerable efforts made by UNRWA and the Agency's pivotal role

in easing the burden on the Palestinian refugees and providing them with a modicum of dignity and stability, including through the education to more than half a million children. UNRWA had also held untold numbers of health consultations, undertaken the repair and construction of thousands of homes and provided emergency services to millions of refugees.

60. In the light of the despair and frustration felt by the Palestinian refugees as a result of the economic and social repercussions of the oppressive embargo on Gaza and instability in the region, as well as the onerous and dangerous circumstances in which UNRWA staff carried out their humanitarian work, it was unfortunate that donor countries had suspended their financial aid to the Agency without waiting for the release of the conclusions of the current United Nations investigation regarding recent allegations. That move had come at a time when financial resources were shrinking and refugee needs were steadily increasing.

61. Algeria therefore called on the international community to fulfil all its responsibilities, not only to ease the financial pressures on UNRWA, but also to find new funding mechanisms that would ensure the sustainability of the Agency, which represented the only hope for 5.5 million refugees. Given the immense importance of UNRWA, it would be unjust to shorten its mandate from three years to one year. Algeria therefore did not support any change to the length of the mandate.

62. A solution to the financial crisis at UNRWA was necessary for addressing the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem. Algeria called on the international community to vote in favour of extending the mandate of UNRWA and also called for redoubled efforts towards a solution that would end the Israeli occupation and allow the Palestinian people not only to establish an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital, but also to control their natural resources.

63. **Archbishop Auza** (Observer for the Holy See) said that the Holy See commended UNRWA and its staff for the wide variety of humanitarian and development activities they undertook based on the needs of beneficiaries, including the re-opening of 709 schools for the 2019 school year. Without robust educational programmes, which depended on regular and predictable financial support, thousands of students would be subjected to unemployment, poverty and despair. The situation in Gaza added further strain on already stretched resources and confirmed the need for the Agency's essential work to continue, so that the needs of refugees could be met.

64. The persistence of its precarious financial situation was one of the major challenges faced by UNRWA, as it was threatened by cuts and shortfalls in contributions from donor States. The politicization of humanitarian aid must be avoided, as such shortfalls significantly affected the most vulnerable, including families left homeless from the war in Syria, persons with disabilities and those needing nutrition assistance. Another challenge resulted from attempts to redefine Palestine refugees, aiming to limit the designation to surviving members of the 1948 generation and force the descendants living elsewhere to be treated as citizens of their countries of refuge. Such recategorization would deprive the vast majority of Palestine refugees of assistance from UNRWA, greatly exacerbating their plight and placing burdens on their host countries at a time when regional tensions were high. It would also effectively exempt the parties responsible from finding a solution to the refugee issue as set out in General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and Security Council resolution 242 (1967).

65. Both supporters and critics of UNRWA could agree that after 70 years, the Palestinian refugee situation had lasted far too long. Since citizenship was the first line of defence in upholding human rights, no person should be stateless. In the absence of a permanent peace agreement to secure and defend the rights of the Palestine refugees, UNRWA deserved the full support of Member States and the Palestine refugees must be able to trust in the unswerving solidarity of the international community. The Holy See hoped that a fair and durable solution would be reached through resumed negotiations, with a view to reaching a two-State solution to allow Israel and a Palestinian State to live side by side, in peace and security within internationally recognized borders.

66. **Ms. Elarja Flitti** (Observer for the League of Arab States) said that, in view of the deadlocked Middle East peace process and the failure of the international community to ensure compliance with the international terms of reference endorsed by the United Nations with respect to the Palestinian issue, the question of the refugees, one of the five final status issues, must be settled through direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, for the full implementation of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). Pending such settlement, the international community must continue to provide comprehensive support to the Palestine refugees in the areas served by UNRWA.

67. The League of Arab States was concerned about the severe deterioration in the socioeconomic conditions of the Palestine refugees, but also about Israeli practices in Palestine and elsewhere, including the Golan region,

such as violence, destruction, forced displacement and restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinian civilians, to say nothing of the embargo on Gaza, the erosion of freedom of expression and assembly, or the suppression by Israeli forces of peaceful popular demonstrations. Such practices had adversely impacted the resilience of UNRWA and its ability to fulfil its mandate.

68. The League of Arab States stressed the importance of the work done by UNRWA, despite the crisis, and its effective contribution to preserving regional stability, both in the refugee camps and in the host communities. It was unfortunate, however, that certain allegations related to UNRWA had been leaked to the media prior to the conclusion of the relevant United Nations investigations. The League welcomed the results of the internal investigations, which had shown the allegations of fraud and corruption to be unfounded. It was important to restore international confidence in UNRWA and its exemplary work in a complex and unstable environment.

69. The League called on the international community to renew the mandate of UNRWA for the applicable period and to continue its generous support for its vital programmes. The international community should avoid the politicization of humanitarian work, especially since voluntary contributions were directly channelled into basic UNRWA services for children's education and health care for families. The League also called on friendly countries that had frozen aid to UNRWA to reconsider that decision and to help strengthen the mandate of UNRWA.

70. Efforts by the United Nations, donor countries and host States to make new or increased contributions were welcome, and additional efforts should be made to close the funding gap. The Member States should vote in favour of the resolution to extend the UNRWA mandate for three years and promote the right of the Palestine refugees to self-determination and the right to establish an independent State on the 4 June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

71. **Mr. Saunders** (Officer-in-Charge, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees), thanking Member States for their strong and consistent messages of support for UNRWA and its mission, said that he echoed their praise for UNRWA staff, who were dedicated professionals often working in extremely difficult circumstances. He therefore extended his heartfelt appreciation to host authorities for their unwavering generosity and support of the Palestine refugees, despite the considerable burden that represented.

72. It was essential not to lose sight of the effectiveness and reliability of UNRWA as a partner; he was therefore pleased that many Member States had stressed the positive accomplishments of the Agency. In its recent report, the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network had commended Agency for the strength of its workforce, its robust, results-based monitoring system, the high technical capacity of its education and health programmes and its proven capability to operate efficiently while continuing to take both a cautious and a rigorous approach to risk management, and to adopt a strategic stance in deciding how and with whom to engage.

73. Gender parity had been achieved in UNRWA schools and the 500,000 pupils were taught to think critically, incorporating the values of human rights and tolerance. The achievements of the Agency's education system were reflected in the accomplishments of students, who consistently outperformed their peers in public schools and attained above-average results in international assessments, as validated by the World Bank. UNRWA clinics used an innovative approach to family-centred care, with 8.5 million patient visits each year. Moreover, the Agency's education, health and emergency programmes in Syria had been used as a model for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in emergencies. Its emergency education curriculum in response to the war in Syria was now used by the United Nations Children's Fund and others in humanitarian assistance worldwide. The Agency also worked to support persons with disabilities, with the majority of its facilities having been made more accessible. In the current circumstances, there was no alternative to UNRWA for the provision of such services. For as long as its mandate continued, the Agency was determined to keep delivering the highest-quality, most cost-effective assistance possible.

74. While it had been noted that the Agency's humanitarian mission took place in a politicized situation, UNRWA only wished to be allowed to focus on humanitarian and development work. In that connection, the funds of UNRWA were due to run out in two weeks, and as such, the Agency was facing very difficult choices, including the possible reduction and even termination of services. He urged States that were in a position to help with additional contributions to do so, and those that had made pledges to fulfil them as soon as possible.

75. The Office of Internal Oversight Services had pointed out that its investigation had revealed neither corruption nor fraud at UNRWA. The integrity of the Agency's operations was therefore not in question. The mission of the Agency was more essential than ever and

it remained committed to supporting the vulnerable and assisting in the human development of millions of Palestine refugees as they awaited a fair and durable solution to their plight. That solution could only be achieved with the support of Member States, with whom he looked forward to working in partnership.

Statements made in exercise of the right of reply

76. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that it was regrettable the Israeli representative had been allowed to make some provocative, albeit unsurprising, statements in the Committee, a place intended for diplomacy and civil exchange rather than for hostile attacks on a United Nations agency, namely UNRWA, with baseless claims of corruption that had already been proven untrue. The alleged concerns of the Israeli representative regarding the funds provided by the international community and the expenses borne by the United Nations arising from the conflict would be moving if they were not so hypocritical.

77. There was a clear solution to the problem: Israel should stop obstructing the rights of the Palestinian people; stop violating their right to self-determination; stop denying their right to return; and justly compensate them for the loss, trauma and suffering inflicted upon them for over 70 years. Moreover, Israel should stop feigning concern about the billions of dollars of international funding spent over decades to put a humanitarian band aid on the wound that Israel itself had refused to close and continued to exacerbate, obstructing every attempt to realize a just solution, flagrantly denying the Palestinian people's rights and blatantly violating international law and United Nations resolutions. The concern of Israel for the international community and its welfare did not seem to extend to the damage being inflicted on the international system and its laws and rules-based order and on an entire people, generation after generation.

78. The solution could not be found in depriving a people in need and millions of refugees of international assistance. Rights-based advocacy was the only means to redress the injustice. In advocating a just solution and respect for refugee rights, UNRWA was fully in line with its General Assembly mandate and the relevant resolutions on the issue. It was doubtful that humanitarianism could be divorced from human rights and that a solution could be divorced from rights and justice. Accountability was currently lacking, yet it was the only way of ending such impunity and injustice and allowing a political solution to give the Palestinian and Israeli people the chance to live in peace, security, dignity and equality with one another. Such a solution

would also relieve the international community of the burden of providing support and assistance to address the humanitarian and human consequences of the ongoing conflict and its impact on regional and global peace and security.

79. Her delegation rejected the rhetoric aimed at redefining who constituted a Palestine refugee, as an attempt to strip such refugees of their status and rights. Those rights did not diminish with the passage of time. While human rights could, regrettably, be violated, they could not be negated, regardless of rhetoric. Moreover, the right of Palestine refugees to return was not a claim; it was an individual and collective right to which all refugees were entitled. For Palestine refugees, that right had been explicitly affirmed in General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and reaffirmed in over 150 subsequent resolutions. That right could not simply be dismissed in order to accommodate the narratives and schemes of Israel to ensure a demographic majority.

80. In 1948, the Palestine refugees numbered just over 750,000. Significant human suffering could have been averted if they had been allowed to return to their homes, land and property following the conclusion of hostilities and the signing of the armistice in 1949. The plight of 5.5 million refugees today could have been avoided. Attempts to deny refugee status to Palestinian descendants were also baseless and rejected, as clarified by the United Nations under international law. According to the principle of family unity, the children of refugees and their descendants were also considered refugees until a durable solution to their plight was found. The Palestine refugees were not the exception to that rule, which had been applied to every other protracted refugee situation in the world. In that regard, her delegation recalled the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and the call for the safe and dignified return of refugees, including in protracted situations.

81. Claims that UNRWA was the problem, or that the Agency somehow perpetuated the refugee issue, were absurd and offensive. The Palestine refugee problem persisted due to the failure to address the root causes of the conflict and justly resolve the Palestine question, and to the ongoing denial, obstruction and violation of the rights of the Palestinian people by Israel. With or without UNRWA, the Palestine refugees would still exist in the absence of a solution. Blaming, discrediting or delegitimizing UNRWA or the Palestine refugees for the continuation of the crisis was unacceptable and must be denounced. The support of the international community and the work of UNRWA were humane acts, giving sustenance, hope and a lifeline for survival, until rights were restored and justice and peace prevailed. The

strong statements of support and solidarity, for both the Palestine refugees and UNRWA, were therefore encouraging. Her delegation hoped that such support would be translated into urgently needed funding to the Agency and an overwhelming endorsement of its mandate when the Committee came to vote on its renewal.

82. **Mr. Bromberg** (Israel) said that while his delegation's attempt to reply to the remarks made by the Syrian representative might be vain, it was forced to do so given their level of absurdity and cynicism, as well as the obvious attempt to deflect from the reality in Syria. In response to the attack by the Syrian representative on Israel and her claim that Israel was the sole cause of Palestinian suffering in Syria, it was important to recall that in 1948, Israel had accepted the partition plan. However, the Arabs had not, and had instead decided to attack Israel. Syria had been one of the first and leading countries in that attack, attempting to erase Israel from existence; Israel, however, had gained the upper hand.

83. The Syrian representative had prided herself on the hospitality extended by Syrian authorities to their Palestinian brothers, stating that they received the same treatment as Syrian nationals. However, considering that the Palestinians had been in refugee camps in Syria for 70 years, where, according to the Syrians, they required assistance from UNRWA, it was unclear what kind of brotherhood existed in Syria. That said, since the representative of Syria was speaking on behalf of a regime that had caused the slaughter of around half a million people, it made sense for her to claim that the Palestinians were being treated the same as Syrians. Nonetheless, the mistreatment of the refugees by Syria had been reaffirmed by the current Commissioner-General of UNRWA, who had stated that the Palestinian refugees from Syria did not wish to go back, wishing instead to immigrate to other countries.

The meeting rose at 5.10 p.m.