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Chairman: Mr. Acharya (Nepal)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 31: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

(A/61/13, A/61/347, A/61/358, A/61/278 and A/61/172)

1. **Mr. Hoang Chi Trung** (Viet Nam) said that his delegation welcomed the Agency's excellent work and efforts to overcome obstacles and provide its regular programmes to Palestine refugees, in particular education for Palestinian children. His delegation urged the United Nations to increase support for the Agency's work and hoped that the Agency would continue to work closely with the United Nations system.

2. His delegation was deeply concerned about the deterioration of the humanitarian condition in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. More than half the Palestinian population was unable to meet its food requirements without international aid, and the decline in security and the economic situation due to persistent violence was aggravating already harsh conditions. His delegation called on Israel to cease all military operations and to lift curfews and closures it had imposed in the area. Israeli limitations on the movement of Agency staff and vehicles were a matter of grave concern. The Agency's privileges and immunities must be respected and obstacles to its work must be removed.

3. **Ms. Spoljaric** (Switzerland) said that the annual report of the Commissioner-General was excellent and her letter of transmittal would provide context for the Committee's debate. Her delegation commended Agency activities, particularly in view of the severe political and operational obstacles it faced, and welcomed the contributions of the host countries.

4. Her delegation was deeply concerned about the marked deterioration in the socio-economic situation of Palestine refugees in the Occupied Territory. The Agency's efforts to extend its emergency assistance programme and to cooperate with other humanitarian organizations had been commendable, as was its willingness to share the results of its external evaluation of the emergency assistance programme before the end of 2006.

5. Her delegation called on the authorities in the Agency's fields of operation to ensure its safe access to those under its mandate, in particular in the Occupied

Territory. It called on Israeli authorities to immediately reimburse the Agency for taxes levied at the Karni crossing point and to exempt the Agency from such taxes as they were not compatible with the Israeli Government's international commitments.

6. The constructive work begun in the revitalized Advisory Commission was proof of renewed international solidarity on behalf of Palestine refugees. Her delegation welcomed the Agency's participatory approach to management, which included its most precious asset, its staff.

7. **Mr. Endo** (Japan) said that his Government considered assistance to Palestine refugees and non-refugees an important component of its efforts to advance the Middle East peace process. Japan had contributed nearly \$1 billion to the Palestinian people, 30 per cent of which was administered by the Agency, an important partner for promoting security. In July 2006, Japan had contributed approximately \$25 million to improve health care and create jobs, largely through the Agency. In January 2006, Japan had contributed millions to the support of Palestinian communities in the West Bank and Gaza. As a major donor, Japan was interested in Agency reform and looked forward to seeing greater transparency in its management and increased accountability and efficiency in its utilization of resources. Reform would build confidence between the Agency and donor countries.

8. Important as international assistance was to improving the humanitarian situation of Palestine refugees, the establishment of a lasting peace was even more important. Most Palestinians and Israelis supported the peace process; therefore their political leaders should pursue peace. His delegation hoped that Palestinians would overcome their differences of opinions and that the Palestinian Authority would opt to pursue peace through dialogue — a move which should win the immediate support of the international community. His delegation also hoped that Israel would do its part to end the current impasse. For its part, Japan had proposed the creation of a "corridor for peace and prosperity" to create regional cooperation in the Jordan Rift Valley. It was also initiating official consultations with Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan.

9. **Mr. Bilgen** (Turkey) said that the political conflict could not be settled by violence or military measures, and that neither unilateral action nor

indifference to the suffering of others would bring about lasting peace. His delegation hoped that the Palestinian people would ensure the conditions necessary for establishing their own state, and that Israel would facilitate the process by changing its current policies. Both parties understood their obligations under the Quartet Road Map and knew what needed to be done in order to fulfil them.

10. The Palestine refugee issue was the most complicated aspect of the Palestinian question. The Agency's role was critical in providing for their fundamental needs pending a just solution, and the accomplishments of the Agency and its staff, under very difficult circumstances, had been commendable. He welcomed progress in the reform process and the new structure of the Advisory Commission, which enhanced relations between the stakeholders and Palestine refugees.

11. Turkey was an emerging donor country for a number of United Nations programmes and funds, and it had more than doubled its annual voluntary contribution to the Agency for 2006. Turkey also provided in kind assistance and channelled direct assistance to Palestine through a plan of action that complemented the Agency's programmes.

12. **Mr. Elsherbini** (Egypt) said that, despite the work carried out by the Agency, the suffering of the Palestinian people continued to increase because of the deterioration in the humanitarian conditions in the West Bank and Gaza and because of occupation practices such as military assaults and restrictions on freedom of movement. His Government was concerned by the increase in the difficulties faced by the Agency as a result of occupation practices, lack of a political settlement and underfunding.

13. The Agency should step up its efforts to provide humanitarian assistance. Without international assistance, poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, economic stagnation and the level of basic public services were growing steadily worse, and there had been an increase in the number of displaced persons as a result of Israeli aggressions.

14. The restrictions on movement and curfews imposed by the Government of Israel had hindered the Agency's work and cut off refugees from their families, places of work, schools and medical services. He called for the removal of all restrictions on the movement of the Agency's staff and vehicles, and for

compliance with the Agreement on Movement and Access in order to guarantee the delivery of food supplies and humanitarian assistance. That easing of restrictions would reduce feelings of frustration and isolation and lay the groundwork for rebuilding confidence and moving towards the resumption of the settlement process. The Government of Israel must respect the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the illegality of the construction of the separation wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory because that construction had significant humanitarian, economic and political consequences. The Agency's ability to carry out its mandate in Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Jordan could be compromised in future by the lack of political horizon for a settlement and the suspension of peace negotiations aimed at establishing an independent Palestinian State and the Israeli evacuation from all Arab territories that had been occupied since 1967.

15. It was important to address the underfunding of the Agency and to strengthen donor countries' contributions and responses to emergency appeals. In that connection, his Government welcomed the enlargement of the membership of the Advisory Commission to include some donor countries and the meeting that had been convened in June 2006 to consider the Agency's strategy for development.

16. **Ms. Al-Thani** (Qatar) said that the UNRWA report highlighted the valiant and extraordinary work it was doing to improve the overall living conditions of the Palestine refugees, more often than not under extremely difficult conditions. After five decades, UNRWA was providing indispensable services to the 4.3 million registered refugees in the occupied territories. Their need was greater than ever before, because Israel was still engaging in inhumane practices under its illegal occupation.

17. UNRWA services offered the barely minimum level of assistance needed to allow the refugees to live decent and productive lives, which was their right. The Agency acted as an advocate for the rights of the refugees and sought to uphold them. Its work had a positive impact on the stability of the region.

18. Two developments marked the period covered by the report: the deteriorating living conditions of the Palestine refugees as a result of the declining human development indicators and the economic collapse in the Occupied Palestinian Territories since the victory

of Hamas in the legislative elections; and the decline of voluntary contributions in relation to UNRWA programme expenditures creating a large regular budget deficit for 2006. That shortfall did not bode well for the quality and level of UNRWA services and the emergency relief assistance available and would have dire consequences for the Palestine refugees who depended on them.

19. His delegation appealed to all Governments, financial institutions and donors to raise their contributions until the Agency's 2006-2007 budget was fully financed. Qatar spared no effort in extending all possible material and moral support to the refugees, and was committed to doing so as long as necessary. It was the international community's responsibility to continue supporting UNRWA until a just, comprehensive and lasting solution was found to the refugee problem and to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a whole.

20. **Mr. Saradgi** (India) said that support for the Palestinian cause had been a central feature of his Government's foreign policy for more than 60 years. His Government had maintained that violence was a serious impediment to the peace process and the real solution would lie in political dialogue. Paragraph 14 of the Commissioner-General's report indicated that the economy of the Palestinian Authority had suffered immeasurably as a result of the ongoing conflict. The widespread increase in poverty and unemployment, coupled with the decreasing revenues of the Palestinian Authority, had brought the economy to the verge of collapse. Furthermore, the separation wall, closures, curfews and other restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities would lead to further hardship for the affected Palestinian population. The continued construction of the wall on Palestinian land also threatened to prejudge the eventual outcome of the final status negotiations between the parties.

21. His Government had called for an urgent easing of the restrictions placed on the Palestinian areas and had manifested its support to the Palestinian people through regular assistance and the provision of medical supplies to the Palestinian Authority. In May 2006, in response to a request from the Palestinian Authority, his Government had provided medicines and medical supplies to the Palestinian people. India had also been a regular, albeit modest, contributor to the Agency's budget.

22. The environment in which the Agency carried out its operations continued to hamper its ability to deliver services. His Government was concerned at the restrictions on the Agency's movements and called for their removal. The Agency's activities represented an important component in the struggle for the realization of peace in the Middle East, and the international community should live up to its shared responsibility to support them. In particular, the Mideast Quartet should urge all sides to fulfil their obligations. His Government was confident that a just and comprehensive solution to the conflict was attainable and called on all sides to work together to achieve the vision of two States living side by side within secure and recognized borders.

23. **Mr. Ali** (Sudan) welcomed the efforts made under the Commissioner-General of UNRWA to broaden the good services UNRWA had long been providing to the refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in the countries hosting Palestine refugees. His delegation also endorsed the steps taken to reform the Agency's planning in order to improve programme quality.

24. The escalating Israeli threats against the Palestinians and the consequent deterioration of the economic, social and humanitarian conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as the deliberate destruction of infrastructure, had placed a greater burden on UNRWA. Israel's closure policy had transformed the Gaza Strip into a huge prison, destroyed economic activity and employment opportunities there and doubled poverty. The restrictions on the movement of Palestinians had been applied also to Agency staff and vehicles, causing delays or cancellation of services, extra costs to the Agency, and food shortages among the more vulnerable refugees.

25. The separation wall, which Israel was determined to construct despite the International Court of Justice advisory opinion condemning it, had aggravated the suffering of the people, further damaged the economy and created infrastructural problems. In addition to escalating violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israel had complicated the situation of the Palestine refugees in Lebanon with its recent war there. UNRWA was to be commended for the services it had provided during that period of violence. Its staff should be on an equal footing with other United Nations personnel and should be compensated for the danger to which they had exposed themselves. Thanks were due

also to Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan for hosting Palestine refugees without discrimination and for their excellent cooperation with UNRWA in all its initiatives to improve the living conditions in the camps.

26. The Palestine refugee question would be resolved only as part of a larger solution that included the withdrawal of Israel from the territories it had occupied, in accordance with United Nations resolutions, especially resolution 194 (III) upholding the refugees' right of return and right to compensation with the Charter of the United Nations and with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Until then, the international community was responsible for the well-being of the refugees.

27. The Sudan was very concerned about the large UNRWA budget deficit. All States should contribute more, either financially or in kind, so that the Agency could continue to fulfil its mandate.

28. **Mr. Landemoen** (Norway) expressed his Government's deep concern at the warning by United Nations organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross that violence, humiliation and poverty were leading the Palestinian population towards a deep crisis. Women and children were suffering the most in that situation. In 2005, the Gaza disengagement had raised expectations of an improvement in the quality of life and in the freedom of movement of Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank. However, in 2006 focus had shifted to the most immediate needs of the refugee population; food distribution and survival had become the most pressing issues. His Government had tried to keep international attention focused on the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian Territory at a time when the whole world was preoccupied with the tragedy in Lebanon. To that end, it had co-hosted donor conferences in Geneva and Stockholm in recent months. In the expectation that needs would continue to increase, his Government would increase its contribution to the Agency by 50 per cent in 2007 and would continue to be an active participant in the dialogue on efforts to strengthen the working relationship between the Agency, host nations and donor countries.

29. **Mr. Bowman** (Canada) reaffirmed his Government's strong commitment to the Agency. Canada appreciated the opportunity it had been given to become a member of the Advisory Commission. The

management changes under way within the Agency represented important steps in enhancing effectiveness and improving partnerships and accountability. Improved management and programming were key to maintaining donor support and meeting the humanitarian needs of the Palestine refugees. The Agency's role in providing essential education, health and social services to the refugees was especially important at a time when the humanitarian and security situation was deteriorating. His Government continued to support the work carried out by the Agency. In addition to the contribution of \$10 million to the Agency's core budget in 2006, his Government had contributed \$8.5 million in response to emergency appeals. His Government believed that it was essential to work with increased commitment and intensity to achieve a comprehensive political settlement to the conflict in the Middle East and realize the vision of two States living side by side in peace and security.

30. **Ms. Liu Jia** (China) commended the Agency and its staff on all their efforts, which were performed with dedication in arduous and often dangerous circumstances, and expressed regret that funding difficulties faced by the Agency over the last few years had impeded its work. Accordingly, she called on the international community to honour its pledges and step up its support to UNRWA.

31. Noting that the current deadlock in the Middle East peace process had negative consequences for the entire region and was in no one's interests, she appealed to the Palestinian and Israeli leaders to show the necessary political courage and to abide by their commitments in relaunching the process, while rejecting outside influences. For its part, the international community should set in place a climate conducive to that process. She reaffirmed China's commitment to achieving a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East through negotiations between all parties, and pledged her country's readiness to continue working with the international community to that end.

The meeting rose at 4.10 p.m.