

UNITED



NATIONS

**Special Report of the Director
of the United Nations Relief and Works
Agency for Palestine Refugees
in the Near East**

Covering the period 1 November 1956 to mid-December 1956

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OFFICIAL RECORDS : ELEVENTH SESSION

SUPPLEMENT No. 14A (A/3212/Add.1)

(7 p.)

NEW YORK, 1957

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SPECIAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST

covering the period 1 November 1956 to mid-December 1956

INTRODUCTION

1. As forecast in the covering note to the annual report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East,^{1/} this special report is presented in order to in-

form the General Assembly of the emergency actions taken by UNRWA as a result of the recent hostilities in the Near East. It covers the period from 1 November to mid-December 1956.

I. OPERATIONS IN THE GAZA STRIP

The resumption of operations

2. When it was known on 1 November that Israel forces had attacked the Gaza Strip, the Agency had to decide immediately whether it could and should seek to carry on its services in the new situation. More than two-thirds, or over 213,000 persons, of the total population of the Strip are ration-recipient refugees whose lives depend upon UNRWA's fortnightly distribution of rations and other services; it appeared unlikely that the occupying Israel authorities would be able to assume immediate responsibility for these essential services. Any breakdown in the supply of food would have caused extreme suffering and hardship. The Agency decided that it was in the best interest of the refugees that UNRWA should attempt to carry on, in spite of the serious difficulties caused by the Israel military operations. Plans were made immediately to that effect.

3. Staff. The Agency's international staff then in Gaza was below strength because of restrictive actions by the Egyptian authorities in the preceding months concerning the appointment and movement of UNRWA officials (see paragraph 13 of annex G to the annual report of the Director). The Director decided that the new situation would require additional personnel. From a large number of volunteers within the staff of the Agency, an emergency team of seven officers was selected and made ready to leave for Gaza as soon as clearance could be obtained from the occupying authorities. This clearance was requested on 2 November and was given on 4 November. On that day, the Director and his emergency team flew by UNRWA plane from Beirut to Lydda and thence travelled in United Nations vehicles overland via Beersheba to Gaza, where they arrived that evening.

4. The Agency's international staff in Gaza, under instructions from the senior United Nations official responsible for United Nations security matters in the Gaza Strip, had been evacuated on 2 November as a precautionary measure, but had returned on 3 Novem-

ber. Although the situation was still much disturbed, this regular Gaza staff had already taken the preliminary steps looking to the resumption of Agency operations by the time the emergency team arrived on 4 November.

5. Rations. The distribution of fortnightly rations would normally have commenced on 1 November and continued on the following days, but the fighting and the curfew imposed by the Israel military authorities made this impossible. At the Agency's request, the curfew was lifted for periods of six hours during the day, beginning 5 November, and the distribution of rations was started that morning.

6. Even with the lifting of the curfew for a limited period each day, there were many practical difficulties to overcome. Arab staff concerned with distributing the rations had to be furnished with work permits issued by the occupying forces. Some Agency vehicles had been damaged during the fighting, others had been seized by the occupying troops. These factors, coupled with the loss through looting of automotive spare parts, tires and batteries, delayed the movement of personnel and supplies to those UNRWA centres at which looting of food stores - mainly by refugees - had been severe. Nevertheless, by 15 November, rations had been made available for every refugee. The shortage of supplies normally purchased on the spot affected the re-starting of the supplementary feeding programme, and it was operating at only one-third of normal volume by mid-December.

7. Health services. On 4 November, it was found that two of the four hospitals which had been operated by the Egyptian authorities (and partly subsidized by UNRWA) had ceased to function during the fighting. The other two Egyptian-operated hospitals and the tuberculosis hospital at Bureij Camp (run jointly by the Agency and the Egyptian authorities) were short of staff and supplies. The hospital operated by the Baptist Mission and assisted by an UNRWA subsidy was fully manned but was short of supplies. The Agency clinics were short of medical staff: most of the doctors were Egyptian nationals and, with the exception of one Egyptian doctor

^{1/}Official Records of the General Assembly, Eleventh Session, Supplement No. 14 (A/3212).

who lived in the Agency camp at Rafah and who remained constantly on duty, they had stopped reporting for work.

8. On 5 November, at a meeting of the Director with the Israel authorities, the latter took the position that all Egyptian doctors and all Arab nurses (other than Palestinians) would have to stop working within one or two days. As this ruling would have disqualified most of the Agency's doctors and nurses working in the field, as well as most of those working in the hospitals run by the Egyptian authorities, the Director pointed out that, under such circumstances, the Agency could assume no responsibility for carrying on the health services. Later that day, the Israel authorities agreed to permit those doctors and nurses to continue practising. As an emergency measure, the Agency then accepted responsibility for arranging for the continued operation of the tuberculosis hospital in Bureij and of two Egyptian-operated hospitals. It supplied all of them (as well as the Baptist hospital) with basic rations and medical supplies, beginning 6 November. The Agency's clinics in each of the UNRWA camps in the Strip were rapidly re-established (the clinic at Rafah had never stopped working), but special services such as the maternity and child welfare clinics could not be restarted until mid-December.

The supply problem

9. In spite of the losses by looting, sufficient food was left in the Agency's stores in the Gaza Strip for the November and part of the December distribution of rations. However, in order to bring in supplies for later distributions, the Agency had to take emergency measures to rearrange its lines of communication and sources of supply. Bulk supplies were previously imported mainly by rail from Port Said, some being also shipped during the months of fine weather by schooner from Beirut and unloaded in the open roadstead at Gaza. Both methods have been inapplicable since 1 November, for stocks in Port Said have been lost or are cut off from Gaza, and the weather prevents schooner shipments. The Agency, therefore, has had to establish new lines of communication by sea to Haifa and thence by rail to Gaza, and to place emergency orders at high prices for foodstuffs (flour, pulses, fats, rice, milk) to be delivered in early December.

10. It also proved necessary to make some emergency shipments of various items to Gaza, using both the UNRWA plane and road transport from Beirut. Thus, the Agency flew one ton of medical supplies from Beirut on 4 November, two days after the Israel occupation of the Strip. Four convoys of trucks also took about 200 tons of urgently needed supplies for Gaza from the Agency's central warehouses in Beirut, the trucks being driven by volunteers from the Agency's international staff.

11. There is still a desperate need for fuel in the Strip. In the absence of the normal fuel (kerosene), even orange groves and trees planted under the Agency's afforestation project were being cut down and used by the refugees and local population for cooking and heating. The normal source of supply via Egypt having been cut off by the fighting, the Agency, as a matter of urgency, has been seeking to buy 1,000 tons of kerosene to meet

the minimum needs of the refugees during the winter months. Unfortunately, only fifty tons had been secured by mid-December, but urgent efforts were continuing to obtain the remainder.

Other immediate problems

12. Education. The re-establishment of the Agency's full education programme in the Gaza Strip will take considerable time. Some of the schools were looted by the refugees, some of the teachers dispersed, and the transportation system for teachers and pupils disrupted. Further, the Israel authorities decided to screen the teachers (of which there are over 1,000, almost all refugees) before permitting them to resume working, and expressed their intention to review the curriculum, which was the one used in Egyptian schools. As an interim measure, arrangements were made to open the first four grades in the elementary system on 10 December, and gradually to build up the full programme of education. Discussions have been in progress between UNRWA and the Israel authorities, and it is hoped that agreement will soon be reached regarding the complete curriculum and the availability of the remaining schoolteachers.

13. The Vocational Training Centre was re-opened by mid-November, though as a workshop for the production of immediate necessities rather than with its full courses. Normal working will be resumed as soon as practicable. One problem to overcome, however, is the fact that a number of the instructors were Egyptians, who may not be allowed - or may be unwilling - to continue to teach under the circumstances which now prevail.

14. The Agricultural Training Centre has ceased to function. Practically all of the farm equipment, including livestock, was taken by the Israelis but they have agreed to return them. Meanwhile, a small skeleton staff is harvesting the produce and planting new crops. The produce is being given to the various hospitals.

15. Currency. Until the Israel occupation of Gaza, the Egyptian pound was the legal tender in the area. For a short period after the occupation, both Egyptian and Israel currency were valid. On 3 December 1956, the Israel authorities declared the Israel pound to be the only legal tender in the Strip. Egyptian pounds may (but need not) be exchanged for Israel pounds at the rate of four Israel to one Egyptian pound. This is lower than the cross rate (L.E.1 = I.L.5.166) obtained by comparing the official rates of exchange of both currencies against the dollar, but the Israel authorities assert that the 1:4 rate is more in line with the purchasing power of the Egyptian pound.

16. It is too early to predict what effects the change in currency will have upon the Agency's finances. Some time must pass before it can be established whether the cost of living has been seriously affected, and in what direction. The Israel authorities have announced that they intend to fix maximum prices (as in Israel) for certain categories of essential goods: unless this is done, it appears probable that the cost of food will rise considerably, with serious consequences, both direct and indirect, upon the costs of UNRWA's operation.

17. Unemployment. The economic situation in the Gaza Strip in recent years was such that opportunities for useful work were extremely limited. The change of régime further aggravated this problem. A number of refugees who had had jobs with the Egyptian Administration, as well as a number who had had casual employment of various kinds, have found themselves without work for a variety of reasons associated with the changed situation. In addition, UNRWA has felt compelled to advise those of its staff members for whom there is no work in the Agency because of the disruption of normal operations that, after 1 January 1957, they will be on leave without pay until such time as the situation permits their re-employment. This means that the refugees are more fully dependent than ever on the meagre ration the Agency is able to provide.

Agreement between the Agency and the Israel authorities

18. During the first days of resumed operations in the Gaza Strip, a provisional agreement was reached between the Agency and the Israel authorities setting forth the framework within which the Agency would continue its operations. This agreement took the form of an exchange of letters between the Director and the Israel Chief of Staff. Its essential points were:

(a) That the Agency's emergency work in the Gaza strip did not imply any recognition of a state of affairs in contravention of the Armistice Agreement between

Egypt and Israel or contrary to the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly adopted in emergency special session on 2 November 1956;

(b) That the Agency's work in the Gaza Strip would be subject to instructions or resolutions emanating from the principal organs of the United Nations;

(c) That the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations would govern the relations between the Agency and the Government; and

(d) That the Government would, to the best of its ability, ensure the protection of the Agency's personnel, installations and property; would, subject to military security, permit free movement of Agency vehicles and of the Agency's international staff into and in the area; and would permit the Agency's local staff to move within the Strip subject to military government regulations.

A tribute to the staff

19. The re-establishment of UNRWA's basic relief services during the emergency was made possible only through the devoted work of many individuals, members of the Agency's international and local (mostly refugee) staff. Their work deserves the highest praise. In addition, particular mention should be made of the work of the medical staff of the Baptist hospital in caring for the many serious surgical cases caused by the fighting and the subsequent incidents at Khan Yunis and Rafah, where a number of refugees were severely wounded.

II. EFFECTS OF MILITARY OPERATIONS ON GAZA REFUGEES

Casualties among refugees

20. In addition to the disruptions referred to in section I above, the occupation of the Gaza Strip by the Israel army resulted in a number of civilian casualties in both the refugee and local populations, and caused anxiety and fear among the refugees, particularly during the first few weeks.

21. In other circumstances, it would have been a logical course for the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization to investigate and report upon casualties resulting from an armed attack across the demarcation line. In the present emergency, that organization was unable to do so, as the movements of its officers in the Gaza Strip had been restricted by the Israel authorities. The Agency has, therefore, made every effort to ascertain the facts concerning the various incidents affecting the refugees and it has sought to prevent any repetition of violence against the refugee population. The Agency has been compelled to rely upon its own sources of information. These were necessarily limited, but they included eye-witness accounts by UNRWA employees, both refugees and others.

22. The Director sets forth below a summary of the information he has obtained concerning refugee casualties, which he believes to be as accurate a reflection of the facts as prevailing circumstances permitted.

23 Khan Yunis. The town of Khan Yunis and the Agency's camp adjacent thereto were occupied by Israel troops on the morning of 3 November. A large number

of civilians were killed at that time, but there is some conflict in the accounts given as to the causes of the casualties. The Israel authorities state that there was resistance to their occupation and that the Palestinian refugees formed part of the resistance. On the other hand, the refugees state that all resistance had ceased at the time of the incident and that many unarmed civilians were killed as the Israel troops went through the town and camp, seeking men in possession of arms. The exact number of dead and wounded is not known, but the Director has received from sources he considers trustworthy lists of names of persons allegedly killed on 3 November, numbering 275 individuals, of whom 140 were refugees and 135 local residents of Khan Yunis.

24. Rafah. On 12 November, a serious incident occurred in the Agency's camp at Rafah. Both the Israel authorities and UNRWA's other sources of information agree that a number of refugees were killed and wounded at that time by the occupying forces.

25. A difference of opinion exists as to how the incident happened and as to the numbers of killed and wounded. It is agreed, however, that the incident occurred during a screening operation conducted by the Israel forces. These screening operations have been carried out in each UNRWA camp, as well as among the non-camp population. The stated purpose of the Israel authorities was to find persons who were members of the so-called "Palestine Brigade" or who participated in fedayeen operations. The procedure was to

institute a twenty-four-hour curfew in the area being screened and to call all men between certain specified ages to gather at designated places; meanwhile, soldiers went through the houses and huts looking for suspects who might have remained at home.

26. The Israel authorities in Gaza state that the attitude of the refugees in Rafah camp was hostile and that there was some resistance to the screening operation, during which the casualties occurred. The refugees deny any such resistance. The facts appear to be as follows: Rafah is a very large camp (more than 32,000 refugees) and the loudspeaker vans which called upon the men to gather at designated screening points were not heard by some of the refugee population. Realizing this, an UNRWA official went personally to one section of the camp to inform the inhabitants of the Israel announcement. Moreover, sufficient time was not allowed for all men to walk to the screening points and get there before the designated hour. In the confusion, a large number of refugees ran toward the screening points for fear of being late, and some Israel soldiers apparently panicked and opened fire on this running crowd.

27. The Director has received from sources which he considers trustworthy lists of names of persons allegedly killed at Rafah on 12 November, numbering 111, of whom 103 were refugees, seven local residents, and one an Egyptian.

Protest by the Agency

28. Upon learning of the Rafah incident, the Agency protested to the Israel Government stating that, unless immediate measures were taken to put an end to such happenings, it would be impossible for UNRWA to continue its work among and on behalf of the refugees in the Gaza Strip. The Agency was assured by the Israel Foreign Office that the Government was taking urgent steps to establish the facts and was doing its best to ensure that there would be no repetition of such incidents.

29. To the best of the Agency's information, the two incidents mentioned above are the only major ones of their kind which have taken place. There have been, however, a number of refugees killed or wounded in smaller incidents - some during the fighting, some in connexion with breaches of curfew restrictions, and some accidentally. The exact number is not known, but the Director has received a list, from sources which he considers trustworthy, numbering sixty-six individuals, of whom forty-eight were refugees, killed in the

III. REPERCUSSIONS IN OTHER AREAS

34. There were no public disturbances directly affecting the Agency's work in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria during the period covered by the present report, but it was none the less necessary to curtail somewhat the full range of UNRWA operations in Jordan and Syria. This curtailment was due in part to security restrictions in military areas and to the black-out, and in part to the fact that, in view of the acute political

period 1 to 21 November (exclusive of those mentioned above).

30. It has not been possible to verify individually each listed death, nor has it been possible to complete a list of all refugees who may have been killed or who are missing. Further information may be obtained in the weeks to come, but it is most unlikely that lists of casualties can ever be made complete. One of the reasons for this is that, particularly in the early phase, many burials were made without identification.

The present situation

31. During a visit to the Gaza Strip at the end of November, the Director talked in several UNRWA camps to many responsible refugees, such as mukhtars and elders. At that time, curfew restrictions had been eased and there was generally free movement of persons throughout the Strip outside curfew hours. There had been no recent incidents. The sporadic small attacks of fire which had been frequent and disturbing to the refugees during the first few weeks of the occupation - which the refugees attributed to a campaign of intimidation - had virtually ceased. Screening operations were still going on, but apparently in an orderly fashion. A large number of refugees were being taken to internment centres, and large numbers were returning freely to their camps after screening. The Israel authorities agreed to supply a list of persons held there as prisoners of war.

32. Although relative calm had returned to the Strip by the end of November, the refugees appeared to be still living under considerable tension, and it was evident that recent events had further increased their sense of frustration and of hopelessness. Responses from refugees expressed gratitude to UNRWA for continuing its assistance in the emergency; they welcomed it as a stabilizing force, but they seemed fearful of the future. Several of the refugee leaders asked the Director to convey to the United Nations General Assembly their urgent plea for security and for protection.

33. The emotions and hazards arising from military operations and from the sudden change in local administration seemed to have made the refugees more conscious of their precariousness of their position, of the total uncertainty of their fate. To the Director, these people were a living reminder of the fact that there could be no lasting peace in the troubled Near East unless and until a definitive solution of the Palestine problem, based on the principles of equity and accepted by all concerned, was agreed upon and put into effect.

tension resulting from the hostilities, it was considered advisable to reduce temporarily the international staff in those two countries to personnel responsible for basic services. These services were maintained without interruption.

35. Syria. Essential services have been maintained in Syria. However, shortly after that country broke

diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom and France, a disturbing incident occurred which made much more difficult the Agency's efforts to carry on its work for the refugees. On 5 November, military police officials made a sudden and unauthorized entry into the UNRWA premises in Damascus, took from their offices the Agency's representative in Syria and another senior officer, and placed them in cells, where they were detained, having been first deprived of their neckties, belts and shoes. They were released after about six hours on condition that they leave the country immediately. The charges made against the two officials by the military police differed. In one case, it was charged that the official had lighted a match during an air raid alert; in the other case, the official was charged with having made derogatory remarks about a political leader. No evidence was produced to substantiate the charges, which were flatly denied by the two UNRWA officers.

36. The action of the Syrian authorities (which had been preceded by other difficulties referred to in the annual report of the Director, paragraph 24 of annex C) was protested by the Secretary-General to the Syrian Government on the ground that it was in con-

travention of the Convention on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations. The Syrian authorities were requested to take appropriate remedial action. The matter has not as yet been resolved satisfactorily. Unless this can be done promptly, a serious question will arise as to whether or not the Agency should be asked to continue its operations in Syria.

37. Evacuation of dependants and United Nations staff. Following an agreement between the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Directors-General of the specialized agencies, the Director was invited to assist United Nations staff members and their dependants in certain areas of the Near East, should it at any time be undesirable for them to remain at their duty stations. In consequence, the Agency has assisted in the movement of dependants and certain staff members of United Nations agencies operating in Gaza, Jordan and Syria. Some were flown out of Gaza, Jordan and Syria by United Nations aircraft and others brought out to Lebanon by road. Billeting arrangements were made in Beirut, and the Agency chartered an aircraft and established a transit office in Athens to supervise their onward movement to other centres in Europe.

IV. ADDITIONAL COSTS

38. It is too early to predict with any accuracy by how much the recent events will affect the total cost of the Agency's operations. Much will depend on the response of the Israel Government to the suggestions that it should assume financial responsibility for the handling and movement of supplies for Gaza through Israel, just as the Egyptian Government made itself responsible for the handling and movement of goods through Port Said and for transporting supplies purchased in Egypt by the Agency, upon which all duties and charges were waived.

39. Apart, however, from such possible expenses, the Agency has been obliged to incur heavy additional costs as a result of recent events in Egypt and Gaza. The following table, while not accurate in detail, gives a picture of the order of magnitude of the costs already incurred, for which no provision has been made in the current budget (they could not have been foreseen) and for which additional funds will have to be provided. They may well be much greater.

Additional costs incurred to date

	\$
(a) Losses of supplies, equipment and installations in Gaza, Port Said, and in transit, from military action, looting, burning, etc.	275,000
(b) Excess over normal cost of emergency supply procurement for Gaza.	64,000
(c) Cost of transporting certain supplies for Gaza from Port Said to Haifa.	92,000
(d) Excess over normal cost of transporting supplies to Gaza from Beirut.	2,000
(e) Cost occasioned by displacement of staff and dependants in Gaza.	2,000
(f) Costs occasioned by displacement of staff and dependants elsewhere	25,000
(g) Miscellaneous	5,000
Total additional costs incurred to date	465,000

40. The Director assumes that special provision will be made to meet these exceptional costs. He believes it to be his duty, however, to call to the attention of the General Assembly the latest information available ^{2/}about contributions to the Agency's ordinary budget, and to invite Members to draw certain conclusions which the events in Gaza have brought into the foreground. The refugees from Palestine, whether in Gaza or elsewhere, consider themselves to be the wards of the United Nations. For eight years their standards of living have been dictated by the size of the

voluntary contributions of a few Member States, which have allowed the Agency, on behalf of the General Assembly of the United Nations, to spend on the upkeep of the refugees less than \$30 per head per year. Now that the recent crisis has focused the attention of the world upon the problems of the Near East, and has sharpened its appreciation of the need for their solution, Members of the United Nations should be aware of the fact that unless adequate contributions are forthcoming and are paid in time, even the meagre services that the Agency has provided so far will have to be reduced, with extreme human misery and suffering as the result for some 900,000 people.

^{2/}See records of the fifty-first meeting of the Negotiating Committee for Extra-Budgetary Funds (A/AC.62/SR.51, 21 December 1956).