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## Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

### Summary record of the 21st meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 9 November 2015, at 3 p.m.

*Chair:* Mr. Bowler ..... (Malawi)

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.*

**Agenda item 54: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East**

(A/70/13, A/70/13/Add.1, A/70/379, A/70/308, A/70/340 and A/70/319)

1. **The Chair** said that the international community should be proud of UNRWA's success in providing quality education, resulting in high literacy rates, and medical services, reducing infant mortality rates and the incidence of communicable diseases, as well as its humanitarian and development programmes, which had helped many Palestine refugees rise above poverty. The Agency had also been invaluable in providing a sense of hope and dignity for that vulnerable community.

2. That summer, half a million Palestine refugee children in the Middle East had faced the prospect of losing their right to education because of UNRWA's funding crisis. The international community needed to intensify its efforts to prevent a similar financial crisis from arising in the future. Emphasizing that the Agency depended on the Organization's support to fulfil its mandate, and that Member States had a responsibility to support it at a time when the Middle East was in crisis, he said that it was crucial that the Agency should continue to operate until a just and lasting solution was found to the question of Palestine refugees.

3. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that one year after the deadly war in Gaza, Palestine refugees regrettably felt more abandoned than ever. Their vulnerability and isolation had reached levels not seen in generations, as expanding conflicts in the Middle East thrust one community after another into extreme insecurity. The current situation had created a new existential crisis for Palestine refugees, many of whom had already been subjected to severe inequalities and discrimination. Where possible, some chose to flee, joining the refugee exodus across the region and into Europe.

4. Given those conditions, the social and economic development gains achieved over decades in the greater Middle East were very much at risk. A relationship must be established among the Palestine refugees, UNRWA and the recently-adopted Sustainable Development Goals. With their governance and justice provisions, the Goals aspired beyond the foreseeable future of refugees, as long as they

remained casualties of an unresolved conflict that had violated their fundamental rights with no means of redress. However, Palestine had already achieved much with regard to the human-development commitments enshrined in the Goals, and particularly the Goal that every child must benefit from a quality, inclusive education.

5. Education had been at the core of UNRWA's mandate since its inception, providing the foundation for the successful development of Palestine refugees' human capital. The international community must collaborate in taking all necessary steps to preserve and build on those achievements until a just and lasting solution was realized.

6. That summer, UNRWA's flagship education programme for 500,000 Palestine refugee schoolchildren and vocational training for 7,000 youth had been under threat of indefinite suspension owing to a lack of funding. Postponing the opening of the Agency's schools would have jeopardized achievement of a core Sustainable Development Goal, denying those children their right to education and sending shock waves through the entire Palestine refugee community. In the current Middle East context, that outcome would have posed a threat to regional security.

7. Faced with a crippling funding shortfall, UNRWA's management had been compelled to take urgent, painful measures to curtail planned expenditures. As set forth in the August 2015 Special Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East on the Financial Crisis of the Agency (A/70/272), those measures included a hiring freeze, higher student-per-classroom ceiling, 85 per cent reduction of international consultancies and short-term contracts, and an exceptional voluntary separation package for staff.

8. Bridging the shortfall had also required the active support of external stakeholders. Under the exceptional resource-mobilization effort led by UNRWA, the Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretary-General, along with the strong support of the Jordanian Government, including its Minister of Foreign Affairs, and that of the Palestinian President and Prime Minister, the required \$101 million had been raised to enable UNRWA's schools to re-open on time. Half of the funds had been donated by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. He expressed his

gratitude to all the donors who had contributed to that effort and all the Agency's donors and host countries which, together, ensured that its core services would be delivered in 2015.

9. The events of summer 2015 were a warning to the international community that it must take serious steps as part of a collective effort to ensure that the Agency was placed on a more sustainable financial foundation in the future.

10. UNRWA had not hesitated to take on responsibility in order to ensure sustainability, and would introduce additional measures to control costs while maximizing the impact of its modest resources. He had instructed its senior managers to prioritize activities directly related to service delivery and ensure that support functions were streamlined and their budgets compressed Agency-wide. Under the Deputy Commissioner-General's robust direction, that approach had guided the preparation of the Agency's 2016 budget, which would be the first to benefit from a new enterprise resource system. Exposure to currency-exchange risks would also be reduced by enhancing hedging strategies, supported by a new advisory committee of external experts.

11. UNRWA's projected budget shortfall for 2016 had been reduced to \$81 million, resulting in unprecedented savings of over \$50 million while sustaining a zero-growth programme budget. Those and other measures were being developed to lower the costs of doing business while maintaining — and, wherever possible, improving — the Agency's performance and refugees' access to services. UNRWA would continue to measure programme results against the targets set forth in its medium-term strategy for 2016-2021.

12. Even so, additional resources would be required to compensate for the projected shortfall. The Agency recognized that its traditional donors expected it to be innovative in developing new sources of funding, potentially including World Bank Trust Funds for education, Islamic finance tools such as *zakat*, *waqf* and social bonds, private-public partnerships and other sources of private-sector income, and philanthropic giving. The Agency hoped its pilot project would be among the first to demonstrate the potential of Islamic *zakat* financing at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016.

13. While seeking new funding opportunities, the Agency still urgently needed the support of donors to open new funding sources such as the World Bank; funding must still be undergirded by Member States, from which it needed consolidated, predictable and multi-year commitments. He underlined the importance of consolidating recent efforts by Gulf State donors and ensuring, whenever possible, that donors at least maintained previous funding commitments.

14. Strengthening UNRWA's financial viability was a collective responsibility. Its staff and management must implement strategic operational and financial plans in accordance with its medium-term strategy for 2016-2021. Host countries must continue to support and show generosity towards Palestine refugees and protect their rights, which give those refugees the best prospect of a better future.

15. With a sprawling infrastructure of 685 schools in almost 60 refugee camps and towns throughout its area of operation, the scale of UNRWA's education programme was partially to blame for the 2015 financial crisis.

16. The conflict in Syria had devastated UNRWA's education system. Forty-nine of its 118 schools had been damaged since 2011 and only 42 remained operational. While approximately 66,000 students had regularly attended its schools prior to the conflict, that number currently totalled 45,000 and was subject to security conditions. Eleven of the fourteen UNRWA staff killed during that conflict were from the Agency's education programme. His delegation condemned in the strongest terms the wanton violation of the rights of children and all civilians.

17. Earlier that year in Lebanon, an armed extremist group staging attacks on other factions took over an UNRWA school in the Ein el-Hilweh camp, departing only after mediation by prominent figures in the camps. Schools in Lebanon continued to be affected by factional violence, with serious implications for Palestine refugees. During the summer 2015 hostilities in Gaza, 83 schools had been damaged, including 7 schools serving as emergency shelters. At the peak of displacement, 90 UNRWA schools had sheltered 300,000 persons — approximately 17 per cent of the total Gazan population.

18. On recent visits to conflict-stricken Palestine refugee communities, he had seen the essential role played by the Agency's education system in the

regional-conflict dynamic. In the Yarmouk camp in March 2015, parents who had survived two years of a merciless siege had spoken to him only briefly about their own survival needs before bringing up their children's education. Where the combined forces of violence, dispersion and unmet basic needs fuelled refugee flows beyond the Middle East, UNRWA's institutional presence offered a stable space in which Palestine refugees could nourish their determination and strength, adapt to what many hoped was a temporary displacement and begin to rebuild their lives. Those refugees would help their shattered communities recover after the conflict was brought to an end.

19. Education was undoubtedly an essential source of hope and strength for Palestinian youth, who were so often deprived of opportunity and rights. Safeguarding their access to education remained crucial to preventing radicalization and preserving the prospect of a better future. The Agency's human-rights curriculum exposed Palestinian boys and girls to the importance of respecting the rights of others and gave them a better understanding of the rights they should be enjoying.

20. The illegal blockade of Gaza remained in place, subjecting Palestinians to a collective punishment and denying all but a few the opportunity to lead normal lives, including by interacting with the outside world. Currently, 893,000 Palestine refugees were food-dependent — eleven times more than 15 years earlier. Gaza's 42 per cent unemployment rate was the highest in the world, and its refugee-youth unemployment rate was 70 per cent. In 2014, its economy experienced 15 per cent negative growth, and its per capita GDP was only 72 per cent of the 1994 level.

21. UNRWA had made enormous efforts to rehabilitate the 140,750 Palestine refugee homes and shelters damaged in the devastating 2014 Gaza conflict, completing more than half the caseload for minor repairs of Palestine refugee dwellings. However, the first reconstruction of a completely-demolished Palestine refugee home had taken no fewer than 14 months; while approvals for some 170 homes had been granted, the pace of rebuilding must increase, and funding remained insufficient to rebuild the homes that had been destroyed or severely damaged in 2014.

22. Fifteen years of ongoing armed conflict and eight years of blockade had decimated Gaza's agriculture,

small businesses and cottage industries. Its infrastructure was fragile and had only a limited capacity to provide electricity and potable water, which were both necessities for the population's sustenance. The United Nations projected that Gaza would not be liveable by 2020 unless the international community engaged all parties concerned to lift the blockade and support large-scale humanitarian and development activities. The deplorable conditions imposed on the people of Gaza — half of whom were children — could only be described as immoral, untenable and undermining to the security and rights of States and peoples in the region.

23. The recent upsurge in violence and protests in the West Bank including East Jerusalem had directly impacted Palestinians, with some 71 fatalities and over 7,500 injuries in the first month of unrest. As the Deputy Secretary-General had said at the Security Council's quarterly Middle East debate, the crisis would not have erupted if the Palestinian people, among others, had any hopeful prospects for a viable Palestinian State, an economy that offered jobs and opportunities, and control over their legal and administrative processes. UNRWA was shocked by the upsurge in violence affecting Palestinian and Israeli civilians, the pattern of deadly force against Palestinians, increased use of live ammunition in and around refugee camps, settlement expansion, increased settler violence against Palestine refugees and the latter's displacement as a result of the demolition and destruction of structures. Also concerning were the longstanding threats to transfer Bedouin communities, a majority of whom were Palestine refugees, from Area C to three townships. Such transfers would contravene Israel's obligations under international law.

24. Some 450,000 Palestine refugees — 80 per cent of the pre-war total — remained in Syria; almost all of them required the Agency's assistance to fulfil their basic needs. UNRWA estimated that 58,000 refugees had fled to Lebanon and Jordan and 52,000 to locations outside its areas of operation such as Europe, Asia and Latin America. Many had tragically lost their lives while making the perilous journey to Europe.

25. UNRWA's ability to provide emergency shelter, education and health services in situ using its long-established infrastructure had undoubtedly played an important role in individual families' decision to remain in Syria. It was therefore vital that those emergency services should be adequately funded and

that the Agency should continue providing education to children living in critical conditions.

26. Supporting the Agency's efforts in Syria was both cost-effective and humane: recent estimates suggested that the cost of supporting Palestine refugees was seven times higher in Europe than in Syria. According to current trends, only just over half of the Agency's 2015 emergency appeal for \$420 million would be met. As winter approached, \$124 million would be needed for emergency cash, shelter and winterization, \$30 million for emergency food assistance, \$17 million for emergency education and \$24 million for livelihoods. If fully delivered, the specified services could substantially determine whether refugees decided to remain in Syria or not.

27. Palestine refugees yearned for stability. Even in the battle-scarred area of Yarmouk and its environs, to which the Agency had only limited access, those refugees continued to live in the direst conditions, harbouring the hope that they would be able to return to their former lives. It was incumbent on the international community to assist them and support UNRWA's emergency work. He paid tribute to the Agency's courageous staff in Syria, 14 of whom lost their lives and almost 30 of whom were unaccounted for or detained. Very few agencies would continue operations under such circumstances.

28. In Lebanon, there had been no change in the status or work opportunities for the Palestine refugees residing there and the additional 42,000 Palestine refugees from Syria. The latter community's needs for cash, food, housing assistance and emergency health care were urgent. For instance, UNRWA had recently been forced to eliminate its housing subsidy to Palestine refugee families from Syria, exposing tens of thousands to the prospect of homelessness on the streets of Lebanon.

29. Weakening coping mechanisms would reduce those refugees' ability to remain in Lebanon temporarily, increasing the chance that they would either return to Syria or risk dangerous smuggling routes to reach Europe. Their precarious legal status also made it difficult for them to obtain civil documentation for birth, marriage, divorce and death. Left unresolved, that situation would lead to the emergence of an undocumented population, with concomitant risks. He noted with satisfaction, however, that the 6,500 Palestine refugee children from Syria

had matched the results and performance levels of the refugee students already living in Lebanon.

30. He once again drew attention to the Agency's largest housing project, the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, whose reconstruction continued far too slowly for lack of donor funds. He was grateful to Saudi Arabia for its additional support, but noted with concern that approximately half the families displaced eight years earlier remained displaced. Failure to complete the project expeditiously reflected the international community's failure to understand how deeply humiliating it was for thousands of residents to continue living in inadequate temporary shelters.

31. Jordan hosted the largest number of Palestine refugees — 2.1 million — as well as the 16,000 estimated to have fled from Syria. Jordan and Lebanon had been severely affected by the Syrian crisis and deserved greater international support to enhance the resilience of the vast number of refugees from Syria sheltered in each country. UNRWA recognized the great burden placed on Jordan and had requested that its Government ensure equal treatment and protection of all refugees in accordance with international standards.

32. UNRWA's financial crisis that summer was symptomatic of a broader existential crisis within the world's humanitarian system, whose donor resources could not keep pace with growing needs. UNRWA provided for 44 per cent of the world's long-term refugees and successfully integrated humanitarian and development funding, having the institutions and structures to address emergency needs and provide human-development services.

33. UNRWA strongly endorsed the efforts of the Chief of the World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat Jemilah Mahmood and her team to collaborate with all stakeholders in identifying ways to remodel the global humanitarian system. Innovative approaches were required to ensure that people affected by crises were adequately cared for.

34. As emphasized during the preparations to the World Humanitarian Summit, UNRWA supported empowering local actors and enhancing the protection of vulnerable populations. While strongly supporting the call to revitalize the core principle of putting people at the heart of humanitarian action, UNRWA continued to operate in a highly polarized environment. In the light of recent allegations of inappropriate

statements by UNRWA staff, notably on social media, the Agency unequivocally condemned any form of anti-Semitism and racism; its position on that issue was a matter of public record. It took every allegation seriously and would continue to take disciplinary action as required.

35. Recalling that the historical injustice bequeathed to successive generations of Palestine refugees remained unresolved, he regretted that a political settlement had never appeared further from the international community's grasp. However, as demonstrated by recent events in Jerusalem and the West Bank, it had never been more urgent to take political action, especially as the Middle East became more fragmented and chaotic. Every effort to control the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had failed. UNRWA must be supported in its endeavour to create conditions for Palestine refugees to live dignified lives until the realization of a just resolution of their plight.

*Interactive dialogue*

36. **Mr Çevik** (Turkey), citing UNRWA's critical role in the Middle East region, said that in the light of the recent financial crisis, it clearly needed greater international support. He asked the Commissioner-General to elaborate on the Agency's current efforts to diversify its donor base and strengthen partnerships, and on ways that Member States could support those efforts

37. **Mr. Maleki** (Islamic Republic of Iran) asked what the Secretary-General had done to implement paragraph 4 of General Assembly resolution 65/272 requesting his support for the institutional strengthening of the Agency with financial resources from the regular United Nations budget. Facing a major budget deficit in 2015, as it had the previous year and perhaps again the following year, UNRWA should have predictable financing, which was not possible with voluntary contributions.

38. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) reaffirmed her delegation's appreciation of the UNRWA Commissioner-General's leadership and compelling advocacy on behalf of the Palestine refugees in challenging times, and of the Agency's entire staff — both national and international — for their tireless efforts to fulfil its mandate and provide a constant measure of stability and hope. She recognized their dedication and courage in the context of a volatile

environment and the personal challenges and risks that many of them faced, given that the majority of the staff were Palestine refugees themselves. In that context and in follow-up to the Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry with regard to certain incidents affecting UNRWA's schools (S/2015/286), including attacks on those schools during the 2014 Israeli military aggression on the Gaza Strip, and in the light of several killings of United Nations staff members during that aggression, she asked what measures had been taken to enhance the security and protection of UNRWA's staff and premises, including under the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel. She also wondered what steps, if any, had been taken to ensure accountability for the killing of civilians on Agency premises as well as the killing of staff members and the destruction of Agency property by the occupying Power.

39. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) expressed his sincere appreciation to the donors present. The Agency currently had several efforts underway to broaden its base of historic supporters, some of which entailed proactive engagement with additional Member States. To that end, he had visited China, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Korea. The Agency would also focus its outreach efforts on countries in regional groups to build diplomatic and partnership ties, and certainly would cooperate with Turkey in that regard.

40. UNRWA had a limited track record of engaging with international trust funds such as the World Bank Trust Funds for education, and would verify its eligibility for such funding. Unlike many humanitarian organizations, UNRWA had a mixed budget that provided for the predictable annual costs of its education and health-care activities. In that regard, it was similar to a government ministry that needed to ensure the delivery of a service to an entire population. In view of those recurrent costs, the Agency should have a more predictable multi-year funding arrangement with Member States and, potentially, other platforms.

41. The Executive Office of the Secretary-General had made genuine efforts to ensure UNRWA funding and to advocate on behalf of its international positions, which had increased in recent years. That matter was still being discussed in the Fifth Committee. Meanwhile, UNRWA still relied primarily on voluntary contributions, requiring it to conduct a challenging resource mobilization every year.

42. The Agency had carried out security assessments on the ground and had begun to implement a number of United Nations recommendations regarding the situation in Gaza. More broadly, he was concerned that the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) framework applied to UNRWA's international staff, but not its national staff. That framework entailed annual costs of \$80 million to the 30,000 national staff. The Agency's inability to carry those costs reflected, in Syria and in Gaza the previous year, a security management framework different from that for any other national staff in the United Nations system. In the light of UNRWA's significant personnel losses, he was currently investigating other ways to address and improve overall security management for his entire national staff.

43. Regarding accountability, UNRWA had engaged with Israel during its own investigation and fact-finding mission, with a view to submitting its observations on all the cases that Israel had investigated. UNRWA called on Israel to adopt accountability measures when investigations and fact-finding missions were started. It would submit its own findings and await the conclusion of the process before commenting further.

44. **Mr. Suleman** (Pakistan) said that the illegal Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, currently in its eighth year, must be lifted in accordance with international humanitarian law, to allow for economic recovery and physical reconstruction and promote opportunities for Gaza's large youth population. The current tripartite agreement among Israel, Palestine and the United Nations was no substitute for lifting the blockade. He asked if that mechanism had actually facilitated the Agency's efforts to import supplies, provide services and begin reconstruction of the thousands of refugee shelters damaged or destroyed during the 2014 Israeli aggression, as well as those that remained unrepaired following past aggressions. He also asked about the current situation of families whose houses had yet to be rebuilt.

45. **Mr. Habib** (Indonesia), citing UNRWA's unprecedented funding crisis and declining annual funding, and its status as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, asked what the Agency's specific financial requests of Member States were.

46. **Mr. Djacta** (Algeria), deploring the tragic situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, whence

thousands of refugees had fled to neighbouring countries, asked what the Agency was doing to attend to the basic needs of those refugees. As the Commissioner-General had noted, it should be highlighted that some refugees were attending and performing well at schools in those countries.

47. **Mr. Elshandawily** (Egypt) said that Palestine refugees in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, continued to suffer from many illegal Israeli policies and practices, such as confiscation of land, home demolition and increased settlement activity. He asked what the Agency did to support the rights and address the needs of refugee families specifically affected by those practices.

48. **Mr. Gidor** (Israel) said that while he commended the Commissioner-General on his energetic and professional leadership of the Agency, his country still had substantive textual and methodological reservations concerning certain aspects of Commissioner-General's report (A/70/13), most significantly, its unbalanced and disproportionate description of the various crises affecting Palestine refugees across the Middle East. He presumed that for some of the cases of staff members killed and missing, as reported in paragraph 9 of the document, the identity of the perpetrators had been made known to the Agency. Nevertheless, in stark contrast to the sections of the report dealing with Israel, the report assigned no culpability to any faction, organization or individual. He asked the Commissioner-General to enlighten the Committee as to who was responsible and whether the Agency would push for the establishment of a board of inquiry similar to the one that had been set up after the 2014 war in Gaza.

49. Page 23 of the English version provided a detailed breakdown of seven incidents leading to damage of property and loss of life at UNRWA facilities in Gaza. However, somewhat predictably, no such breakdown was provided in respect of the appalling carnage and devastation inflicted on Palestine refugees and UNRWA facilities in the Syrian Arab Republic. Furthermore, paragraph 10 of the report expressed praise and gratitude to the Syrian regime — considered by most enlightened societies and Western governments to be genocidal — for its support for Palestine refugees. That was surprising, to say the least, and could hardly be reconciled with the list of casualties among UNRWA staff in that country and the shocking conditions in the Yarmouk refugee

camp in Damascus. Given the absence of anything even approaching a similar expression of gratitude to the Israeli authorities for the provision of running water and electricity in Gaza, even at the height of the war with Hamas in 2014, or its continued reconstruction efforts there, he wondered whether the Agency was upholding the Syrian regime as a role model to be followed.

50. The section entitled “Legal matters” listed a litany of legal complaints by UNRWA against various Israeli Government bodies on matters ranging from taxation to transit permits and consular restrictions. Only one largely factual and non-polemic paragraph dealt with the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. Was his delegation once again forced to conclude that UNRWA had no legal complaints or issues to raise with the notoriously law-abiding regime in Damascus? Regrettably, that imbalance had also been manifest in the Commissioner-General’s statement, during which almost 30 minutes had been devoted to the root causes, conduct and outcome of a fifty-day war in Gaza that had ended 15 months prior to the meeting, while less than 5 minutes had been allocated to a war that had been raging in the Syrian Arab Republic for five years and was worsening. He had listened closely to the Commissioner-General but could detect no apportioning of culpability with respect to the carnage in that country; one could even imagine that the deaths were the result of a natural disaster and not of a prolonged, man-made crime perpetrated largely through, but not exclusively by, the Syrian regime.

51. He asked the Commissioner-General to enlighten the Committee on the identity of the body that had been controlling the Gaza Strip for almost a decade. The report referred repeatedly to hostilities between the State of Israel and the Palestinians of Gaza, without mentioning their leaders. He wondered who handed out military instructions and was responsible for placing weapons and ammunition in UNRWA schools and facilities. Furthermore, he would appreciate clarification regarding why the word “Hamas” was mentioned only once in the entire report, and only in the context of Palestinian national-unity endeavours, and also wished to know how operating in a territory controlled by an internationally-proscribed terror organization affected the daily work and staff of the Agency.

52. **Mr. Forés Rodríguez** (Cuba) asked what the Agency was doing to help the Palestine refugees

achieve the development goals of the recently-adopted post-2015 agenda, such as reducing inequality, eliminating poverty, ensuring inclusive and quality education, and protecting vulnerable populations.

53. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA), referring to the Gaza reconstruction mechanism, said that procedures and approaches had initially been complicated, as evidenced by the results on the ground. Subsequently, there had been improvements in how the mechanism facilitated the arrival of material, but it was still insufficient, in terms of scale, speed and other conditions determined by donors, for providing financial support. The appeal by UNRWA only covered between 33 and 35 per cent of needs, so there was still a substantial gap. Despite close interaction with stakeholders, funding remained a core issue. As for financial requests, UNRWA was spending on average US\$ 1.2 to US\$ 1.3 billion on operations. The present meeting of the Committee was not the appropriate occasion for pledging announcements or requests, but it was important to understand that the Organization’s long-term commitment in education and healthcare required predictable multi-year arrangements to avoid challenging situations, and he called for more Member States to join the financial effort to that end.

54. In line with its mandate, the Agency focused not only on Palestine refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, but also those fleeing the conflict in Syria. Every single refugee was therefore eligible and entitled to the services provided by UNRWA, and children were immediately integrated into schools. As to land confiscation and the destruction of homes, the Agency’s first action was to engage with refugees, document cases, and address families’ immediate needs. As part of its regular dialogue with the Israeli Defence Force and the Government, UNRWA also submitted its observations and findings on cases with a view to ensuring the non-repetition of such actions.

55. Turning to the points raised by the Israeli representative, he said that by the very definition of the term “missing”, responsibility was difficult to assign when people were unaccounted for. However, he had no doubt that some of the missing staff members had been detained by Syrian Government forces, and he had raised the issue in Damascus. Attempts to assign responsibilities during a war such as the one in Syria complicated an already complex issue. Whether or not the Secretary-General would decide to establish a



board of inquiry was a matter of speculation, but the issue of threats to the safety or lives of United Nations staff should be scrutinized closely in any context. He recalled that, at the twentieth meeting of the Committee in 2014, the representative of Israel had made similar comments on the disparity between his breakdown of the situation in Israel and in Syria. However, the current report (A/70/13) had far more specific content on Syria than the previous report because there were many issues to be addressed relating to the security, well-being and safety of Palestine refugees. His role was not to compare across country contexts. While it was legitimate for the representative to look into the information provided on Israel, he reiterated that regardless of the frequency and detail with which the Agency examined or compared the situation in Israel and that of Syria, no Government could be relieved of its responsibility to protect and ensure the well-being of Palestine refugees living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He would be happy to discuss that further in a bilateral setting. Furthermore, he had no difficulty naming or referring to the role of Hamas, or any other actors, but the fact remained that neither the Secretary-General's board of inquiry nor any other body had been able to attribute responsibility to a specific group for the placement of weapons components at three UNRWA schools during the Gaza conflict; it was thus not a question of the Agency's reluctance to identify the perpetrators. As to how the work and operations of the Agency in the Territory were affected, he said that sheltering 300,000 displaced persons in some 90 school buildings during the war was a tribute to the Agency's operating capacity under the challenge posed by the presence of any armed group or facing the military consequences of the actions of any party, including the Israeli Government. The Agency had a proven track record of response on the ground that was remarkable.

56. Poverty reduction remained one of the Agency's biggest challenges. The inclusion of education, which created employment opportunities, in its core activities had been one of the more noteworthy visions of the Agency since its establishment. The problem for the Palestine refugee community was the contrast between the high quality of education received and the conditions on the ground, which were detrimental to employment and progress. That was where the fight against rising poverty had to take place, but it could not be done unless the core issues were addressed. The

international community must therefore take political action to end the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Those were the dynamics undermining development and employment, creating increased poverty and reducing an educated people — who should be self-sufficient — to dependence on assistance. Without political action, the region would slide further into “de-development” and poverty.

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

57. **Ms. Larsen** (Norway), introducing the report of the Working Group (A/70/379), said that the Group's deliberations had changed considerably since it was convened on 1 July 2015, as UNRWA was facing its greatest-ever financial crisis. The Commissioner-General's Special Report (A/70/272) outlined the background of the crisis, which had endangered access to education for half a million Palestine refugees in the Middle East, and the various measures that UNRWA had been taking to remedy it. The Working Group was pleased that the financial gap had been eventually bridged with additional contributions from several countries, and that all Palestine refugee children had returned to school, on time, in all the Agency's areas of operation. Half the amount raised had come in a welcome renewed commitment by Gulf State donors; Saudi Arabia was currently the third largest donor to UNRWA overall. The Group's report described the situation in the Agency's fields of operation, all of which were affected to varying degrees by the current regional unrest.

58. Concerned by the multiplication of crises and their impact on the Agency's operations and funding, and committed to supporting the Agency's fundraising efforts, the Working Group therefore urged Governments that had not yet done so to contribute regularly to UNRWA, particularly to its General Fund, and called on Governments that had made small contributions, or that had reduced or ceased contributions, to step up their support. It also urged Governments to fully fund the Agency's General Fund for the biennium 2014-2015 and, where possible, to establish increased multi-year funding to allow UNRWA to improve planning of its activities. It encouraged all Member States to consider positively the Secretary-General's report on strengthening the management capacity of UNRWA (A/65/705) and all

resolutions relating to the Agency's financing, so as to address recurring budget deficits and support the Agency's vital work. UNRWA had undertaken significant reforms and would continue to identify and implement cost-containing measures wherever possible without sacrificing the quality of its services. There was also a need to identify potential sources of funding to meet severance payment obligations as necessary.

59. The Working Group invited all Member States to consider its recommendations when assessing funding for UNRWA in 2016 and beyond. The Agency had made progress in efforts to contain its costs; Member States should accompany those measures with adequate funding.

#### *General debate*

60. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that the Palestine refugee problem constituted a core issue that must be resolved, based on General Assembly resolution 194 (III), for the realization of a just, lasting, comprehensive peace, a commitment pledged by the international community and which still required responsible, collective and urgent action. The current escalation of tensions and deterioration of the political, security, socio-economic and humanitarian situation were manifestations of the injustice that had persisted for nearly seven decades, denying generations of Palestine refugees their fundamental rights. The majority of the more than 5.5 million refugees registered with UNRWA remained in camps that had been established as temporary shelters, and successive crises had compounded their vulnerability with displacement and dispossession, death and injury, rising poverty and unemployment. Fragmentation was currently undermining their resilience and creating an existential crisis, as so many refugees struggled for survival, forced to flee the ravages of war and poverty in search of ever-elusive security and a better life for their families. That phenomenon was especially stark in Syria, as the catastrophic conflict spilled over into Lebanon and Jordan, and in Occupied Palestine, where refugee communities were disproportionately affected by the brutality and indignity of Israeli occupation. The current refugee and migrant crisis in the region and in Europe had brought into painful focus the misery of what it meant to be a refugee, a term to which many had become inured when it came to Palestine refugees. It further underscored the urgent need for humane

solutions based on international law, including humanitarian and human-rights law, to address root causes.

61. While political will must be mobilized to address the immediate refugee crisis, comprehensive solutions also required addressing the historic plight of the Palestine refugees and the reigning insecurity, turmoil and sense of injustice. Rectifying that injustice remained at the core of Palestine's search for peace. She reaffirmed the centrality of the Palestine refugees' rights of return and to just compensation for their losses and suffering, based on resolution 194 (III) and relevant provisions of international law; and the right of the Palestinians displaced in June 1967 to return to their homes and lands, in line with relevant United Nations resolutions and agreements reached by the parties in the 1990s. By rejecting those rights and using rhetoric minimizing the importance of a just solution for the Palestine refugee issue for achieving peace, Israel was being irresponsible and provocative, reinforcing its total disrespect of human rights and failure to commit to even the most basic principles of peacemaking. The international community must demand that Israel comply with its legal obligations under the Charter of the United Nations, international law and relevant resolutions; Israel could not be allowed to continue obstructing peace without consequence.

62. The Agency's assistance exemplified the nexus between meaningful humanitarian assistance and development, showing that basic needs could be fulfilled while also building human capital and preserving rights and dignity, even in times of conflict and crisis. Providing an important model in the era of sustainable development for all, it deserved praise and support for its work, which should also be prioritized in the context of international humanitarian aid. In the absence of a just solution, UNRWA — whose education, job-creation, microfinance, maternal-health and other programmes had irrefutably made a tangible difference in the lives of the Palestine refugees — remained indispensable. However, it could not be taken for granted: the recent risks posed to the Agency's education programme, with the possible closure of 685 schools and 8 vocational centres, stoked deep anxieties. At a time when the rest of the world emphasized the importance of education for sustainable development and for the peace and security of nations, it would be unacceptable to leave Palestine

refugee children behind and deny them their right to education, with the inherent dangers posed thereby. The Agency's immediate mobilization at the highest levels to avert the crisis and the collective efforts to secure adequate resources for that core programme were commendable.

63. In each of the Agency's 58 camps, the needs were real and the dreams of justice and of a free, dignified life hung in the balance. The strong donor response to the unprecedented financial crisis in August 2015 had been crucial for covering the funding gap and reconfirmed the importance of the Agency's humanitarian mission. Moreover, the political, financial and moral support and solidarity for the Palestine refugees – reiterated at the September 2015 High-level Ministerial Meeting on the Financial Sustainability of UNRWA — and the early convening of the annual pledging conference reflected strong international commitment. Palestine recognized the crucial assistance and cooperation of the host countries over the years, as well as of the donor community, including members and Observers of the Advisory Commission and the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA. The generosity of traditional, major donors and of new and emerging donors was appreciated, and it was hoped that those contributions would become regular. Her delegation appealed for contributions to the Agency's General Fund and emergency appeals and for multi-year contributions where possible. Palestine fully supported the Agency's efforts to diversify the donor base and strengthen partnerships, and hoped for the success of its medium-term strategy. While the Agency's humanitarian-assistance, human-development and protection work remained necessary, she reiterated the urgent call for serious efforts to attain a just solution to the question of Palestine. There was a pressing need to secure a credible political horizon to address all core final-status issues and urge the international community to mobilize the political will required to help the parties realize a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to fulfil the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people, including the Palestine refugees, and attain peace. It was a matter of political, humanitarian and moral urgency.

64. **Mr. Maleki** (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, praised the Agency's tireless efforts, courage and dedication under difficult and often dangerous

circumstances; 18 staff members had lost their lives in the line of duty, many in the 2014 war in Gaza. Expressing serious concerns about the violation of the immunity of UNRWA personnel and premises by Israel, the Movement condemned in the strongest terms the killing of United Nations personnel and the destruction of United Nations premises. The mandated role of UNRWA in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, was essential in the absence of a just and lasting solution to the plight of the Palestine refugees that would include their rights under General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The Movement was gravely concerned by the critical situation of the refugees, whose lives the occupation continued to define adversely in every aspect, from security and freedom of movement to livelihoods and employment. Palestine refugees had continued to face serious protection challenges throughout 2014 and, in many places, faced existential threats, sinking deeper into poverty and desperation. The disastrous situation had been exacerbated by the armed conflicts in Syria.

65. The illegal and inhumane Israeli blockade of Gaza continued to cripple its economy and stifle the population, preventing the delivery of humanitarian aid and basic materials for reconstruction, thus obstructing economic and social recovery. To enable UNRWA personnel to discharge their humanitarian duties freely, the occupying Power must immediately lift all its illegal restrictions on free, sustained movement of persons and goods between Gaza and the outside world, in compliance with international law. The international community must uphold its moral, political and legal responsibilities to bring an end to Israel's illegal policies and all of its violations against the Palestinian people. Israel, the occupying Power, must abide by its obligations under the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention) and relevant United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

66. The Movement also expressed concern over the situation of the Palestine refugees in Syria and the further resulting displacement as thousands of them fled to other countries for safety, adding to the demands on UNRWA, particularly by increasing the need for emergency assistance. Donors must respond to those urgent needs. The continued funding shortfall remained a concern, as it undermined the Agency's efforts to promote human development and meet

refugees' needs. The Movement urged all Member States, especially the traditional donors, to increase their contributions to UNRWA to avoid a financial crisis in the coming years. While appreciating the efforts of and pledges made during the Cairo International Conference on Palestine: Reconstructing Gaza, the Non-Aligned Movement encouraged all donors to maintain their generosity, enabling UNRWA to overcome the serious financial shortfalls and funding gaps it still faced, with increased expenditures arising from the grave socio-economic and humanitarian situation and instability in all its fields of operation. The Movement thus continued to support General Assembly resolution 65/272, as well as the Agency's unwavering efforts despite many difficulties. The current humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, must be addressed and the entire international community must intensify its efforts to put an end to the occupation of Palestine and find a just solution for the Palestine refugee problem on the basis of the principles of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions.

67. **Ms. Radwan** (Saudi Arabia), speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, cited UNRWA's dangerous and difficult work providing assistance to Palestine refugees under constant threat of Israeli aggression, and expressed appreciation for the sacrifices made by Agency personnel in the line of duty, sometimes at the cost of their own lives.

68. Commending UNRWA for the crucial humanitarian and technical support that it provided to over 5.5 million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Group expressed concern at the Agency's severe and unprecedented funding crisis, which had threatened its ability to fulfil its mandate and would have prevented UNRWA schools from re-opening at the beginning of the 2015 school year had it not been for generous last-minute donations from Arab States, most notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

69. The Group supported the Commissioner-General's endeavours to stabilize the Agency's financial situation and reiterated its call on the international community, specialized financial institutions and other donors to significantly increase their contributions to UNRWA to enable the Agency to meet its increasing programme requirements in the face

of ongoing Israeli aggression and rising numbers of refugees.

70. While financial backing was urgently needed to relieve the suffering and preserve the dignity of the Palestinian people, the Group emphasized that the only way to solve the underlying problem was to compel Israel, the occupying Power, to abide by international law. Israel must desist from its repeated acts of violence, which caused extensive human and material losses and thwarted reconstruction efforts; lift the suffocating blockade on Gaza; allow immediate entry of all humanitarian assistance; halt settlement construction; and put an end to settler terrorism, such as the appalling act of terror perpetrated by Israeli settlers who set fire to the Dawabsha family home, burning alive a young infant and causing the later death of other family members.

71. In the West Bank, Palestinians were denied freedom of movement and basic standards of living, poverty was on the rise and the economy was deteriorating. Israel continued to terrorize Palestinians, use live ammunition to mercilessly kill Palestinians in residential areas and expand settlements in Jerusalem, thus putting 7,000 Bedouin residents, most of whom were registered as Palestine refugees, at risk of losing their homes. Faced with such flagrant violations of international law, it was high time for the international community to take a bold stance by holding Israel accountable for its crimes and providing assistance to the Palestinian people as a matter of urgency.

72. The Group was extremely concerned about the dangers and human suffering experienced by Palestine refugees as a result of the ongoing crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. It condemned the gross violations committed in Yarmouk refugee camp, where basic humanitarian assistance had been blocked, and called for urgent action to end that crisis and hold the perpetrators accountable. It urged the international community to step up efforts to support and cooperate with the Agency to support the plight of refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis.

73. The Group was firmly committed to assisting UNRWA in its work until Palestine refugees could return to their homeland and receive the compensation they deserved for the terrible damages inflicted upon them for decades, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). Reiterating that the Palestinian tragedy would not end while Israel

continued its occupation of Arab territories, violations of international law, and campaign of murder and violence against the Palestinian people, the Group supported all efforts to secure urgent international support, establish a deadline to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories, ensure Israel's withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders and move towards the two-State solution envisioned under the Arab Peace Initiative.

74. Speaking in her national capacity, she said that her Government was proud to support the Palestinian people and their legitimate religious and humanitarian need to live in freedom and dignity and exercise their inalienable rights. Saudi Arabia had contributed over \$350 million to UNRWA in 2014, making it one of the Agency's main donors alongside the United States and the European Union, and had been among the first States to respond to the Agency's recent urgent appeal with a donation of \$35 million to help cover the deficit and prevent the closure of UNRWA schools. In addition, Saudi Arabia had recently pledged \$111 million to fund Agency programmes and operations involving education, health care, reconstruction in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli attack in 2014, repair and reconstruction of schools and homes in the West Bank and the Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon, and provision of humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees affected by the Syrian conflict.

75. Her Government looked forward to cooperating with other stakeholders to raise further contributions from States and international organizations such as the World Bank, in order to permanently resolve the Agency's financial crisis, particularly in the area of education. Highlighting the vital role played by UNRWA in meeting the basic needs of Palestine refugees, Saudi Arabia expressed appreciation to all donors and pledged its ongoing commitment to the Agency. In view of their intense suffering for over 65 years, urgent action was needed to provide Palestine refugees with international protection and tackle the root cause of the problem by ending Israel's occupation of Arab territories and establishing a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

76. **Mr. Storaci** (Observer for the European Union), speaking also on behalf of the candidate countries Montenegro, Serbia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; the country of the stabilization and association process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina; and Ukraine, said that humanitarian

workers worked in difficult and dangerous circumstances and must be protected by the relevant authorities. He expressed appreciation to all UNRWA staff for their work and offered condolences to the families of those who had lost their lives in the line of duty.

77. Recalling the sense of urgency at the recent High-Level Ministerial Meeting on the Financial Sustainability of UNRWA, when donors had acted to overcome financial difficulties so as to ensure UNRWA schools re-opened for the 2015 school year, he stressed that Palestine refugees must be guaranteed the right to education, a crucial means of preserving their dignity and offering hope for the future. Commending the efforts of the Agency, he expressed gratitude to all donors, in particular Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, for their contributions, which had averted the crisis and allowed 500,000 children to return to school.

78. Given UNRWA's continuing essential role in the region, greater efforts were needed to rejuvenate the Agency, make its work more sustainable and enable it to fulfil its mandate with minimal risk to its operations. That would require a change of approach and sustained, long-term efforts on the part of all stakeholders, including donors, host countries, Agency staff and the refugees themselves. In that regard, he underscored the need for burden-sharing and urged new donors to step forward.

79. The European Union welcomed UNRWA's medium-term strategy and emphasized that while the Agency could not meet all the needs of the 5 million registered Palestine refugees, its wealth of experience, broad geographic reach and dedicated staff made it a viable partner with which other authorities could cooperate.

80. As the main providers of international assistance to UNRWA, the European Union and its Member States reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to supporting the Agency, while urging it to implement initiatives to secure medium-term budget and financial stability and ensure delivery of core services to the most vulnerable refugees. Commending the efforts and leadership of the Commissioner-General in that regard, the European Union urged UNRWA to take further steps to reduce the deficit in its General Fund, and to effectively communicate to Agency staff and refugees

that such efforts were intended to stabilize and protect the delivery of core services.

81. Expressing concern over the dire situation in the Gaza Strip, where hundreds of thousands of Palestine refugees were dependent on UNRWA food aid, he called on the international community to address the situation and tackle the root causes of conflict as a matter of priority. While the European Union welcomed recent steps taken by Israel to ease restrictions in Gaza, much remained to be done to enable full delivery of humanitarian aid and facilitate reconstruction and economic recovery. Recalling the tragic hostilities of 2014, when UNRWA facilities were bombed and 11 Agency staff lost their lives, he reiterated that compliance with international law and international humanitarian law by States and non-State actors was a cornerstone of peace and security in the region.

82. Regarding the crisis UNRWA faced in Syria, he noted that refugee camps and neighbourhoods, particularly Yarmouk, frequently experienced intense armed engagements and were too often deprived of humanitarian assistance. Acknowledging the efforts of countries in the region to deal with the influx of refugees fleeing Syria, he called on all parties to the conflict, in particular the Assad regime, to fully implement all provisions of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014) and the presidential statement of 2 October 2013, by taking appropriate measures to protect civilians, desisting from attacks on civilian objectives, and providing full and unobstructed access to humanitarian aid.

83. Thanking UNRWA for its vital work at a time when Palestine refugees were in particularly acute need of its help, he reaffirmed that the only way to end their plight was to reach a fair and realistic solution, as part of a comprehensive peace agreement based on a two-State solution, that would end the occupation and all further claims and meet the aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians. The European Union remained committed to cooperating with its international partners, including as part of the Quartet for Middle East peace, and with the parties concerned to improve the situation on the ground and work towards final-status negotiations on a comprehensive settlement to the conflict. Pending such an agreement, the European Union and its Member States would continue to support UNRWA in its crucial work, which helped to keep alive the values of humanity, solidarity and

dignity and preserve the future for young people who had already known too much suffering.

84. **Ms. Kawar** (Jordan) said that even in 1949, when UNRWA was dealing with only around 700,000 Palestine refugees whom it expected would soon return home, the refugee problem had been an enormous challenge for the international community. Sixty-five years later, faced with over five million Palestine refugees and an increasingly complex situation, compounded by a severe lack of financial support and no prospect of a lasting solution, the Agency was struggling to cope with rising demands. Under United Nations resolutions and international law, the responsibility to assist and relieve the suffering of Palestine refugees lay not only with host countries and a handful of donors, but on the entire international community. The financial and moral support provided to Palestine refugees by host countries, international donors and UNRWA was absolutely crucial, and any reduction in any part of that support would jeopardize progress towards the achievement of a just, lasting and peaceful solution to the refugee problem.

85. Of particular concern was the situation in Gaza, where living conditions were harsh, refugees were deprived of their basic needs, and the Israeli authorities restricted the movement of both refugees and UNRWA staff, thus obstructing the provision of essential services. As the Agency had already been suffering a financial crisis for many months, even the slightest drop in funding would be extremely detrimental to its ability to provide those services, as had been demonstrated earlier in 2015 when the Agency had almost been forced to delay the start of the school year for over 500,000 pupils. Moreover, funding cuts to the Agency served to further shift the burden onto host countries. In order to improve living conditions for refugees and work towards a lasting solution to their plight, the Agency must be provided with a solid financial basis for its work. It was therefore imperative to expand the donor base and adopt a new methodology that would ensure sustained assistance for Palestine refugees.

86. Jordan was highly committed to addressing humanitarian issues, in particular the situation of Palestine refugees, and insisted that Palestinians must be guaranteed the right of return and the right to compensation. Working in partnership with UNRWA to assist refugees through a network of schools, clinics and social centres, Jordan was presently hosting 42 per

cent of all Palestine refugees, more than any other country, and had received an extra 15,000 Palestine refugees over the past year as a result of the crisis in Syria. In September 2015, together with Sweden, Jordan had convened the High-Level Ministerial Meeting on the Financial Sustainability of UNRWA to tackle the Agency's financial deficit. Despite its limited resources, the Jordanian Government would continue to provide protection and assistance to Palestine refugees until their situation could be justly resolved by ending the Israeli occupation and establishing a fully independent and sovereign Palestinian State based on the pre-1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

87. Expressing appreciation to the Agency's international donors for their support and commending UNRWA and its staff for their vital work in a region that had experienced rising instability in recent years, she reiterated that the work of the Agency not only helped to guarantee Palestine refugees their basic rights and dignity, but also contributed to regional stability.

88. **Mr. Wehbi** (Lebanon) said that while significant milestones had been reached in the past year, such as the raising of the flag of the State of Palestine at the United Nations and the 65th anniversary of UNRWA, the Agency had also faced its worst financial crisis. The international community must therefore remain focussed on ensuring the welfare and protection of Palestinians and their rights.

89. Noting the drastic efforts to reform UNRWA since 2006, he stressed that the Agency's leadership and staff must be enabled to focus on service delivery and on raising the necessary funds to strengthen its financial structure and ensure the predictability of its resources. Only a strong and able UNRWA could contribute to stability in the region, pending a just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine, including the issue of Palestine refugees, pursuant to international law and United Nations resolutions, in particular resolution 194 (III).

90. Lebanon, where Palestine refugees made up around 10 per cent of the population, had recently welcomed an additional 45,000 refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. However, while the refugee population was growing, services were deteriorating and financial resources were dwindling. Refugees fleeing Syria were no longer receiving cash assistance,

which had previously formed their main source of income, leading to an alarming situation in which Palestine refugees in Lebanon were severely lacking support.

91. As a host country and member of both the UNRWA Advisory Commission and the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, Lebanon was committed to working closely with the Agency in all available forums. When its financial crisis had risked delaying the start of the 2015 UNRWA school year, the President of the Lebanese Council of Ministers had written to the Secretary-General in support of the efforts of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA to secure the necessary funding to enable the affected children to return to school. The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee was endeavouring to ensure better protection of Palestine refugees' rights, including through adopting legislation regulating Palestinian workers' access to the Lebanese labour market, publishing a guide to Palestinian workers' rights and obligations and implementing a vaccination campaign.

92. The Government of Lebanon was grateful to donors who had assisted in the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp and called on Member States to comply with the principle of shared responsibility by donating the \$157 million still needed to complete the reconstruction project and relocate the 26,000 registered Palestine refugees who had been displaced from the camp. Member States were also urged to respond to the Agency's appeal for funds to cover the basic humanitarian needs of Palestine refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis. In addition to the humanitarian aid it provided, the Agency's very existence served as a reminder to the international community of the need to recognize Palestine refugees' rights to return and live in dignity, peace and justice.

93. **Mr. Pederson** (Norway), citing UNRWA's pivotal role in providing services to rising numbers of refugees, including Palestine refugees, who had been forced to flee unbearable conditions in their homeland, said that the capacity of host countries to provide for refugees had been stretched to its limit and increasing demands were affecting the Agency's ability to operate. Norway was deeply concerned that if the current situation continued, the Agency could be forced to suspend some of its basic services, including education services.

94. Donors and the international community had a duty to ensure that UNRWA was able to provide services to refugees, and the effect of refugee displacement on the Agency's resources and priorities should also be assessed. The Agency should continue to adapt its programmes to the changing realities in the region, giving priority to the most vulnerable refugee groups. His delegation supported efforts to accelerate UNRWA reform under its medium-term strategy, which would help to improve the Agency's performance and sustain its budget, and encouraged it to use the report of the Department of Internal Oversight Services as a tool to improve transparency and accountability.

95. Commending the Agency's efforts to rebuild the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon, he urged donors to maintain or increase their financial support of the Agency, noting that funding must be predictable, flexible and accompanied by political backing to ensure basic services for refugees until a just and lasting settlement could be found in the region, in accordance with United Nations resolutions. Concerned at the continued loss of life among United Nations staff and expressing condolences to the families of those who had lost their lives in the line of duty, he commended the Agency's efforts to cut budget deficits and reaffirmed Norway's commitment to remaining a predictable donor to UNRWA.

96. **Mr. Hamed** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations Mediator in Palestine, had been right to warn in 1949 that denying Arab refugees the right to return to their homes while allowing Jewish immigrants to replace them would be an offence against the basic principles of justice. Now, almost seven decades later, Israel not only continued to deny Palestine refugees their right of return but was even calling for their refugee status to be withdrawn. Moreover, new settlers were being brought to live in both new and expanding settlements while Palestinians were being forcibly expelled, their houses destroyed and their lands confiscated. The international community had so far failed to fulfil its legal, political and moral duty to end the suffering of Palestine refugees, who now numbered 5 million, instead leaving them prey to the racist settlement colonization campaign which violated their most basic rights. His delegation reaffirmed that the right of return could not be negotiated, conceded or forgotten, as confirmed by international law, in particular resolution 194 (III), which reaffirmed the right of Palestine

refugees to return to their homes at the earliest practicable date and receive compensation for the damages they had suffered. It was highly surreal to hear the representative of Israel, the occupying Power, express concern over the situation of Palestine refugees in Syria.

97. UNRWA continued to perform vital work to relieve the suffering of Palestine refugees, despite systematic and repeated attacks on its staff and facilities by the Israeli occupying forces, notably during the most recent Israeli offensive when 76 of the Agency's schools had been targeted and 11 of its staff had been killed.

98. Emphasizing that Arab States that received Palestine refugees were not only host countries but also donors, since they provided refugees with services and assistance with no support from other States, he said that the Syrian Arab Republic had fulfilled its responsibility to welcome Palestine refugees and treat them without discrimination. As noted by various reports of the UNRWA Commissioner-General, his country had for many decades offered the best possible conditions for Palestine refugees. While acknowledging that Palestine refugees in his country were currently experiencing greater hardship than before, he emphasized that that change had been brought about by two factors: firstly, the attacks carried out by armed terrorist groups, including Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Nusra Front, on Palestine refugees and Syrian citizens residing in refugee camps, forcing many of them to flee the camps in search of safety; and secondly, the unilateral coercive economic measures imposed by certain States, including those of the European Union, on the Syrian Arab Republic, which negatively affected the lives of both Syrian citizens and Palestine refugees residing in the country. Noting Israel's highly surreal earlier comments on the situation in his country, he requested all delegations to take the two aforementioned factors into consideration before condemning the situation of Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic.

99. His Government would continue to do everything in its power to support and cooperate with UNRWA. It insisted on the need for sufficient financial resources to enable the Agency to continue its valuable work in accordance with its mandate under General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 1949, and for Palestinians to be granted fair compensation and allowed to return to their homes in accordance with resolution 194 (III).



He called on States spending vast sums of money on waging war, interfering in the affairs of other States, supporting terrorism and providing military and financial assistance to Israel, to bring those policies in line with the principles of human rights and international law. Emphasizing that even a minuscule portion of those funds could contribute enormously to assisting the Palestine refugees, he expressed disappointment that the States concerned were instead shirking their responsibilities, for reasons plain to all, thus creating a structural deficit in the Agency's budget.

100. **Mr. Zehnder** (Switzerland) said that the efforts made and the tangible results achieved by UNRWA were commendable, as the Agency had succeeded in maintaining an adequate level of services in spite of the extremely volatile context in which it worked and its lack of financial resources. The Syrian conflict and the ongoing deterioration of the security, political and socio-economic situation had particularly severe consequences for the civilian population and for already vulnerable and marginalized Palestine refugees, 95 per cent of whom currently relied on the Agency's humanitarian assistance. The lack of a meaningful Israeli-Palestinian peace process was unsustainable and further compounded the vulnerability of Palestine refugees. The blockade of Gaza, now in its eighth year, and growing violence in the West Bank increased Palestine refugees' reliance on the Agency's protection and services. Switzerland remained very concerned about the repeated and systematic violations of international humanitarian law and human-rights law that had disastrous consequences for the civilian population, and called on all parties to respect their obligations fully and to bring to justice violators of international law.

101. Given its key role in meeting the growing needs of and providing stability for refugees, a strong and effective UNRWA was essential. Its precarious financial situation, however, was weakening its ability to fulfil its mandate: its worst-ever financial crisis had been resolved at the last minute as a result of the generous efforts of many donors, including Switzerland. A longer-term solution must urgently be sought to avoid yearly repetitions of such crises.

102. More than ever, the Agency needed adequate and predictable resources to fulfil its mandate. The underfunding of the General Fund thus remained a primary cause of concern. The Commissioner-

General's efforts to address the unprecedented 2015 shortfall and key sustainability issues were laudable; reforms had proven effective and must be pursued. Further efforts were needed on the part of UNRWA and donors alike, and he encouraged donors to give priority to the General Fund; Switzerland would increase its regular contribution to that Fund to SwF 18.5 million for 2016, with a total contribution of SwF 21 million. Furthermore, his country remained ready to participate in a longer-term consultative process on the Agency's financing with a view to ensuring adequate assistance and protection to Palestine refugees. Switzerland would continue to support the Agency's reforms, in particular the efforts to develop a resource-mobilization strategy to widen its donor base and strengthen its financial stability, and to cooperate closely with the Agency pending a just and lasting solution to the plight of Palestine refugees.

*The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.*