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Chairman: Mr. Mohamad (Sudan)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Agenda item 32: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(*continued*) (A/62/13 and Add.1, 64, 181, 282, 312 and 361)

1. **Ms. Spoljaric** (Switzerland) said that the programme improvements outlined in the report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (A/62/13 and Add.1) should be accompanied, both in the field and organizationally, by evaluation and follow-up. The Agency's organizational reforms were showing promising interim results and should be pursued.

2. UNRWA staff were working in a singularly restrictive environment and, for some of them, a dangerous one. The constant deterioration of the socio-economic and security situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, especially in Gaza, was disturbing. All parties concerned must give UNRWA staff unfettered access to the Territory; Israel itself was strongly urged to stop imposing border-crossing charges on Agency consignments in violation of the agreed international arrangements, and to reimburse any amounts charged.

3. The countries which were generously hosting Palestine refugees should help UNRWA take a strategic approach to running its programmes. Switzerland intended to remain a reliable partner to UNRWA in all respects, and it would respond flexibly to specific needs as they arose. It would, for example, working closely with the Lebanese authorities and UNRWA, consider sponsoring projects to help the population displaced from the Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon, pending reconstruction of the camp.

4. **Mr. Dizdar** (Turkey) expressed the hope that the opportunity created by the new momentum in the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue could be seized, paving the way for a comprehensive and lasting settlement based on the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. In the meantime, however, his Government was following the developments on the ground with serious concern. Unilateral measures that brought about nothing but misery and desperation could benefit no one. It was high time for a genuine political dialogue in the Middle East, and at the current critical juncture, both sides

must act with utmost restraint so as not to jeopardize the prospect of a permanent peace.

5. The future of the Palestine refugees was an important component of any peace plan, but it also had a serious humanitarian dimension. The refugees were living in tragic conditions, and the political, socio-economic and psychological toll of the conflict on the innocent would only increase. As matters deteriorated, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain an effective humanitarian relief operation. The achievements of UNRWA were highly commendable: it was becoming a symbol of making things possible in an impossible environment.

6. Turkey welcomed the reform under way within UNRWA to increase its efficiency. As Chairman of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, he urged the international community to extend its full support to the Agency as it addressed the drastic needs of the Palestine refugees. His Government, committed to the UNRWA goals and mandate, had increased its annual voluntary contribution and also responded to emergency appeals, having recently donated over one million dollars' worth of food for the displaced refugees in northern Lebanon. In conjunction with its support for UNRWA, his Government was providing direct assistance to the people of Palestine through a complementary plan of action covering security, education, public financing, institution-building, health and agriculture.

7. **Mr. Naik** (India) observed that a collective failure to address the crisis facing UNRWA, which impinged directly on the Palestine refugees' well-being and the Agency's ability to discharge its responsibilities, would inevitably make itself felt in the already volatile situation in the region.

8. The first of the challenges was the crisis of UNRWA financing. The budgetary shortfall grew as demands for assistance increased. Overcrowded refugee camps, after many generations, needed basic upgrading. Closed border crossings, the precarious financial position of the Palestinian Authority as a result of the international boycott and the internal conflict among Palestinians had forced many refugees to seek assistance for the first time after decades of self-reliance.

9. The insecurity bred by the extreme poverty among the Palestinian people in the occupied territories was heightened by the perilous security situation in

Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time, the continued expansion of Israeli settlements and construction of the separation wall served only to heighten the Palestinian people's sense of siege.

10. Paralleling its financial constraints, the scope of UNRWA operations continued to shrink. Security concerns had forced it to evacuate its personnel from Gaza, and its access to Palestinians in the occupied territories was uncertain. Israel's detention of Agency staff — unacceptable on humanitarian grounds — and the levying of charges for the transit of humanitarian goods through Israeli ports were compounded by the increasingly frequent closure of the few existing crossing points into Gaza. The decision to limit crossings to one border point would further worsen the desperate situation.

11. The problem of the Palestine refugees would be resolved only through a comprehensive solution to the long-standing conflict in the Middle East. The ongoing cycle of violence and counter-violence made the prospects of an eventual peace only more remote. Until a mutually acceptable peace had been established, UNRWA, the primary source of humanitarian relief to the Palestine refugees, must be fully supported.

12. **Mr. Edrees** (Egypt) said that UNRWA had played a pioneering role in assisting Palestine refugees since 1949. Regrettably, however, the suffering of the Palestinian people continued to grow; humanitarian conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were persistently worsening as a result of the ongoing occupation and the well-known practices accompanying it, all of which removed the impetus for a peace settlement. The repeated closure of crossing points and the escalating violence also increased the burden on UNRWA, which, owing to a conspicuous lack of international personnel and inadequate financing, was already experiencing difficulties on the ground. He therefore hoped that the forthcoming meeting on the Middle East would revive the peace process and lead to tangible improvements in the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories.

13. Every effort should be made to ensure that UNRWA fulfilled its humanitarian mission, to which end key emphasis on its staffing and funding requirements was essential. Other issues to be addressed in the occupied Palestinian territories included the mounting incidence of poverty,

unemployment and malnutrition, the economic slump and cuts in basic health and utility services. In that context, the Israeli Government's threats to halt water and electricity supplies to the Gaza Strip were disturbing, not least in view of its ongoing legal responsibility for the humanitarian situation there, despite its unilateral withdrawal.

14. The closures, curfews, military zones and checkpoints in the West Bank constituted another of those issues, impeding as they did not only the daily lives of inhabitants, including access to work, education and medical facilities, but also provision by UNRWA of humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees. Similarly vital to the delivery of food supplies, freedom of movement would also help to dissipate Palestinian feelings of frustration and isolation, ultimately building confidence towards resumption of the peace process and the achievement of a just solution that would end the occupation and permit the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian State. Attempts in that direction would, however, be cast into doubt if the socio-economic decline in the occupied Palestinian territories continued, along with the violence, anger and extremism which it inevitably fostered.

15. The poverty and suffering of Palestine refugee families had also been exacerbated by the construction of the separation wall, which Egypt had repeatedly condemned as illegitimate. Israel should comply with the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and the General Assembly resolutions on the subject by removing the wall and halting any further construction. Egypt looked forward to a successful outcome from the present contacts between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority aimed at a resumption of negotiations on all matters relating to a final solution, including the question of refugees that was so relevant to UNRWA. The Agency's justifiable request for more international personnel should be treated with the utmost seriousness and efforts should be made to increase donor funding in order to address its problem of dwindling resources. The international response to calls for humanitarian and emergency assistance should also be strengthened with a view to enabling UNRWA in turn to cope with the consequences of Israel's constant attacks on Palestinian towns and camps. Egypt fully supported the work of UNRWA and was ready to provide the assistance it needed.

16. **Mr. Mansour** (Tunisia) said that UNRWA shouldered a tremendous responsibility and played a vital part in international efforts to assist Palestine refugees, yet the difficulties it faced in implementing its programmes were a continuing cause of grave concern. The practices of the occupying Power not only violated the rights of Palestinians but also targeted UNRWA activities by restricting the freedom of movement of its staff and obstructing refugees. He therefore reiterated the call for urgent measures to enable UNRWA to perform its humanitarian role, the importance of which was reflected by the fact that the number of Palestine refugees benefiting from its services had now swollen to 4.6 million.

17. He supported the calls for additional efforts to ensure material support to UNRWA for continued delivery of minimum services to those refugees, particularly in view of the increasingly frequent emergency situations. He hoped that both donor and host countries would step up their much appreciated support to UNRWA so that it could tackle such pressing needs as the implementation of its reform programme and removal of its budget deficit. Tunisia had constantly lent material and political support to UNRWA in its mission to alleviate the suffering of Palestine refugees and promote conditions conducive to regional stability. A lasting and comprehensive settlement to the crisis in the region would indeed lay the foundations for security and stability, guarantee restoration of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and end their daily suffering.

18. **Mr. Chowdhury** (Bangladesh) observed that the steady deterioration of the situation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Lebanon, as documented in the Commissioner-General's report (A/62/13 and Add.1), was a matter of deep concern. Military operations and conflict in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon in 2006 and 2007 had left 32,000 people displaced from their homes and, as always, UNRWA staff had stepped into the breach with dedication and commitment, often under life-threatening conditions and without receiving the standard United Nations hazard pay.

19. The illegal expansion of Israeli settlements into Palestinian lands and the illegal construction of the separation wall in the West Bank, accompanied by a regime of permits and closures, had severely compromised the livelihood of Palestinians by obstructing access to employment or income, essential goods and services. As a result, the poverty level

among the Palestinians had risen by 30 per cent. The restrictions imposed by Israel on the freedom of movement of UNRWA personnel and vehicles were, in addition, seriously hampering relief operations, and its imposition of taxes on UNRWA was another clear violation of international law.

20. The Agency was to be commended for promoting income-generating activities for low-income people, and it was a matter of satisfaction for Bangladesh, the proponent of the microcredit approach, to see that UNRWA had started such a programme. It should be extended and should focus especially on empowering poor Palestinian women.

21. Donors and host countries deserved commendation for their assistance to the Palestine refugees and for sustaining UNRWA and its operations, and they should now respond generously to the emergency appeal for the refugees from the Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon. The Commissioner-General and the Agency staff deserved thanks for their commitment and hard work in the face of continued adversities.

22. **Mr. AlShammari** (Saudi Arabia) said that the current figure of over 4.5 million Palestine refugees raised the question of the collective responsibility of Member States towards the Palestinian people under human-rights law and international humanitarian law. That figure also highlighted the very substantial role of UNRWA in that regard, while at the same time revealing the true ugliness of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, which raised further questions about the Israeli practices to which the Palestinian people were daily subjected. The occupying Power endlessly obstructed the efforts of UNRWA and other humanitarian organizations to fulfil their mandates by detaining their staff and levying taxes and charges in contravention of international agreements. Such arbitrary measures of repression, in particular the closure of crossing points, had forced the suspension of infrastructural projects and entailed additional costs amounting to thousands of dollars for the storage of food that UNRWA had been prevented from delivering to refugees. Despite the Israeli pretext to the contrary, none of those measures was connected to military security.

23. Saudi Arabia attached great importance to humanitarian causes, in particular the Palestinian question, which it had supported via contributions of

millions of dollars over the years through a variety of channels, including UNRWA. While it regarded such assistance as an Islamic duty towards its fellow Arabs, the Palestine refugee problem would not be solved through financial support alone; political support, especially from the international community, was also vital. He vehemently condemned Israel's daily acts of violence and crime against the Palestinian people, as well as against the personnel of organizations working in the occupied Palestinian territories, and called for their immediate halt. Israel should also reimburse all taxes and charges paid by UNRWA and compensate it for damage to its property.

24. Utmost efforts in support of UNRWA were essential to the achievement of its objectives and the renewal of its mandate until such time as the refugees returned home and a just and comprehensive peace was established. The solution to the refugee problem in fact lay in the return of usurped territories to their rightful owners, whose right of return to those territories was moreover fully indisputable and irrevocable.

25. **Ms. Behbehani** (Kuwait) said that UNRWA must continue its work until the question of the Palestine refugees was settled in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948. Her delegation appreciated the Agency's reform programmes and hoped that, despite its financial difficulties, its activities would be expanded and would continue in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan equally.

26. The Kuwaiti Government and people continued their financial assistance to Palestine refugees, financing numerous infrastructure projects through international institutions. They contributed \$1.5 million yearly to UNRWA.

27. Israel's repressive practices against Palestinian civilians had continued without interruption since September 2000. Its campaign of arrests and assassinations violated international conventions and the most fundamental principles of international law. Israel based its justification of such policies on the need to stop violence, yet events had shown that they only aggravated it, as the living conditions of the Palestinians worsened. Moreover, Israel's constant creation of obstacles to the humanitarian work of UNRWA, in violation of the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and the 1967 Comay-Micheltmore Agreement between Israel and the Agency, was extremely troubling.

28. Kuwait, which stood in full solidarity with the Palestinian people, would continue to support their legitimate efforts to obtain all their rights under United Nations resolutions. It therefore called on the Israeli Government to abide by Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and the principle of land for peace.

29. **Mr. Jølle** (Norway), recalling that for nearly 60 years UNRWA had provided the Palestine refugees with immediate relief, basic services and the possibility of a life with dignity, commended the Agency and its staff for their untiring efforts under difficult and often dangerous circumstances. Its work in each of the host countries merited particular recognition.

30. The situation of Palestine refugees in Gaza and of those displaced from the Nahr el-Bared camp in northern Lebanon was particularly desperate; as so many times before, UNRWA had had to provide the safety net. The thousands of refugees displaced from that camp faced a harsh winter, and the destruction of livelihoods and educational and health facilities needed to be addressed. Norway had responded by providing \$2 million in humanitarian assistance, and other donors were urged to contribute to the emergency appeal.

31. Two years after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, the socio-economic situation was rapidly deteriorating; had it not been for massive food aid from UNRWA and also the World Food Programme, the indicators would have been even more negative. As import restrictions increased, moreover, the cost of providing the food aid was rising steadily, and it fell to UNRWA and thus to the donor community, placing a heavy burden on an Agency that was set up to deliver basic health and education services. When the only imports into Gaza were humanitarian goods, there were few prospects for economic development. Norway called upon Israel to ease its restrictions on the movement of goods and people and to refrain from imposing collective punishment by reducing fuel and electricity supplies to Gaza.

32. Norway would continue to be a strong supporter of UNRWA and would pursue its efforts to keep the plight of the Palestine refugees on the international agenda.

33. **Mr. Khair** (Jordan) said that the refugee issue was central to the question of Palestine and a key point for the final-status negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. It was of particular concern to Jordan,

which was host to nearly 1.8 million Palestine refugees, or 42 per cent of all those registered with UNRWA, in addition to 600,000 displaced persons who lived in Jordan as a result of the 1967 war.

34. Protecting the rights and interests of all those people and providing the necessary health, education, welfare and security services cost Jordan, despite its difficult economic conditions, more than \$460 million yearly. The inability of UNRWA to keep up with growing needs in the camps, owing to its financial constraints and to population growth, entailed still further expenses for the Government.

35. Peace in the Middle East required a solution to the question of Palestine refugees based on their exercise of their inalienable right of return and entitlement to compensation under international law and instruments, in particular General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. The situation of the displaced persons was governed in particular by Security Council resolution 237 (1967), which called on Israel to facilitate their return.

36. In view of the enormous economic burdens with which it had been saddled as a result of the refugee problem, Jordan reserved the right to be compensated for the real cost of five decades as host country, as well as costs incurred in the future.

37. The role of UNRWA would remain pivotal until a final solution that was satisfactory to all parties was fully implemented. Until then, Jordan called upon the donor community to increase contributions to the Agency to help offset a budget shortfall expected to reach \$100 million in 2007. The deficit had come at a time of growing need for the Agency's services. It was alarming that austerity measures within the Agency should affect health and education services and assistance to the poor. It was imperative, moreover, that the needs of Palestine refugees be dealt with equally, irrespective of their geographical locations or their living conditions.

38. The Commissioner-General had noted that Jordan continued to ensure the best standard of living for refugees despite the crises around it. The Government also faced constant challenges in its efforts to raise the level of education in a balanced way throughout Jordan, where the youth constituted over two thirds of the population. Refugees attended public schools, which had also begun to absorb the children of Iraqis

hosted by their Jordanian brothers. For that reason his delegation called on the international community to support UNRWA so that it could improve its education services yet further.

39. Jordan shared the concern of the Agency's Advisory Commission over the separation wall, the closures, prevention of movement and other restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities in the West Bank and Gaza, hampering the movement of workers, income, goods and basic services and restricting the ability of the Agency to transport staff and humanitarian assistance to those in immediate need of them, thus entailing further costs. All those Israeli measures were against the Charter of the United Nations, the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and the Comay-Micheltore Agreement. The security and safety of UNRWA staff and facilities were of paramount importance to everyone, and under international law there was a responsibility to protect them and facilitate their movement in the performance of their duties.

40. Jordan welcomed the Agency's reforms aimed at strengthening its capacity and building confidence between the Agency and donors. It supported the Agency's requests for additional posts and increased resources. Any decline in the Agency's resources or its capacity to perform its work would put additional pressure on Jordan's resources and pose genuine security challenges for the country. His delegation reiterated its profound appreciation of the role played by the Commissioner-General and her staff and pledged continued cooperation.

41. **Ms. Knight** (United States of America) said that her Government, sharing the international community's concerns about the hardships facing the Palestinian people, had in 2007 provided \$50 million through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to support basic humanitarian needs, education, and democracy and civil society programmes for Palestinians. Through its substantial financial contribution to UNRWA — close to \$155 million in 2007 for both core activities and emergency activities in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon — her Government had demonstrated its support for humanitarian relief for Palestine refugees.

42. The United States continued to be one of the Agency's largest contributors, because it viewed its work as a stabilizing force in the region. It called upon

other countries, especially those in the region, to increase their contributions to the UNRWA core budget. The Agency was the second largest employer in the West Bank and Gaza and the main provider of education, primary-health services and other humanitarian assistance for 70 per cent of the population in Gaza and 30 per cent in the West Bank, and its role in those fields was especially critical. It was, similarly, an indispensable partner in Lebanon, where it was working hand in hand with the Government to meet the needs of tens of thousands of refugees displaced from the Nahr el-Bared camp until it was reconstructed.

43. Her delegation was closely following the Agency's efforts to improve strategic planning and strengthen fiscal oversight and management. It strongly supported the comprehensive UNRWA reform agenda. That called for additional international staff in key positions, and the United States supported that initiative. Success in achieving the UNRWA management reform goals depended upon sufficient resources, including a cadre of effective leaders and managers.

44. **Mr. Khalid Mohammed Osman Ali** (Sudan) said that the suffering of the Palestine refugees was increasing day by day because of the practices of the Israeli occupation authorities. Restrictions on movement in Gaza, the policy of closures, the penetration of Israeli occupying forces and the declaring of Gaza a "hostile entity" had aggravated economic, social and humanitarian conditions.

45. Palestinian suffering would end only with a just solution to the Palestinian question that called for the return of the refugees in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The right of return was an inalienable right of the Palestinian people within the framework of their self-determination and the establishment of their State, with Al-Quds al-Sharif as its capital.

46. His delegation called on the international community and donor States to provide continued support to UNRWA and respond to its urgent call concerning the West Bank, Gaza and the refugees at the Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon. It commended those States that had announced an increase in their contribution to the Agency's budget, supported the UNRWA request for 20 additional posts and welcomed the Agency's reforms. It deplored the arrests and harassment to which the staff of UNRWA had been

subjected, the damage caused to its property by the Israeli occupying forces, and the charges imposed on its movements. It greatly appreciated the enormous efforts of the host States, namely Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

47. **Archbishop Migliore** (Observer for the Holy See) said that at the heart of the difficulties and differences separating Israelis and Palestinians lay the problem of injustice. Yet the sustained political will to resolve the conflict was lacking, and to refuse to negotiate and to compromise reasonably was to perpetuate injustice. Whether such a mindset was deliberate or not did not alter the reality on the ground, namely, innocent people and entire families on all sides continued to suffer terribly.

48. The centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the continuing instability in the Middle East, and its impact on the whole international community, could not be ignored. The Holy See was convinced that the two-State solution had the best chance to settle the crisis. The responsibility for making that a reality lay with the parties directly concerned and with neighbouring countries, which had an immediate interest in the question. The international community and the Quartet could do only so much to bring them together. The pretence of peacemaking must stop and full negotiations be started. The hope was that the international conference scheduled to be held later in November would move the peace process towards a realistic accord that the parties would be determined to implement.

49. Of course that was easier said than done. Decades of injustice and violence had spawned deeply rooted recriminations and rage among the peoples in the area, fuelling the vicious cycle of violent retaliation. Mutual isolation was antithetical to building the trust necessary to any peace process and peaceful coexistence. His delegation appealed not only to the authorities but to the entire Israeli and Palestinian peoples and their neighbours and to groups within their civil societies, to reach out to one another in order to offer and receive forgiveness and reconciliation. Only thus could their contradictory claims that had prevented talks from coming to fruition be bridged.

50. Patient dialogue, persevering trust, the overcoming of religious and cultural prejudices and a manifest desire of entire communities for peace had restored harmony in many other countries previously devastated by hatred and violence. Surely the different religious faiths in the Holy Land could make a

significant contribution to resolving the conflict there. A lasting solution must include the status of the Holy City of Jerusalem. In the light of the challenges to free movement posed by the security wall, the Holy See reaffirmed its support for international guarantees of the freedom of religion and conscience of its inhabitants and of unhindered access to the Holy Places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities.

51. **Ms. Koning AbuZayd** (Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), expressing appreciation for the solid support extended to UNRWA and for the recognition of its staff's work, often under difficult circumstances, said she was particularly grateful to those countries which had announced increases in funding and was encouraged by the acknowledgement that the budget gap had to be filled. UNRWA was committed through its organizational reforms to becoming an ever more effective organization serving the Palestine refugees. She hoped that the Fifth Committee would approve the small number of additional staff needed in the coming biennium.

52. General concern had been expressed over the worsening conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Action was needed to address the mix of political and security factors that lay behind that untenable situation. The fact that UNRWA served as a temporary safety net was not a reason for complacency. The situation in Gaza was particularly egregious. Despite the quickening pace in the Middle East peace process and the prospect that the final-status issues would be addressed by the parties directly concerned, it should be evident that the Agency's mandate, due to expire in June 2008, would need to continue in its current form for some years to come.

53. Efforts must be redoubled to bring to an end the longest-lasting refugee problem the modern world had known. The refugees had been patient and had got on with improving their own lives and those of their children, with the crucial help of the international community and donor Governments. The annual debate in the Committee was no formality; it was a reaffirmation of the necessity of the Agency's mission and the importance of maintaining support for the 4.5 million beneficiaries.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.