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STATEMENT BY PHILIPPE LAZZARINI, UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL AT THE MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMISSION (ADCOM)

24 June 2024



Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA Commissioner-General addresses the Advisory Commission (AdCom) on 24 June 2024, © 2024 UNRWA Photo



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Excellencies,

Dear Members of the Advisory Commission,

Welcome to the Palais des Nations, for the first in-person meeting of the Advisory Commission since the start of the war in Gaza.

I would like to thank the United States for its efforts as Chair of the Advisory Commission, as well as Egypt and the European Union for their efforts as Vice-Chairs.

I would also like to thank Canada for serving as SubCom Chair, and Jordan and the European Union for serving as SubCom Vice-Chairs.

We are convening at a time of seismic change in the occupied Palestinian territory, and the broader region.

In the last nine months, we have witnessed unprecedented failures of humanity in a territory marked by decades of violence.

Palestinians and Israelis have experienced terrible losses and suffered immensely.

Gaza has been decimated.

For more than two million Gazans, it is a living hell. A nightmare from which they cannot wake.

Catastrophic levels of hunger across the Gaza Strip are the result of human action.

Children are dying of malnutrition and dehydration, while food and clean water wait in trucks.

The breakdown of civil order has resulted in rampant looting and smuggling that impede the delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid.

Gazans are clinging to life, displaced repeatedly across a ravaged territory.

In the shadow of Gaza, another tragedy is unfolding in the West Bank.

More than 500 Palestinians have been killed since October.

Daily attacks by Israeli settlers, military incursions, and the destruction of homes and critical infrastructure are part of a well-oiled system of segregation and oppression.

On the Israel-Lebanon border, clashes are intensifying, threatening full-blown war.

Millions of Palestine Refugees in the occupied Palestinian territory, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are anxious and afraid.

Most have been living in camps for generations, often with limited rights and in grinding poverty, waiting for a political solution that will bring an end to their plight.

Today, they are witnessing the greatest Palestinian tragedy since the Nakba.

And, as they have done for 75 years, they are looking to UNRWA for protection and the fulfillment of basic human rights.

Members of the Advisory Commission,

UNRWA has been a driver of human development for Palestine Refugees since its creation.

It has upheld the rights to education and health, while providing protection and assistance, in the absence of a full-fledged State.

By doing so, the Agency has been a force for stability across the region and a beacon of hope for Palestinians.

Today, however, UNRWA is staggering under the weight of relentless attacks.

In Gaza, the Agency has paid a terrible price.

193 UNRWA personnel have been killed.

More than 180 installations have been damaged or destroyed, killing at least 500 people seeking United Nations protection.

UNRWA personnel have been detained alongside other Gazans by the Israeli Security Forces and report mistreatment and torture.

Our premises have been used for military purposes by Israel, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups.

Our convoys have come under attack despite coordinated movement with the Israeli authorities.

In the West Bank, UNRWA's operational space is shrinking.

Israeli security forces have deployed inside some UNRWA facilities during military operations in Palestinian refugee camps.

Arbitrary measures imposed by Israel severely restrict the presence and movement of staff.

Military measures imposed by Israel severely restrict the presence and movement of staff.

Increasingly violent protests outside our premises in East Jerusalem recently culminated in arson attacks.

These are grotesque, irresponsible and dangerous actions.

In 30 years of humanitarian work, I have never encountered such blatant disregard for the protected status of humanitarian workers, facilities and operations under international law.

Turning a blind eye to these attacks sets a dangerous precedent – it compromises future humanitarian work and the rules-based international order in other conflict situations.

In addition to these attacks, we are witnessing a concerted effort to dismantle UNRWA with the aim of changing the established political parameters for peace in the occupied Palestinian territory.

This effort includes legislative proposals that seek to undermine our operations by threatening eviction from our compound and labeling UNRWA as a terrorist organization.

The Agency is targeted because of its role in safeguarding the rights of Palestine Refugees, and because it embodies an international commitment to a political solution.

Israel has long been critical of the Agency's mandate.

But it now seeks to end UNRWA's operations, dismissing the Agency's status as a United Nations entity supported by an overwhelming majority of Member States.

If we do not push back, other UN entities and international organizations will be next, further undermining our multilateral system.

Members of the Advisory Commission,

Amid these extraordinary challenges, I received serious allegations that several UNRWA personnel in Gaza were involved in the abhorrent attacks against Israel on October 7.

If proved true, these allegations would constitute an appalling betrayal of Palestine Refugees and UNRWA's critical mandate.

I immediately terminated the appointments of the accused individuals.

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) is seized of the matter, and the Secretary-General launched an independent review of how UNRWA upholds neutrality in its work.

The OIOS investigation is ongoing.

Of the 19 cases referred for investigation, one has been closed and the staff member has been reinstated.

Four cases are suspended, requiring additional evidence.

14 investigations are ongoing.

Separately, the independent review led by the former French Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna, concluded that UNRWA has established policies, mechanisms, and procedures to ensure compliance with the principle of neutrality.

The review confirms that the Agency has systems to address alleged neutrality breaches, including through disciplinary sanctions.

Importantly, it recognizes the complexity of the environment in which UNRWA works.

The report also makes recommendations to reinforce neutrality and underscores that upholding neutrality is a shared responsibility.

UNRWA welcomes the recommendations and commits to implementing them, with your active engagement as hosts and donors.

The Agency has published an updated policy directive on outside and political activities for local and international personnel.

The policy reiterates that while staff have a right to their personal views and convictions, they cannot represent a government or a political party, nor hold any high or public office.

Membership in any militant or armed group or entity is prohibited.

You will hear more from my Deputy for Operational Support about implementation of the Colonna recommendations later today.

Members of the Advisory Commission,

I have warned repeatedly in this forum that UNRWA's funding model is incompatible with its mandate to provide public-like services.

More than a decade of chronic underfunding has depleted our financial reserves.

Together with severe austerity measures, this has eroded the quality of our services.

Palestine Refugees now have shorter medical consultations, with UNRWA doctors seeing an average of 72 patients per day.

UNRWA classrooms are more crowded, with more enrolments and less funding to open new classes or hire more teachers.

The Agency is increasingly less able to support the poorest and most vulnerable Palestine Refugees requiring food and cash assistance.

A strong resistance to change – stemming from the lack of any progress towards a viable political solution – has not allowed the Agency to adapt to its financial reality.

Weakened by snowballing financial deficits carried from one year to the next, the Agency nearly imploded earlier this year.

In the wake of the allegations against individual staff members, 16 Member States temporarily suspended funding to the Agency, amounting to half the expected funding for the year.

We have worked tirelessly with partners to restore confidence in the Agency. Almost all partners have resumed funding – I am immensely grateful for your trust and support.

However, the fundamental fiscal challenge remains – UNRWA lacks the resources to deliver its mandate.

The Agency's ability to operate beyond August will depend on Member States disbursing planned funds and providing new contributions to the core budget.

For the humanitarian emergency in the occupied Palestinian territory – driven primarily by the war in Gaza – we are appealing for \$1.2 billion to cover critical humanitarian needs until the end of the year. As of today, the appeal is only 18 percent funded.

Meanwhile, the emergency appeal for Syria, Lebanon and Jordan remains less than 20 percent funded.

Members of the Advisory Commission,

UNRWA is the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza.

The Agency will remain essential for a viable transition from ceasefire to "day after".

It will play a key role in providing essential services – notably primary healthcare and education – to a shattered population.

Before the war, UNRWA met 70-80% of primary healthcare needs in Gaza.

Throughout the war, at least six out of 22 UNRWA health centers have operated continuously, in addition to nearly 100 mobile health teams.

Our extensive network and deep integration into the community allow us to rapidly introduce and scale-up services such as mental health and trauma care, which are crucial in the transitional phase.

Education is another priority in Gaza, where every second person is a child.

Palestinian communities value education highly, evidenced by a 98% literacy rate.

Education was the only investment from which they could not be dispossessed.

Gazan children have now lost almost three of the last four school years to the conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, more than 625,000 deeply traumatized children are living in the rubble without access to education – 300,000 of them were enrolled in nearly 290 UNRWA schools before the war.

Children who are out of school are at risk of violence and exploitation, child labour, early marriage, and recruitment by armed groups.

Without decisive intervention to resume education, we will condemn an entire generation to poverty and sow the seeds of hatred, resentment, and future conflict.

Together with partners including UNICEF, UNESCO and the Palestinian Authority, we have put together a plan to resume learning in Gaza.

The plan starts with the systematic provision of mental health and psychosocial support services; transitions to fostering literacy and numeracy in informal settings like shelters; and culminates in the return to formal education in rebuilt schools.

Members of the Advisory Commission,

UNRWA was created 75 years ago as a temporary agency.

A stop-gap measure, pending a political answer to the question of Palestine.

The Agency exists today because a political solution does not.

It exists in lieu of a State that can deliver critical public services.

If the international community truly commits to a political solution, UNRWA can resume its intended role supporting a time-bound transition, delivering education, primary healthcare, and social support.

It can do so until a Palestinian administration takes over these services, absorbing UNRWA's Palestinian personnel as civil servants.

Members of the Advisory Commission,

Let me conclude with three requests:

First, I urge you to safeguard UNRWA's critical role both now and within the framework of a transition.

The notion that the Agency can be dismantled without triggering the collapse of the humanitarian response in Gaza, and causing chaos in its fields of operation is naïve at best.

As members of the Advisory Commission, you know UNRWA's value and the indispensable role it plays in the lives of millions.

The Agency must be allowed to continue providing services until a political solution is at hand.

Second, we must scale up and enhance our service delivery to Palestine Refugees.

For this, we must cultivate and maintain strong partnerships.

These partnerships must build on our respective strengths, and complement UNRWA's mandate, not undermine it.

These efforts to meet overwhelming needs must be matched by adequate, predictable and flexible funding from Member States.

Third, I seek your support as donors and hosts in implementing the recommendations of the Colonna Report.

Upholding neutrality is indispensable for the survival of this Agency and the continuity of its vital work.

It is a shared responsibility – the Advisory Commission must play its part if we are to succeed, including by implementing the recommendation directed at the Advisory Commission.

In closing, I appeal to hosts and donors to engage fully in strategic discussions about the future of this Agency.

The region and the world have changed drastically since we last met.

The pressures on the Agency today are greater than ever before.

If the status quo is maintained, the Agency will crumble and millions of vulnerable children, women and men will pay a heavy price.

I hope that our discussions at this meeting of the Advisory Commission will reflect the urgency and significance of the existential crisis we are confronting.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Background Information:

UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.

UNRWA operates in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, The Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods due to the 1948 conflict continue to be displaced and in need of support, nearly 75 years on.

UNRWA helps Palestine Refugees achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

Your support is crucial to help us provide emergency aid to displaced families in Gaza

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