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STATEMENT TO THE MEDIA BY PHILIPPE LAZZARINI, UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL

13 February 2024

Geneva, 13 February 2024

I just had a two-hour briefing with the Member States. Basically, we were talking about the situation in Rafah, which is deeply, deeply concerning and, as you know, people are anxious and in fear of a possible large-scale military operation.

If this military operation takes place, the question is, "Where will the civilians go?" There is absolutely no safe place in Rafah anymore. The fear is that the number of people killed and injured might again significantly increase in a conflict where, I reminded, already more than 100,000 people have been either killed or injured or are missing.

Which means that, in four months' time, [if] 5% of the population - and we are still talking about the largest military offensive in the middle of a sea of displaced people - are asked to move, the question is, "Where to move?" If you are in Rafah, from the border to Beit Lahia, which is a 20 kilometre stretch, you only see plastic makeshift [shelters] where hundreds of thousands of people are already living.

Then we talked about the allegation about the 12 staff. I just reminded of all the actions which have been taken by the agency, which I started [by] terminating the contractors.

After that we have initiated an investigation. I was calling for cooperation for this investigation and reminding that it is of utmost importance that the Government of Israel also cooperates so that we do have more than the allegations which have been shared with me.

As you know, the Secretary-General has also commissioned a review of all the risk management systems of the organisation, mainly when it comes to neutrality issues.

All these allegations about use of social media, about the tunnel, about weapons, about political affiliation - all this needs to be reviewed to see how proactive the agency is in preventing, first, but [also] once an allegation happens, how do we respond to this?

So, we expect this review to take place for the next two months. It will start from tomorrow and as an agency, we remain committed to implement[ing] its recommendations.

You heard also about the allegations about the tunnel which has been discovered over the weekend 20 metres below the headquarters.

Now I also told the Member States that, once the war is over, we need a board of inquiry. We need to look at all the situations where UN premises have been blatantly disrespected. Since the beginning of the war, more than 150 of our installations have been hit. We know that some installations have been completely destroyed. Hundreds of people have been killed, thousands have been injured, and all this needs to be investigated independently, together with the allegation of a tunnel.

Then I also talked with the Member States about all these calls for UNRWA to be dismantled, to be terminated.

And I warned about the impact. I said that these calls are short-sighted. The impact is not just short term. It's not just weakening our collective ability to respond to the humanitarian crisis at a time, I want to remind, when the ICJ has asked [for] this response to be scaled up. At the same time, calls are here to weaken it.

But the real impact is not only now. It's also during what I would describe as being the "transition phase" - these long in-between days before the end of active military hostilities and the day after, when there is, on the table, a solid political package. And we all know that this period can be extremely painful; can be a period of misery. It's a period during which no one really invests in the Gaza Strip.

But at the same time, we have half a million girls and boys deeply traumatised that we urgently need to bring back into an education system.

And this will not be provided by an emerging local administration. There is absolutely no other UN agency or INGOs which have been tasked over the last two decades to provide government-like services like education to hundreds of thousands of children.

And if we want to give a chance to any future transition to succeed, we need also to make sure that the international community has the tools, and one of these tools is UNRWA.

We [are] a temporary agency which unfortunately has lasted for 75 years because there hasn't been any political solution.

Maybe after this cataclysm which has hit the region in Gaza, it might be time now to generally find a political solution, and it would be a disaster if just before it, we get rid of the mandate and an agency like UNRWA.

Thank you.

END

Background Information:

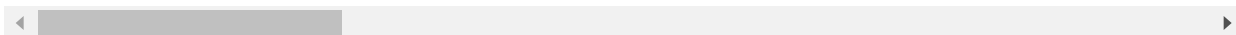
UNRWA (<https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unrwa.org%2F&data=05%7C01%7CHQ-PIO%40UNRWA.ORG%7C7edfcbc8399c400e4a6c08dafba2254d%7C262f6a4120e941408d3efdf>) the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly 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 (<https://bit.ly/3rXMZ0P>)
to displaced families in Gaza (<https://bit.ly/3rXMZ0P>)**



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United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine
Refugees in the Near East

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