

UNRWA condemns killing of Palestine refugees in Khan Eshieh camp

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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) strongly condemns the killing of one of its staff members, Mr. Husein Ali Muhsen, 52, and his uncle, Ahmad Mahmud Muhsen, 77, in Syria on Sunday, 13 November 2016.

Reports indicate that Mr. Muhsen and his uncle were killed by an airstrike that hit a mosque during morning prayers in the Palestine refugee camp of Khan Eshieh in the south west of rural Damascus. At least 12 people were injured in the incident.

Mr. Muhsen served UNRWA with distinction for 24 years. He worked both as a Distribution Team Leader with the Procurement and Logistics department and most recently as a Clerk at the UNRWA health center in the camp. He is the twentieth UNRWA staff member killed since the beginning of the conflict in Syria and is survived by his wife and six children. The thoughts and condolences of all UNRWA staff go out to his bereaved family.

UNRWA is appalled by the continued killing and injuring of civilians in Syria, including Palestine refugees, and calls on all those involved in the hostilities to scrupulously abide by their obligations under international law with regard to the conduct of hostilities and the protection of civilians.

Access to humanitarian assistance in Khan Eshieh has been constrained since 2013 and UNRWA is extremely concerned about the impact of a lack of medicines on civilians, in particular children, chronic disease patients and the elderly. UNRWA calls on the parties to allow civilians, who wish to leave the area, to do so in safety.

The escalating violence has also put students and their access to education at risk. Two UNRWA schools were damaged during the airstrike. Currently, all four UNRWA schools in the camp are closed and the enrollment rate of the 1,262 students recorded in September dropped by half. On 10 November, a 12-year-old UNRWA student, Shahd Yousef Ismail, was killed by shrapnel while helping her father fix a water tank on the roof of their home.

Schools must be safe and accessible spaces for children. Especially in emergency situations, quality education spaces offer physical and psychosocial protection, as well as a sense of routine, stability, structure and hope.

UNRWA urges all armed actors to respect the inviolability of UNRWA premises in accordance with international law and not to enter or target UNRWA schools. UNRWA also urges all armed actors to refrain from fighting in the vicinity of UNRWA schools.

Khan Eshieh camp is home to about 8,000 Palestine refugees, and has experienced intensified armed conflict since 17 May 2016. This has resulted in an increasing number of civilian casualties, including Palestine refugees and other civilians, with at least 34 Palestine refugees killed – and many more injured – in the past three months.

Background Information:

UNRWA is confronted with an increased demand for services resulting from a growth in the number of registered Palestine refugees, the extent of their vulnerability and their deepening poverty. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions and financial support has been outpaced by the growth in needs. As a result, the UNRWA programme budget, which supports the delivery of core essential services, operates with a large shortfall. UNRWA encourages all Member States to work collectively to exert all possible efforts to fully fund the Agency's programme budget. UNRWA emergency programmes and key projects, also operating with large shortfalls, are funded through separate funding portals. UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and mandated to provide assistance and protection to some 5.4 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA across its five fields of operation. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, protection and microfinance.