

Conference on the Syrian Refugee Situation - Supporting Stability in the Region

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Statement of Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner-General of UNRWA

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

I wish to thank Minister Steinmeier, Minister Müller and the Government of Germany for holding this conference and drawing much-needed attention to the plight of refugee communities in times of war.

This is particularly welcome at a moment when world attention is constantly shifting. To the extent that one now regularly hears the conflict in Syria described as “simmering”. To think that it can be placed on the back-burner of attention is a mistake and deeply misleading.

I also want to thank you for inviting UNRWA to this conference. I see this as an indication that you acknowledge the importance of Palestine refugees in the wider regional context. While there is, understandably and justifiably at this Conference, a predominant focus on

the terrible suffering of Syrian civilians, displaced people or refugees, I wish to underline here that the Palestine refugee communities in Syria - and those having crossed in to Jordan and Lebanon - represent yet another generation of Palestinians experiencing the trauma of displacement and dispossession. For them, this is yet another “before and after”, with things lost and resilience shattered.

In a few weeks, I will again visit what in many ways has been a symbol of Palestinian refugee culture. With business thriving and a lively cultural scene, Yarmouk became a centre of life, not only for Palestinians, but also for thousands of Syrians living amongst them. In Yarmouk, Palestinians felt welcome. But by the time I first visited Syria as Commissioner-General of UNRWA, last May, Yarmouk had been all but destroyed. Not even the best television pictures can properly render the human despair behind the physical devastation.

Palestine refugees, with a return to their homeland barred to them, feel vulnerable to the core of their being. We are grateful for the hospitality of the governments of Lebanon and of Jordan in hosting respectively over four hundred thousand and two million Palestine refugees for decades. But borders closed first to Palestinians from Syria. Today, Palestinians seeking to flee the war are forced to the most drastic routes. I call on the international community to do all it can to address the vulnerability of this one particular group.

From the perspective of UNRWA, three key points are seen as important to highlight in the context of this meeting:

1) UNRWA's historic focus on education in the region is a major contribution to stability and to addressing the concern expressed by Minister Steinmeier in regard to the risk of radicalization. The fact that 500,000 children attend UNRWA schools every year of which approximately 200,000 in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, means these children are not elsewhere exposed to other influences. They are acquiring skills and knowledge essential for their future.

2) We may be witnessing the beginning of a second long-term refugee community in the Middle-East. After the Palestinians, the Syrians. If there is one agency in the region that has experience in dealing with the such longer-terms issues it is UNRWA. Take us as both the illustration of what can be achieved for refugees in education, health, etc., and as the living reminder of what happens when no solution is found to address the underlying political causes of a situation. I am conscious of how different the issues of Palestine and Syria are but UNRWA is deeply familiar with the human consequences of unresolved political crises. We are prepared to share our experience - both achievements and challenges - with all actors concerned.

3) Once again, I am aware that this conference focuses primarily on the Syrian refugees but I would urge that when referring to "people affected" you include the Palestine refugees. To ignore their reality is a risk the region and the world cannot take.

Thank you.

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.