

UNRWA Deplores Escalating Violence in Southern Syria Which Has Led to Large Scale Displacement, Impeded Humanitarian Access and Resulted in the Deaths of Palestine Refugees

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08 March 2017

Statement by UNRWA Spokesperson Chris Gunness

UNRWA is alarmed by the escalation of violence in Dera'a Governorate, south of the Syrian capital, Damascus. Fighting among parties to the conflict in the area is causing the displacement of Palestine refugees, impeding humanitarian access to critical aid and has resulted in the deaths of Palestine refugees in recent weeks.

Over the last three days, UNRWA has been providing assistance to over 200 families who have escaped violence in the village of Jilin located 25 km west of Dera'a City. UNRWA estimates that over 90 percent of the Palestine refugee families from Jilin have fled as a result of the escalation of armed violence reported to have started on February 20. The two UNRWA schools in the village are now closed.

Although UNRWA is currently providing food and non-food items to the families who have reached its installations in Dera'a City and Damascus, the Agency is gravely concerned about the families who have sought refuge in the town of Muzeirib located in a hard to reach area. UNRWA continues to provide services such as schooling and health provision to an estimated 3,000 families in the area, however to receive UNRWA humanitarian assistance comprised of cash for food, supplementary food parcels and non-food items, Palestine refugees have to travel to Dera'a City for it. That can take up to eight hours to cover a 15 km journey on a dangerous road subject to sporadic closure.

The events which have taken place in Jilin are part of a larger pattern of population displacement caused by increased fighting in the south. In early February, 200 Palestine refugee families were displaced eastwards from the villages of Jamleh, Ash Shajarah, Koya, Tassil into Muzeirib and Jilin.

The escalation of violence, in Dera'a City and the western countryside amongst the parties to the conflict exposes Palestine refugees to the risk of death and serious injury. In February, multiple sources reported that up to four Palestine refugees, including an elderly man and a child, were allegedly killed as a result of the fighting. In addition, an estimated 2,500 UNRWA students have missed an average of two weeks of schooling with intermittent school closures starting as of February 12. For students newly displaced from Jilin, UNRWA is supporting their re-enrolment both within the Dera'a Governorate and Damascus.

As an imperative to protect lives, UNRWA repeats its demand that all parties to the Syria conflict comply with their obligations under international law and desist from conducting conflict in civilian areas. Armed groups and other parties must comply with their legal obligations to protect civilians and facilitate safe and uninterrupted humanitarian access to life-saving services and relief assistance.

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.

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