

Statement of UNRWA Commissioner-General to the Extraordinary Meeting of the Advisory Commission

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16 August 2018

Dear Ambassador Güngen, Chair of the Advisory Commission,

Dear Mr. Haddad, Vice-Chair of the Advisory Commission,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

I welcome your participation in today's extraordinary session of the UNRWA Advisory Commission and wish to thank H.E. Ambassador Korkut Güngen for accepting to convene this session and for his presence here in Amman. This marks the initial stage of Turkey's role as Chair. I thank also the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for hosting this important session, which coincides with Jordan's role as Vice-Chair.

With a deep sense of responsibility, I called for this meeting today to urgently update you on the state of the Agency and its key priorities.

2018 has been a year of anguish for Palestine refugees, who have faced even more extreme pressures and anxieties.

Thousands of young people either lost their lives or were severely injured in the course of demonstrations in Gaza, and the threat of war has hung again over all its two million people.

Hundreds saw their homes destroyed or their families face forced displacement in the West Bank, while the issue of Jerusalem has remained profoundly contentious.

Tens of thousands were in shock following the last phase of devastation wrought on Yarmouk, which led to renewed displacement of large numbers of people, many for the second or third time in their lives.

And UNRWA was confronted with its worst crisis ever. For Palestine refugees throughout the region there seemed to be no hope and no horizon.

In previous meetings with you, I called the challenges and threats facing the Agency existential, and emphasized the need for UNRWA to protect its core work. I was always clear in saying that it would be a tremendous task to overcome this immense financial crisis – I don't need to remind the Members of the Commission that in January we were US\$ 446 million short of what we needed for 2018. My commitment however was that we would show great determination and leave no stone unturned in the search for solutions.

This meeting is an important moment to take stock of the results, so far, of our collective mobilization, through the Advisory Commission, in your respective capitals and during major conferences and summits in Rome, Dhahran, New York, and Istanbul.

I am very grateful to those countries, institutions and individuals who contributed to generating US\$ 238 million in additional funding in a six-month period. This is a remarkable and encouraging result that reaffirms the international community's commitment, and willingness to act on shared humanitarian concerns. I offer my profound respect to everyone who supported this effort, investing energy, creativity, as well as personal and political capital. That includes the donors who paid their contributions ahead of schedule, helping keep us running as we sought further support.

At the same time, we are by no means on stable ground yet. If you take into account the US\$ 10 million that we had to add to address the terrible health crisis resulting from the many injured demonstrators in Gaza, UNRWA's current shortfall is US\$ 217 million. Specifically, we still need US\$ 123 million for our Program Budget activities, the core of UNRWA's response and US\$ 94 million for our Emergency Appeals. These are considerable amounts, without which operations cannot be ensured until the end of the year.

The critical funding gap forced us to take painful measures of reduction in our Emergency Services in the West Bank and Gaza. These decisions were taken because we have run out of funding for Emergency Programs in these two fields; let me stress, though, that the situation has Agency-wide implications.

I must emphasize the dramatic impact these measures have had on staff members who lost their jobs and others for whom part time arrangements were necessary. In particular in Gaza, where unemployment rates are extremely high and alternatives very difficult to find, I truly regret that we had no choice under the circumstances, and no other solutions could be found. And I understand that affected colleagues felt a need to express deep frustration and anger.

I am aware that occasionally there is a feeling that UNRWA may at times be overstating the risks associated with service reductions. Let me make clear, it took the loss of just over 100 jobs in Gaza and related services to the community for our compound to be stormed by protestors. For twenty-one days UNRWA's management and staff could not access our Gaza Field office which many of you have visited.

It was necessary to take these difficult steps in order to protect vital UNRWA services benefitting Palestine refugees. For example the Agency managed to preserve the food distributions for 1 Million people in Gaza. This remains a key priority and that we have been able to maintain the intervention after an immense loss of income is a significant achievement.

Today, despite all the difficulties we are facing, I wish to announce my decision to open UNRWA schools for 526,000 students in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. This is another major priority. It reflects UNRWA's deep

commitment to protecting the dignity of Palestine refugees, the core of its service delivery and its mandate.

The schools will open on time - teachers and students will return to their classrooms as planned - because it is crucial to protect the fundamental right to education for Palestine refugee girls and boys and the community's unwavering attachment to learning and the development of skills.

The schools will open on time taking into account the fact that host countries have repeatedly drawn attention to the serious risks to regional stability if this was not the case.

The schools will open on time to pay tribute to all our partners and donors who stepped forward at this time of challenge, either by advancing transfers of expected donations or by making new pledges and payments, and bringing us much closer to a successful resolution of the crisis. This tribute includes the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. António Guterres, whose investment and engagement have been outstanding.

While this is an important decision, dear colleagues, I want to remind us all that UNRWA still needs US\$ 217million, of which US\$ 123 million is needed to close the program budget shortfall. We are not out of the crisis by any stretch of the imagination.

We have just enough money to run Agency services until the end of September. Not beyond. So we are opening the schools, for all the important reasons mentioned, but we do not have any guarantee at this point that we will be able to keep them open throughout the end of the year, or in early 2019. We are taking a very significant financial and institutional risk and I wish to underline that the situation in 2019 will remain critical.

We will need the active engagement of hosts and donors to help cover the rest of the amount required. In that context, we will actively approach donors who made pledges of additional money but have not yet transferred it, as well as donors who have signaled an interest in supporting UNRWA at this critical time. It is essential that we build on and consolidate the successful response seen during the first part of the year.

For our part, I restate that UNRWA will take ongoing robust measures to safeguard the financial situation of the Agency. We will continue to be focused on reform initiatives and the identification of efficiencies. This is our necessary contribution to protecting the Agency and creating the environment conducive to trust and a growing number of partnerships.

There is also an urgent need for management, unions and staff to stand united and in solidarity in coming months. There has been remarkable internal cohesion during this demanding time and I wish to draw the attention of the Commission to the understanding that many staff have shown for the Agency's predicament and management actions, and to the constructive way that many ideas addressing the situation were put forward by staff.

I must however state that we cannot repeat the situation of loss of control of the compound and irresponsible statements by union leadership as was the case in Gaza. As shown in all other fields, we found solutions and steps forward through genuine dialogue between unions and management.

I commend the unions in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and headquarters for their understanding of the Agency's challenges and for defending the rights of staff in a serious manner. Such attitudes and actions as were seen in Gaza - threats against management, intimidation of staff, mock burials, grave security breaches - are incompatible with our regulatory framework and general dignified behavior. They are unacceptable.

Staff affected by measures have the right to demonstrate. Let me repeat this: Staff affected by measures have the right to demonstrate. They have the right to challenge decisions, to ask for them to be reviewed. On the other hand, to interfere with the integrity of UNRWA operations and weaken the ability to manage our complex services is, again, completely unacceptable.

I repeat that UNRWA is facing existential pressures at this time. We need to robustly preserve our key services. We also need to ensure that UNRWA continues to manage the quality of services while making the best possible use of the money it mobilizes. When we face difficulties, we need to take measures to protect the most important services.

In doing so, we will keep the spirit and passion behind the #Dignity Is Priceless campaign alive. We were mandated to assist Palestine Refugees - and to protect their rights - until a just and lasting solution is found. We take that mandate very seriously. Opening the school year on time is a demonstration of that.

I thank you again for the opportunity to present these points to you and I look forward to comments from the members of the Commission and proposals to bridge what remains of the shortfall in 2018, and ensure the Agency sustains its operations through the end of the year without disruption. We must continue standing together and honor the responsibilities we have to maintain UNRWA's mission.

As always, I will convey a summary of recommendations and actions to Secretary-General Guterres and the upcoming UN General Assembly offers new opportunities to mobilize the international community.

I thank you for your attention and the opportunity to brief 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.