

# Statement on incidents in Khan Eshieh

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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) condemns in the strongest terms the party responsible for launching artillery shells which killed five Palestine refugees and a Syrian in Khan Eshieh camp on 17 May 2016. Among those killed were a mother and her 12-year-old son.

There were two fatal artillery explosions. In the early morning, one shell struck close to a commercial mini-bus in which the refugees and other civilian passengers were just beginning their commute to Damascus. Those killed in this incident included Rawdah Jaber and her son Mohammed Majed Nayef, an UNRWA student. The others were two Palestine refugees, including the driver of the mini-bus, and a Syrian national. Seven other passengers were injured. Later that afternoon, another artillery explosion in a separate location inside the camp killed Ahmed Hassan Hamid. The thoughts and prayers of UNRWA staff are with the bereaved families and the injured.

Khan Eshieh camp, home to some 9,000 Palestine refugees, is located in rural Damascus approximately 25 km south-west of Yarmouk. Throughout the crisis in Syria, some 75 UNRWA staff residing in the camp have ensured continuous support to Palestine refugees through services offered in three schools, a health clinic, a community centre, and temporary accommodation for displaced people. Humanitarian access to Khan Eshieh has been heavily constrained since 2013. To receive humanitarian assistance, Palestine refugees must travel at great personal risk to UNRWA distribution centres several kilometers away in the towns of Sahnaya or Khan Dunoun.

Since 2012, the farms and fields surrounding the camp have been active battlegrounds in which heavy weapons have been deployed with often indiscriminate impact. Frequent, intense fighting between armed groups and government forces expose the Palestine refugee residents to the risk of death and serious injury, either inside the camp from the direct impact of heavy weapons or as the refugees travel to and from their homes. The deaths on 17 May occurred in the context of a sharp escalation in the armed conflict around Khan Eshieh camp from the late evening of 16 May.

UNRWA deplores this latest loss of Palestine refugee lives in the Syria crisis. The Agency calls on all parties engaged in armed conflict in Khan Eshieh and throughout Syria to respect and comply with their international legal obligations to protect Syrian and Palestine refugee civilians.

For its part, UNRWA will continue to support and assist the 450,000 Palestine refugees in Syria, including those residing in Khan Eshieh, and will persist in advocating for their safety and protection as well as their rights and dignity.

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.