

UNRWA condemns explosions targeting civilians in Sayyida Zeinab

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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) strongly condemns the parties responsible for the explosions that were triggered in the market area of Sayyida Zeinab in southern rural Damascus on 21 February, resulting in deaths and injuries to dozens of Syrian and Palestinian civilians.

UNRWA staff extend their heartfelt condolences to the bereaved Syrian and Palestinian families, and wish the injured a rapid recovery.

Since 1948, Sayyida Zeinab has hosted Palestine refugees in an official camp.

While the toll of deaths and injuries is still being verified, with many still listed as missing, credible reports indicate that the explosions took the lives of some 120 people. Among those killed were 31 Palestine refugees, including Islam Mohamad a twelve-year old UNRWA student, who was killed along with her mother; thirteen-year old Mohammed Ibrahim Baker, the son of an UNRWA teacher; five-year old Nour Mohammad Issa who was killed alongside his mother; and Ms. Kawthar Ibrahim, an UNRWA staff member who was killed with her six-month old son, her sister and her brother-in-law. The mother of an UNRWA teacher was also killed.

Ms. Ibrahim was born in March 1985 and joined UNRWA in 2009. She was employed as a project assistant in the Sayyida Zeinab Office of the Agency's Engaging Youth Project. The Project provides vocational training to and generates livelihood opportunities for young people. Ms. Ibrahim was the fifteenth UNRWA staff member to be killed as a result of the armed conflict in Syria.

The number of people injured by the explosions is estimated at 150. These included 28 Palestine refugees of whom 13 were children. One child, Ayman Saleh, is in a critical condition and is receiving treatment in hospital. The events of 21 February follow explosions in Sayyida Zeinab on 31 January which injured 35 people and killed 150. Those killed on 31 January included eight-year old Hamzeh Nazir Saleh, an UNRWA student.

Eyewitnesses reported that on 21 February, three consecutive blasts in quick succession were detonated close to three primary schools in session. At approximately 16:30 hrs, the first explosion took place roughly 40 meters from Al Fatimiyyeh School, a government school that is used by Palestine refugee children. The blast destroyed the main gate of the school and six door frames and smashed classroom windows, with flying glass fragments causing injuries to both children and teachers. The second explosion struck some 100 meters from Essit Girls School, and the third hit some 200 meters from Alma School. The

explosions were profoundly traumatizing to everyone in the area, particularly to children. In the aftermath of the blasts, an atmosphere of horror, disorientation and confusion prevailed in Sayyida Zeinab.

In the strongest possible terms, UNRWA condemns the perpetrators of this mindless carnage, which was so deliberately calculated to kill and maim as many civilians as possible. Such atrocious acts, as outrageous as they are, must not distract from the pursuit of a negotiated, peaceful and durable resolution of the armed conflict in Syria.

Through its humanitarian response activities and its health care, education and relief services, UNRWA will continue to support and assist the 450,000 Palestine refugees in Syria, including those residing in Sayyida Zeinab.

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.