

Palestine Refugee Children in Syria Brave “the Checkpoint of Death” For the Sake of Education and Dignity

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By the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, Pierre Krähenbühl

Local people call it “the checkpoint of death”. It is controlled by ISIS and for two years, 900 Palestine refugee students registered with UNRWA risked their lives to pass through it every day to get to school on the other side.

The school’s education coordinator said “these children dreamed of becoming doctors. ISIS would harass them as they waited to cross, sometimes confiscating their books. But they persevered because education for them was a matter of life and death; their only weapon”.

Yarmouk, the refugee camp in the suburbs of Damascus from which the students were moving across was once the thriving home of 160,000 Palestine refugees. Most of it was taken over by ISIS in 2015.

Six weeks ago the checkpoint was closed and when it opened briefly two weeks later, the majority of the 900 children made the painful decision to leave their family homes and move in with relatives and friends on the other side, to ensure militants would never again block their access to school.

Their determination is symptomatic of the value Palestine refugee communities give to education, which explains why despite alarming levels of insecurity, some 48,000 students continue to defy the conflict and attend UNRWA-run schools, compared with 60,000 before the fighting.

These children are part of a pre-war population of 560,000 Palestine refugees in Syria. Over 120,000 have fled, including approximately 32,500 to Lebanon and 17,000 to Jordan. Over 95 per cent of those who stayed behind in Syria are in need of sustained humanitarian assistance to meet their most basic food and shelter needs.

UNRWA’s emergency programmes aim to meet these needs, to provide food and cash assistance this year to 418,000 Palestinians in Syria as well as those in Lebanon and Jordan.

In addition, we aim to provide basic healthcare to registered Palestine refugees who need it, in 15 clinics and 11 health points across Syria, despite 8 of our 23 primary health centres being destroyed.

All this life-saving work is under threat after a major donor withheld over 300 million US\$ of funds. Our emergency appeal for Syria of 409 million US\$ is 165 million US\$ underfunded. Our budget for core programmes in education, health, relief and social services is 125 million US\$ in deficit.

UNRWA has responded robustly. We launched the #DignityIsPriceless campaign to raise half a billion dollars; a pledging conference was held in Rome. Key donors responded generously. 165 million dollars of new money has been pledged, 115 million by four countries alone: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and India. I believe this will create momentum for other donors – traditional and non-traditional – to come forward so that our services can continue uninterrupted.

To illustrate our determination and unique ability to deliver, let me tell you about Faisal, a 56 year old UNRWA teacher from Dera'a Camp, in the south of Syria. He leaves his house at 6.30 every morning, travels 60 kilometers, crosses two frontlines and four checkpoints, to teach his class of third grade students inside Dera'a. The three UNRWA school buildings there have been destroyed, but 300 children attend a make-shift school.

Faisal's journey took ten minutes before the war. These days he and 14 UNRWA staff members leave their own children behind, putting their lives on the line to provide others with an education.

Their courage is typical of the 4,000 UNRWA staff in Syria. Their potential sacrifice is real. 18 staff have died due to the conflict, 25 are missing.

Despite this, we will determinedly implement the mandate handed to us by the General Assembly. My hope, my belief, is that its member states will recognize our contribution and stand by us as we do so.

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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.