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UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES
IN THE NEAR EAST

Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The present report is submitted to the General Assembly in pursuance of paragraph 2 of its resolution 31/15 E of 23 November 1976, concerning Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General, after consulting with the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), to report to it at its thirty-second session on Israel's compliance with paragraph 1 of the resolution. In paragraph 1 of that resolution, the Assembly reiterated its call upon Israel (a) to take effective steps immediately for the return of the refugees concerned to the camps from which they were removed in the Gaza Strip and to provide adequate shelters for their accommodation and (b) to desist from further removal of refugees and destruction of their shelters.

2. By a note verbale dated 13 January 1977, addressed to the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, the Secretary-General drew attention to his reporting responsibility under paragraph 2 of General Assembly resolution 31/15 E and requested the Government of Israel to forward to him, as soon as possible, any relevant information on the implementation of the respective provisions of the resolution.

3. By a note verbale dated 8 September 1977, the Permanent Representative of Israel conveyed to the Secretary-General his Government's comments on resolution 31/15 E, which, as in previous reports on this matter, are reproduced verbatim below:

"The Government of Israel wishes to draw attention not only to the greatly improved security situation in the Gaza Strip and the public order and tranquillity prevailing there in general, but also to the full employment and the vast amelioration in the economic condition of the refugees and the accelerated rate of development and building.

"Of the Gaza Strip's labour force numbering approximately 70,000, about 30,000 - refugees and non-refugees alike - travel every day to work in Israel. The wages which they earn, equal to those of Israeli workers, enable them to achieve a standard of living never enjoyed by them before.

"The public order and the economic prosperity are a direct result of the security measures taken by the authorities against Arab terror, which was rife in the Gaza Strip until 1971, and which for the most part struck at, and grievously harmed, the local population.

"In the last few years, housing projects have been initiated by Israeli authorities to enable refugees to move out of the camps into relatively spacious one-storey homes of their own (between 750 and 850 square feet of floor space), with electricity and indoor plumbing, at modest cost (about \$6,000 per housing unit) and on favourable financial terms (one third down-payment and mortgage arrangements for the balance). More recently, the authorities, in the light of their experience to date, are tending to favour projects designed to allow the refugees to build their new homes by themselves. This is done by making over to the refugees plots of land already prepared with the infrastructure for building, plus a grant of about \$2,000 in cash, so that the family can build a home to its own specifications.

"Hence, for the first time since 1948, refugees in Gaza have been given the possibility of moving out of the squalid conditions of the camps into decent housing, equipped with all the amenities normally available in modern dwellings. Indeed, Israel has been the first country in the Middle East to lend a hand to the refugees and assist them, through land and monetary grants, together with other forms of subsidies, in rehabilitation and the improvement of their standards of living. Israel can have no part in any attempt to perpetuate the untold misery which prevailed in the refugee camps, and thus it will abide by its policy of offering the refugees houses outside the camps. Similarly, it will not evict any refugees already installed in their new homes, which have been purchased with their own money and, in a growing number of cases, built with their own labour. In so doing, Israel is not detracting from the formal status of the individuals concerned as refugees entitled to the services of UNRWA, and accordingly sees no grounds whatsoever for the protestations reflected in resolution 31/15 E, at a time when refugees are being enabled, without pressure or coercion, to move to far superior accommodation than they have known for over a quarter of a century, and when the refugees themselves are delighted to take advantage of this opportunity to better their lives.

"By contrast, it is impossible to turn a blind eye to the situation in the refugee camps in Lebanon today. The civil war in that country during 1975 and 1976 exposed the complete falsity of the Arab charges against Israel, which have been incorporated into countless General Assembly resolutions condemning Israel without reason or justice.

"The events in Lebanon proved what the Government of Israel had been

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saying for a number of years, namely, that the Arab terror organizations took over the refugee camps and set up in them their operational bases, ammunition dumps, arms stores and training facilities. The terror organizations deliberately and callously turned the civilian population of the camps into hostages, using them as cover for their murderous activities and tools of their propaganda. The tragic fate of the inhabitants of Tel el-Zaatar last year is very much a case in point.

"The terrorists continue to maintain their armed presence in the camps in Lebanon, against the will of the refugees, as witnessed by James Markham, writing in the New York Times on 1 September 1977. He quoted a Palestinian terrorist as saying "There is a great deal of malaise in the camps today. People are asking, "If we could not save Tell Zaatar, how can we save Palestine?"

"While the civil war was raging in Lebanon, and while the PLO presence in the camps was paralysing UNRWA's activities in the country to the extent that the Agency was forced to move its headquarters to Vienna and Amman (where they still remain), Israel opened its northern border with Lebanon and offered extensive humanitarian help to villagers who had suffered in, and as a result of, the civil war. The PLO, not content with intimidating refugees in the camps, is now terrorizing Christians in southern Lebanon, and Israel is continuing to keep its border open and to extend considerable medical and economic aid to those in need.

"It is enough to compare the tragic fate suffered by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and indeed by the population of Lebanon as a whole, with the peace, tranquillity, prosperity and progress enjoyed in all fields of life by the Arab population, including former refugees, in the areas administered by Israel, in order to recognize resolution 31/15 E for what it is: namely, a worthless piece of Arab political warfare, inspired through fear that Israel may go far towards solving the refugee problem in the Gaza Strip and in other areas, and thus deprive the Arab States, which for almost thirty years have done little or nothing for the refugees, of a sordid propaganda tool against Israel."

4. The following information concerning Israel's compliance with paragraph 1 of General Assembly resolution 31/15 E is based on reports received from the Commissioner-General of UNRWA.

5. Since the Secretary-General's report was submitted last year, 1/ there have been no cases of punitive demolition of refugee shelters in the Gaza Strip. However, the Agency's claims for compensation referred to in paragraph 6 of last year's report still remain unpaid.

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-first Session, Annexes, agenda item 53, document A/31/240.

6. In paragraph 7 of last year's report, it was stated that only 67 families of the refugees whose shelters had been demolished by the Israeli occupying authorities in July-August 1971 ^{2/} had received free alternative accommodation from the Israeli authorities. There has been no change in this figure. Further details with regard to the rehousing of the families affected by the demolitions are given in paragraph 8 below.

7. In paragraph 8 of last year's report, reference was made to the offer which the Israeli occupying authorities proposed to make to families in need of rehousing. Pursuant to an oral communication in June 1977, the Agency was advised by the authorities in writing on 17 July 1977 that families in need of housing as a result of the road-widening in 1971 (in effect the 138 families referred to in para. 8 below) would have the following three options open to them: (a) to obtain free of charge a plot of land in Beirut Lahia (north of Jabalia) and a cash grant of £I 20,000 to build a house; (b) to obtain a house in Sheikh Radwan at the cost price less £I 20,000 as a contribution from the Israeli authorities; and (c) to obtain a house in Khan Yunis at a cost of £I 10,000, the balance to be contributed by the Israeli authorities. The Agency has informed the Israeli authorities that, whilst it has no objection to refugees being offered any options in regard to accommodation, it expects the Israeli authorities to live up to their commitment to provide the refugees with free accommodation which measures up at least to the standard of Agency accommodation and that this option too should be given to the refugees. All the three options now offered entail out-of-pocket expenditure by the refugees in order to complete acquisition of the new house (see also para. 14 (b) below).

8. The present position is that, of the total of 2,554 families affected by the demolitions in July-August 1971, it is still the case that only 67 have been provided with free alternative accommodation by the Israeli occupying authorities; that of the 266 families who were found by the Joint Survey of March-July 1973 ^{3/} to

^{2/} In July-August 1971, the Israeli occupying authorities demolished a number of shelters in the Jabalia, Beach and Rafah camps, the stated purpose being to construct access roads within the camps. These demolitions affected 2,554 refugee families comprising 15,855 persons; a total of 7,729 shelter rooms were demolished. The developments in regard to the rehousing of these families are referred to in the Commissioner-General's report to the Secretary-General, which was transmitted to the General Assembly at its twenty-sixth session (A/8383 and Add.1), and in the Secretary-General's reports to the General Assembly at its twenty-seventh session (Official Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-seventh Session, Annexes, agenda item 40, document A/8814), its twenty-eighth session (A/9155), its twenty-ninth session (ibid., Twenty-ninth Session, Annexes, agenda item 38, document A/9740), its thirtieth session (ibid., Thirtieth Session, Annexes, agenda item 54, document A/10253) and its thirty-first session (ibid., Thirty-first Session, Annexes, agenda item 53, document A/31/240).

^{3/} This survey was conducted jointly by the Agency and the Israeli occupying authorities in order to establish the facts regarding the condition of those families affected by the July-August 1971 demolitions who, in the Agency's opinion, were still in need. The survey covered 942 families selected by the Agency on the basis of preliminary surveys made by the Agency of the conditions at that time of the 2,554 families affected by the 1971 demolitions. The Joint Survey established that 706 of the 942 families surveyed were inadequately housed, of whom 266 were considered to be in serious cases of hardship; see A/9155, paras. 6, 7 and 8. /...

be in hardship, 138 families still remain in the same state since 70 families on the hardship list have been given accommodation at reduced prices. Another 106 families have purchased new houses in the Gaza housing projects and four families have purchased plots of land in housing projects and have constructed their own shelters. In all, therefore, only 247 families have been provided with accommodation, leaving a balance of 2,307 families, made up of 138 families on the hardship list and 2,169 families of other categories affected by the 1971 demolitions, not provided for.

9. The Agency is still concerned at the lack of progress in the rehousing of the refugee families affected by the 1971 demolitions. It has continued to press the Israeli occupying authorities in the Gaza Strip and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for urgent action on this matter and has again suggested that an immediate practical step would be to make available free of charge to those refugees who are still in need, as a result of the 1971 demolitions, existing vacant accommodation in the housing projects established by the Israeli authorities.

10. As stated in paragraph 5 above, there have been no demolitions on punitive grounds since last year's report. However, the Israeli occupying authorities have continued to inform refugee families that their shelters are to be demolished and to offer them the options of purchasing accommodation in a government housing project (or purchasing land for the construction of housing) or, alternatively, of being allocated shelters vacated in another section of the camp by families who have voluntarily opted for the purchase of new housing. Instead, the practice of demolishing the shelters of those purchasing new accommodation has continued with the result that, as stated in last year's report, the available stock of shelter accommodation in the Gaza Strip has been reduced, although there is still a pressing need for housing of refugees. The authorities have continued to grant the refugees concerned permission to salvage materials from their demolished shelters.

11. In connexion with the practices referred to in the preceding paragraph, in the period from 1 July 1976 to 30 June 1977, a total of 342 families, comprising 2,064 persons, moved from their shelters in the camps -- Rafah, Khan Yunis and Beach camps -- to new housing (against payment) in one or the other housing projects established by the Israeli authorities; 55 other refugee families, comprising 357 persons (out of 108 refugee families who purchased plots of land in one of the projects on the basis that they would construct houses to a standard design), have constructed and moved into new housing. A total of 619 shelter rooms were demolished in the camps in this connexion. One vacated shelter which had been constructed by the Agency was spared and allocated to a family who had lost its shelter.

12. Several families in Beach camp referred to in paragraph 16 of last year's report have purchased houses in government housing projects and have demolished

their shelters. Concerning Khan Yunis camp, all refugees have been invited during the year to apply for houses in a government housing project near by. A further development is that refugees living in Block 1 at Rafah camp were offered shelters at Rafah housing project (against payment) by the Israeli authorities. Also, 19 families from Block II at Khan Yunis camp were informed by the authorities that their 13 shelters were to be demolished and were offered an opportunity to buy shelters in the new housing project. Those who could not afford the cost were told they would be moved to Agency shelters which were expected to fall vacant in the future. However, the authorities subsequently advised that these 13 shelters would not be demolished for the time being.

13. The Israeli occupying authorities have expressed their wish to receive applications for the purchase of new houses at El Amal Housing Project (Khan Yunis) from refugees living in the middle camps, preferably from those living in Deir el Balah camp, presumably, to continue the construction of a road through Deir el Balah camp to the south.

14. With regard to the comments of the Government of Israel relating to resolution 31/15 E, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA has made the following observations for the purpose of clarification:

(a) The Government of Israel describes one of the options offered to refugees as "plots of land already prepared with the infrastructure for building, plus a grant of about \$2,000 in cash, so that the family can build a home to its own specifications". As recently as 17 July 1977, the Agency inquired of the occupation authorities whether a refugee who chose this option could build to his own design. The answer given was that construction would have to be according to the Government's standard design, but arrangements might be possible for a house to be built and occupied in phases.

(b) References in the comments to "squalid conditions of the camps" and "untold misery which prevailed in the refugee camps" and, by contrast, the "decent housing" in the housing projects are, in the Agency's view, more generalized than is warranted by the facts. Refugees in and outside camps live under widely differing conditions and the opportunity is always open to them to move to better housing if they can afford to do so. Better housing - whether in a housing project, in a camp (by improvements to existing shelters), or elsewhere - can be obtained by paying for it. As pointed out in paragraph 7 above, the Agency sees no objection to the options offered to refugees as one means - relocation to housing projects - of obtaining better housing. However, it believes not only that it would be desirable but also that the Government of Israel is committed to extend the programme by adding the option of free housing built to UNRWA standards for those whose shelters have been demolished and those who are told that their shelters are to be demolished. For those refugees who prefer housing above UNRWA standards and are willing to pay the difference, this condition would be met if the subsidy paid to those who relocate to housing projects or elsewhere were the same as the cost of an UNRWA shelter, which is at present about \$130,000 (three rooms without water or electricity). Many shelters in camps which are vacated by refugees moving out of them to housing projects are

considered by the refugees and the Agency to be quite adequate. The Agency believes that such shelters should not be demolished as a condition of moving into a housing project but should instead be turned over to other refugee families, particularly those whose shelters were demolished in 1971, in cases where they are living under worse conditions than such shelters would provide (see para. 9 above).

(c) With reference to whether refugees move from their present housing "without pressure or coercion", except for refugees who have voluntarily purchased new housing, the procedure is that refugees are informed that their shelters are to be demolished and are then offered various options, not including free housing. The Commissioner-General has suggested to the Government of Israel that the refugees be informed, either by the occupying authorities or by the Agency, that the demolition is not compulsory (if that is the case) and that no one of the options need be selected. This practice has not been adopted.

(d) In the Israeli comments on the conflict of the Government of Israel situation in refugee camps in Lebanon, a connexion is asserted between PLO presence in the refugee camps, an alleged paralysis of the activities of UNRWA in Lebanon and the temporary relocation of UNRWA headquarters in Amman and Vienna. The PLO, whose presence in the camps was established by agreement with the Government of Lebanon and with whom UNRWA deals on operational matters in Lebanon at the request of the Government, played no role in the decision to relocate headquarters temporarily in Amman and Vienna. As pointed out in paragraph 19 of last year's corresponding report of the Secretary-General, 4/ the activities of UNRWA in Lebanon have not been paralysed at any time during the conflict. Far from paralysing UNRWA activities, PLO has continued to assist the Lebanon Field Office in meeting specific operational needs. It is the staff of about 2,200 employees in the Lebanon Field Office who conduct UNRWA activities in Lebanon, not the staff of about 425 at UNRWA headquarters. Hence, the location of UNRWA headquarters is not relevant to the level of services provided refugees in Lebanon. 5/

4/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-first Session, Annexes, agenda item 53, document A/31/240.

5/ For an account of the effect of the conflict on Agency activities in Lebanon, see paras. 23-25 and pertinent paragraphs of sects. B, C and D of chap. I of the report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA for the period 1 July 1976-30 June 1977 (Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-second Session, Supplement No. 13 (A/32/13)). Para. 23 of that report describes the considerations relating to the location of UNRWA headquarters, which the Agency has now decided to reunite in Beirut in November 1977.