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Chairman: Mr. Mohamad (Sudan)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Agenda item 32: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(A/62/13 and Add.1, 64, 181, 282, 312, and 361)

1. **Ms. Koning AbuZayd** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)), introducing the annual report of UNRWA (A/62/13 and Add.1), said that the forthcoming Annapolis peace talks to be hosted by the Government of the United States of America would offer the Palestine refugees the hope of relaunching negotiations that might lead to the establishment of an independent, viable and territorially contiguous Palestinian State. The Agency was gratified to note the growing recognition among the international community that a durable peace settlement in the Middle East could not be obtained without addressing the refugee question in all its dimensions. The continued support of the international community was needed to ensure that the refugees benefited from the same level of public services as their neighbours and that they could profit from the same opportunities for self-advancement. The Agency assisted approximately 4.5 million refugees and humanitarian relief remained an essential component of its work.

2. The Agency provided educational, health and social services to the Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and Gaza. The education programme was the Agency's largest and absorbed almost half of the regular budget. Children received elementary education in UNRWA-run schools before continuing on to secondary and tertiary education, mainly in Government institutions. It was a matter of concern that under-investment in education was undermining achievements. In particular, there was an urgent need to improve UNRWA schools in Jordan at a time when the Jordanian educational system was absorbing large numbers of Iraqi refugee children. The Agency was also focusing on reversing the high failure rate of pupils in the core subjects of Arabic and mathematics in Gaza.

3. In the area of health, a lack of funding had prevented the Agency from responding adequately to the increasing prevalence of hypertension, cancer, heart disease, psychosocial and congenital ailments. However, in Gaza external factors rather than the

Agency's funding difficulties were to blame for the sharp decline in health standards. De facto sanctions and restrictions had resulted in growing malnutrition and lack of supplies and equipment in hospitals. The closure of the crossings at Erez and Rafah prevented sick people from being evacuated to Israel, the West Bank or Egypt. Funded by donors, the relief and social-services programme continued to provide an essential social-safety net for the poorest refugees and their dependants. The programme served as the central registry for the refugees, managing an electronic-records project that was expected to play a critical role during implementation of a future peace agreement. In addition, in 2006 the Agency had consolidated its infrastructure and shelter-related activities with a view to improving camp living conditions.

4. The Agency's microfinance and microenterprise programme had experienced contrasting fortunes. In Syria and Jordan, the demand for its services had been growing faster than its ability to respond. In the West Bank, the programme had seen record activity in 2007. On the other hand, in Gaza, poverty levels had prevented borrowers from making payments on their loans or taking on new credit. In spite of that setback, the programme continued to promote local economic development and to focus on assisting women entrepreneurs.

5. With regard to emergency assistance, in spite of lack of funding in 2007, the Agency's operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in Lebanon had provided essential support to the populations affected by conflicts. In Gaza, approximately 80 per cent of the population was dependent on food rations provided by the Agency and the World Food Programme. In the West Bank, Palestinians were enduring a great deal of suffering in the areas affected by the construction of the illegal separation wall and the expanding settlements. Approximately 30 per cent of the population living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem were registered refugees.

6. Following the armed conflict between Lebanese security forces and militants in 2007, the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp had almost been completely destroyed. Although donors had responded generously to appeals for emergency-relief funds, the long-term challenge of rebuilding Nahr el-Bared would take time and entail a substantial financial investment.

7. The Agency faced a serious funding shortfall in 2007, despite the increased contributions from some donors and the Agency's efforts to diversify the donor base and bring in funds from non-traditional donor countries. The bleak financial outlook for 2008 had forced the Agency to adopt a contingency approach to programme planning and implementation and also to adopt austerity measures in a number of areas. However, favourable foreign-exchange trends had allowed the Agency to narrowly avoid significant cuts to its programmes. Faced with rising costs of living, area staff unions were pressing for salary increases which the Agency was unable to afford. The Agency's staff had shown extraordinary courage and commitment during the reporting period. Two Palestinian staff members in Gaza and one in Lebanon had lost their lives in the line of duty. The Agency's Palestinian staff were the only United Nations employees in Israel and the Occupied Territory who did not receive hazard pay. The Agency called on Member States to address that anomalous situation.

8. With regard to reforms, in 2006 the Agency had embarked on a three-year organizational-development plan in human-resources management, procurement information and communications technology and the simplification of business processes. In order to strengthen the Agency's capacity to assess and plan ahead, to monitor programme implementation and to evaluate the impact, a small number of international staff had been recruited and were being paid from the organizational-development budget. In order to retain them, it was essential that the posts should be mainstreamed into the regular budget. In addition, the Advisory Commission had continued to act as the principal source of support and guidance to the Agency. The rapid growth of the Advisory Commission's role owed much to the enthusiastic and astute leadership of Frans Makken.

9. The Agency's cooperation with refugee-hosting countries, including Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon, continued to be strong. It coordinated on a daily basis with local authorities and at the national level when required. The Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan had borne the brunt of the exodus of over two million refugees from neighbouring Iraq, among them a relatively small number of Palestine refugees. In addition, some refugees fleeing persecution in Baghdad remained encamped in desolate conditions on the Syrian and Iraqi borders. The Agency called on all

parties concerned in the region and beyond to take urgent measures to alleviate their suffering.

10. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic) asked whether it would be feasible to request the International Court of Justice to give an advisory opinion on the measures taken by the Government of Israel to restrict food and power supplies in Gaza. Another option might be to request the Security Council to consider the question. It was important to ensure that Israel understood that it was not above international law. His delegation would also appreciate further information on the measures taken by the Agency to address the significant drop in educational standards as a result of the violence and occupation.

11. **Mr. Maleki** (Islamic Republic of Iran) requested clarification on the number of Palestinians employed by the Agency. No doubt, it would be beneficial to the Agency to employ Palestine refugees who had been educated at UNRWA-run schools.

12. **Ms. Koning AbuZayd** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) said that the Agency could not comment on the feasibility of requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice. As to food and power supplies, they had not in fact been stopped in Gaza. However, some food supplies had been restricted and refugees suffered from malnutrition. It was therefore important to focus on re-opening access points and crossings. Although the power supply had not been cut, the threat of cutting the supply had created a high level of anxiety among the population.

13. In order to address the problem of falling educational standards, the Agency had hired remedial teachers to focus on mathematics and Arabic, launched the "Schools of Excellence" programme, reduced the number of pupils in classes by opening temporary classrooms, and trained teachers. With regard to staffing levels, there were approximately 28,000 local staff, most of whom were Palestine refugees educated at UNRWA-run schools.

14. **Mr. Alzaabi** (United Arab Emirates) said that it would be interesting to learn more about the actions taken by the Agency to invite States to contribute funds with a view to increasing the UNRWA budget.

15. **Ms. Koning AbuZayd** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East) said that the Agency had a plan to work with donors through the Advisory Commission and was making efforts to raise the necessary funds to improve living conditions in the camps. The Agency had appointed a special adviser for the Arab world, was taking steps to expand the donor base and had made multi-year funding arrangements with donors that gave the Agency the security of knowing the level of funding it would receive for a particular year. In addition, it had agreed on performance bonuses with certain donors.

16. **Mr. Jølle** (Norway), speaking as Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), introduced the report of the Working Group (A/62/361), which noted the shortfall in pledges for UNRWA and the effects that shortfall would have on services offered, and urged Governments to meet their responsibility and fully fund the Agency's budget for 2008-2009. Given the growing humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the critical role played by UNRWA in alleviating the hardship faced by the refugees, the Working Group also urged donors to fully fund the UNRWA-led emergency appeal to meet the needs of the more than 31,000 refugees displaced by the conflict in the Nahr el-Bared camp in May 2007.

17. The Working Group encouraged the Commissioner-General to continue her fund-raising efforts and her commitment to keeping donors and host authorities informed and involved. It welcomed the Agency's strengthened focus on strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and its commitment to results-based management, as well as its progress in 2006 and 2007 in implementing the three-year organizational-development programme. Member States should continue to support that programme through both bilateral contributions and support in the General Assembly for additional international posts. The Working Group also called for the fulfilment of all commitments to UNRWA, in particular the reimbursement of value-added tax by the Palestinian Authority and of port and related charges by the Israeli Government.

18. The international community's continued commitment to the human development and well-being of the refugees remained essential in the absence of a just and durable solution to their situation and in the light of the devastating economic and social

consequences of the continuing conflicts in the region. The Working Group hoped that the support expressed for UNRWA in the resolutions adopted annually by the General Assembly would be translated into increased support in order to provide the Agency with a sound financial basis for its work.

19. **Mr. Mansour** (Observer for Palestine) reaffirmed the need to continue UNRWA's mandate for both the well-being of the Palestine refugees and the stability of the region, pending the just resolution of the Palestine-refugee question in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948. He expressed his deep gratitude for the long-standing support of the international community, including the host Governments of Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, for UNRWA's work had been crucial, and had been a testament to the international community's humanitarian commitment to the welfare of the Palestine refugees as well as its political commitment to the ultimate resolution of their plight and the realization of their rights.

20. The just resolution of the plight of the Palestine refugees remained one of the core issues that must be resolved to achieve a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine as well as peace in the region. The regional nature of that problem had again been starkly illustrated by events of the past year. As the sixtieth year of the Palestine-refugee problem approached, the international community must redouble its efforts to secure a just and lasting solution to the plight of the Palestine refugees, who now numbered 4.5 million and constituted the largest refugee population in the world. They remained a stateless, dispossessed and dispersed people as a direct consequence of the intransigence and flagrant disrespect for international law on the part of Israel in continuing to deny the refugees their inalienable right to return to their ancestral homeland, while at the same time implementing a "law of return" permitting the immigration of any Jewish person from anywhere in the world.

21. Regrettably, Israel continued to deny the rights of the Palestine refugees and to even deny any responsibility for their plight. It was therefore necessary to reaffirm that: (a) the right of the Palestine refugees to return was an inalienable right, as affirmed by the General Assembly in resolution 194 (III); (b) the Palestine refugees were entitled to restitution of their landed property or fair compensation; and (c) the

thousands of Palestinians displaced from their homes and land had the right to return, as called for by the Security Council and the General Assembly, and he called for accelerated realization of that right via the mechanism agreed upon by the two sides.

22. Turning to the Commissioner-General's report (A/62/13 and Add.1) and the situation of the Palestine refugees over the past year, he said that UNRWA had continued to operate effectively despite financial constraints and difficult conditions on the ground. At the same time, the deteriorating situation in the region had forced UNRWA to expand emergency-related programmes and launch additional appeals for urgent aid.

23. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, the socio-economic conditions of the Palestine refugee population, particularly in the Gaza Strip, had continued to deteriorate. Israel had continued its raids on Palestinian population centres, including refugee camps, causing death, injury, and destruction of civilian infrastructure.

24. The occupying Power also continued to collectively punish the Palestinian people by imposing prolonged closures and severe restrictions on movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, affecting access to UNRWA services and movement of the Agency's staff, vehicles and essential supplies. Unemployment and poverty, especially in Gaza, had continued to soar as a result of Israel's illegal policies and practices and as an enduring consequence of the international aid boycott imposed on the Palestinian Authority in 2006. In turn, demand for UNRWA services had risen including by many refugees seeking assistance for the first time after decades of self-reliance. UNRWA efforts had become even more critical in the light of Israel's continued tightening of the siege on the Gaza Strip and the resulting deterioration of living conditions.

25. That rise in refugee needs and demand for UNRWA services in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had been directly caused by Israel's unlawful, punitive actions. Israel must be held accountable for its actions towards the Palestinians and towards UNRWA, and must be compelled to abide by its obligations under international law.

26. In Lebanon, the situation of the Palestine refugees continued to be difficult, particularly in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp following the outbreak of

fighting in May 2007 between the Lebanese Army and the so-called Fateh al-Islam militant group, composed of armed persons from outside the camp who had established a presence in it. The fighting had caused more than 30,000 Palestine refugees to flee for safety to the Beddawi camp and other refugee camps in Lebanon. UNRWA had immediately responded with essential services. Moreover, in cooperation with the Government of Lebanon, UNRWA had launched another emergency appeal to support its provision of aid to the refugees and to begin planning the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp.

27. The situation of the Palestine refugees in Iraq remained critical, with many attempting to flee for fear of persecution as targets of violence, harassment and eviction. While they were not covered by UNRWA's mandate, the Agency had, in cooperation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), tried to assist them, particularly the hundreds stranded on the Syrian-Iraqi border. He thanked the countries that had responded to appeals and called for continued efforts to address that crisis.

28. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Israeli forces continued to harm, kill and harass UNRWA staff, to damage the Agency's infrastructure and to hamper its movements.

29. Israel must cease its illegal actions against the Agency and its staff, lift all restrictions on the movement of UNRWA staff, vehicles and supplies, ensure the safety of its staff, compensate the Agency for damage caused to its property, and reimburse it for charges incurred as result of the delays and restrictions. Israel must be compelled to fully respect the Charter of the United Nations and other applicable provisions of international law.

30. He expressed concern about reported incidents of Palestinian violation of UNRWA facilities and violence towards staff, and assured the Agency that the Palestinian Authority rejected those actions and was doing its utmost to end such lawlessness. He also expressed regret that because of the instability in the Gaza Strip, which had been worsened by the illegitimate actions of Palestinian militias there in June 2007, the majority of UNRWA international staff had been relocated from the Gaza Strip. He called for restoration of the Palestinian situation in Gaza to that which had existed prior to June 2007 and for calm and stability on the ground.

31. He reiterated his deep gratitude to the donor community for their firm support of UNRWA, their generous contributions and their responses to the emergency appeals. Palestine supported UNRWA's requests for additional posts to strengthen its capacities and enhance its ability to address Palestine-refugee needs, and commended the Agency for its innovative efforts to overcome the challenges it faced.

32. **Mr. Ja'afari** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that Israel continued to obstruct resolution of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Middle East. For almost 60 years it had deprived Palestinian refugees of their right to return to their homes in flagrant violation of international resolutions and human rights law. While the number of Palestinian refugees had grown to several million, foreign settlers occupied their lands. Israel acted as if it was above international law with policies such as "targeted killing." Its occupation policies amounted to war crimes and, in particular, the imposition of collective punishment reminiscent of Nazi practices was a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

33. Israel's violations extended to detaining UNRWA staff and preventing them from doing their work, in violation of the relevant agreements. His delegation strongly supported the Agency's claims for damage to its installations. In Lebanon, refugees had suffered alongside Lebanese from Israeli aggression. Israel's attack on Gaza's only power plant had severely limited electricity and water supplies. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had compared the lives of Palestinians under Israeli occupation with those of South Africans under apartheid, and former United States President Jimmy Carter had drawn the same comparison.

34. He noted that the UNRWA report (A/62/13 and Add.1) included some positive indications, including the assistance provided by his own country, which would continue to work to improve the conditions of refugees without infringing on their rights, including the right of return. He stressed that the Palestine-refugee problem was an international political and moral responsibility. UNRWA should continue to broaden its donor base, and the international community should respond to the Agency's request for 20 additional international staff and to the Commissioner-General's emergency appeal. Regrettably the local staff of UNRWA in the Occupied Palestinian Territory were the only United Nations staff who did not receive hazard pay. The Agency's mandate under General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 1949

should be reaffirmed, and also protected against exploitation by certain parties for other purposes.

35. **Ms. Hernández Toledano** (Cuba), recalled that the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries had reiterated that the Palestinian people's suffering under the Israeli occupation was unjustifiable, as was the continued denial of their fundamental human rights, inter alia the right to self-determination and the right of Palestine refugees to return to their land. As a result, the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had deteriorated tragically. Israel continued to control Palestinian air space and borders, and Gaza crossing points remained closed, depriving the population of medicines, food and fuel.

36. Israel's unilateral measures in the Occupied Palestinian Territory seriously jeopardized prospects for a two-state solution. Owing to Israel's incursions into Gaza, many families had fled their homes. By UNRWA estimates, there were now over 4.5 million Palestine refugees. Extrajudicial executions, border blockades, selective assassinations, torture, arbitrary arrests, destruction of homes and civilian facilities, indiscriminate use of force, collective punishments and methods of psychological terror remained constant Israeli practices. Israel severely hindered movement by Palestinians, and had increased crossing-point closures and road barriers.

37. Cuba condemned an aggressive policy that had made prisoners of the inhabitants of Gaza in disregard of international law. The situation had further deteriorated since the freezing of bank transactions. The poverty rate had increased sharply; in the Gaza Strip, 80 per cent of the population lived in extreme poverty. The Palestinian Authority was unable to pay its employees. Following Israel's attack on Gaza's only electric-power plant, electricity and water supplies had all but ceased.

38. UNRWA worked under very harsh conditions and severe restrictions. Israel imposed illegal tolls on UNRWA containers crossing into the Gaza Strip, and had still not reimbursed the Agency for port charges, causing it to sustain substantial losses. Cuba welcomed the institutional reforms undertaken by UNRWA with a view to strengthening its capacity to serve the Palestine refugees.

39. **Mr. Al-Khulaifi** (Qatar) said that the basic cause of the plight of the Palestinian people was the Israeli occupation. The previous year had seen a deterioration

in humanitarian conditions. Gaza was on the verge of economic collapse; in northern Lebanon, events at the Nahr el-Bared camp had severely worsened conditions among refugees; and in Iraq, refugees suffered persecution by militias in addition to poor living conditions. But as numbers of registered refugees grew, funding could not keep pace. He urged donors to raise the level of their contributions, including for emergency assistance. His own country would continue to provide as much support as possible.

40. The Agency's organizational-development package was commendable, and Qatar supported the hiring of the additional international staff required. Agency staff did outstanding work under difficult conditions created by the Israeli authorities.

41. **Mr. Kedar** (Israel) said that, despite concerns regarding the politicization of UNRWA, Israel supported the Agency's humanitarian mission and would continue working with it in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation. Resolutions regarding the Agency should deal solely with its operations and avoid extraneous political issues that singled out one Member State, prejudiced decisions pertaining to permanent-status negotiations, and promoted the interests of one party.

42. The report under discussion (A/62/13 and Add.1) dealt with the activities of UNRWA during 2006, the first year following Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria. The report could have been very different if the Palestinian leadership had used that historic opportunity to promote its people's well-being. It would have found in Israel a reliable and committed partner. Instead, the Palestinian leadership, led by Hamas, an extreme, ideologically driven terrorist group bent on destroying Israel, had done all it could to further its campaign of terror against Israeli civilians, knowing that Israel's legitimate activities in self-defence would inevitably aggravate the economic and social conditions of Palestinians in the area. But Hamas preferred to devote its time, energy and finances to killing and wounding Israelis than to feeding, educating and caring for Palestinians. It preferred destruction to building, hatred to cooperation and death to life.

43. However, the international community, led by the Quartet, had not carried on "business as usual" but had laid down principles that would condition any further assistance to the Palestinian Authority, namely

commitment to non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations. Unfortunately, the report of the Commissioner-General neglected to mention the reason behind the suspension of international donor funding for the Palestinian Authority. Nor did the report mention the terrorist nature of Hamas, referred to by the Palestinian Authority as an "outlawed group", as had become obvious following its violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. The report also described in detail the restrictions on Palestinians and on UNRWA activities but failed to detail the terrorist activities that were the direct cause of any such restrictions.

44. The duty of all States was to provide security for their citizens, a universally held principle enshrined in the 1967 Comay-Michelmores Exchange of Letters establishing the relations between Israel and UNRWA through which Israel had undertaken to facilitate UNRWA activities, subject to considerations of security. Such considerations had once again been high on Israel's agenda in 2006, a year marked by two suicide bombings in Tel Aviv and over 2,000 terrorist attacks, including an attack on an Israeli Defense Forces position on the Israeli side of the border with Gaza, in which two soldiers had been killed and one abducted. In 2006, 32 Israelis had been killed in Palestinian attacks, 25 of them civilians, and 332 had been wounded, 228 of them civilians. In the year following disengagement from Gaza, the number of rockets fired at civilian population centres in southern Israel had nearly quadrupled, from 222 in 2005 to 861 in 2006. The report's failure to mention any of those events produced a skewed and distorted portrait of reality.

45. Israel had no desire to impose hardships on the Palestinians, despite that implied by the Advisory Commission in its letter attached to the report, and fully recognized the importance of enabling the Palestinian economy to develop. However, Israel was determined to protect its citizens, as well as to make progress in the peace process. In 2006, Israeli security services had thwarted some 70 suicide bombings, often thanks to the very restrictions mentioned in the report. He urged the Committee to ponder the dilemmas faced in combating terrorism while minimizing the impact on non-combatants, and what the effect would have been if even a small percentage of those thwarted bombing attacks had been carried out.

46. Israel was determined to explore every avenue towards common understanding with the current Palestinian leadership with a view to establishing a Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel, and continued to do all it could to facilitate delivery of humanitarian supplies despite the Hamas military takeover of Gaza. Frequent closures of crossing points were invariably forced by rocket attacks of Palestinian terrorist groups supported by the illegitimate Hamas leadership in Gaza against the very crossing points that were used to supply the Palestinians of Gaza with essential supplies. The terrorists used those attacks as a tactic to paint Israel as an aggressor.

47. While Israel put military and civilian personnel at risk to ensure delivery of aid into the Gaza Strip, Palestinian terrorists did all they could to prevent such humanitarian activity, while cynically referring to such attacks as “legitimate resistance”, although the attacks were launched from territory from which Israel had fully withdrawn more than two years previously.

48. The terrorists disregarded the distinction between civilians and combatants, both as to targets and as to launching points for their attacks. The previous week, they had fired mortars from the yard of an UNRWA elementary school in Beit Hanoun. The Israeli military had refrained from responding immediately, to avoid civilian casualties. Regrettably, the United Nations had not yet clearly condemned the abuse of human shields by terrorists and the violation of one of its installations for terrorist purposes.

49. While supporting UNRWA programmes on human rights, conflict resolution and tolerance, Israel was concerned that reliance on textbooks supplied by host States which denied Israel’s existence or right to exist and promoted negative, stereotypical views of Jews, Judaism and Israel undermined the possibility of deepening popular support for peace. UNRWA should seek to ensure that its educational programmes promoted peace rather than hatred and animosity.

50. **Mr. Alzaabi** (United Arab Emirates) said that his delegation was concerned by the deterioration of the humanitarian situation of Palestine refugees, particularly over the previous few months in Lebanon in the wake of the clashes at the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, and in Gaza and the West Bank as a result of Israel’s ongoing occupation and aggression and its continued construction of the separation barrier. It was

also concerned that violations had been committed against UNRWA staff and facilities. The international community needed to shoulder its responsibility to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid, and should demand that Israel cease its aggression against the Palestinian people and its illegal obstruction of the work of the Agency.

51. The organizational development implemented by UNRWA was welcome, but recurring underfunding would continue to affect its ability to provide services. At a time when the numbers of refugees were growing and their needs becoming ever more pressing, his country had decided to double its annual contribution to UNRWA, and called on other donor States to do the same. UNRWA should pursue its mandate in all regions without discrimination, and its personnel should receive the same privileges and immunities as other United Nations staff members, particularly with regard to hazard pay. Infrastructure in the refugee camps should be developed so as to provide opportunities for education and economic independence. He affirmed his country’s solidarity with the Palestine refugees and hoped that their humanitarian situation could be improved until such time as they returned to their homes in an independent Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital.

52. **Mr. Hannesson** (Iceland) said that, despite exceptional hardship and suffering in the region, UNRWA had delivered substantial results, playing a central role in easing the sufferings of both refugees and Lebanese civilians during emergency operations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, and working determinedly towards improving the human development of 4.5 million refugees. Iceland welcomed UNRWA’s reform efforts and believed they would translate into a more agile and strategic Agency. To that end, it was clear that the number of international staff allocated to UNRWA and its regular-budget funding had to be reviewed.

53. Restrictions on movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territory were seriously affecting the Agency’s programme implementation and response to humanitarian needs. Other restrictions had entailed considerable costs that an already under-funded Agency could ill afford. The Agency faced unprecedented restrictions in access to communities in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. As an arm of the United Nations, UNRWA should not be hindered in playing its vital role.

54. Iceland called upon the Israeli authorities to ease access into and out of Gaza, which was highly dependent on food assistance and UNRWA's presence was more crucial than ever, and to ensure that security measures did not entail collective punishment, which was not justifiable under any circumstances. Opening the Gaza crossing points was essential to sustain the Palestinian economy and to improve living conditions. Most Gazans were losing faith in the future, and history had repeatedly shown that despair bred divisions and extremism.

55. There had recently been hopeful signs in Gaza, such as the Agency's initiatives regarding the Schools of Excellence and the Summer Games. To seize that opportunity, it was more important than ever that the Agency should have the funds to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable, particularly young Palestinians.

56. Iceland had steadily strengthened its support for UNRWA over the past years. In recognition of the Agency's excellent work, the Government of Iceland had decided to increase its contribution for 2008 and 2009. Iceland also intended to offer secondment as a support to UNRWA.

57. **Ms. Malcata** (Portugal), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the candidate countries Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia; and, in addition, Armenia and Moldova, expressed appreciation for the commitment of UNRWA staff in very difficult circumstances. The European Union supported the essential work done by UNRWA and likewise supported the extension of its mandate. It was grateful to the Governments of Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic for their assistance to Palestine refugees for more than five decades.

58. The European Union contributed more than half of the UNRWA budget and also contributed generously to special projects and emergency appeals. It therefore welcomed the efforts of the Commissioner-General to develop a strategic response to the enormous challenges facing UNRWA, supported the organizational developments begun in 2006 and welcomed the establishment of an UNRWA office in Brussels.

59. The humanitarian and economic situation of the refugees, especially children, was of great concern. All

parties in the region should give children special protection and respect their rights. The critical humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza was of particular concern and she stressed the importance of uninterrupted emergency and humanitarian assistance and essential services. Any decision to reduce the supply of fuel and electricity to Gaza would for example have potentially severe humanitarian consequences. While condemning attacks on Israeli territory and recognizing Israel's legitimate right of defence, the European Union underlined the need to carefully weigh the impact of such measures on a civilian population already living under very difficult conditions.

60. The closure system had humanitarian consequences in the West Bank and Gaza, restricting access to basic services and undermining the economic viability of the Palestinian territories. She recalled the importance of humanitarian obligations pursuant to international humanitarian law and of the implementation of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, and called on all parties to work for the reopening of crossings into and out of Gaza. The situation on the ground had seriously hampered the ability of UNRWA and other United Nations agencies to provide essential services, and limitations on the freedom of movement of UNRWA staff were of particular concern. The European Union called on all parties to ensure full access for humanitarian assistance in accordance with international humanitarian law and as reiterated by the Roadmap. Concerned for the safety of UNRWA staff, it called on all parties to ensure that UNRWA could provide its services in safety.

61. She deplored the continuing funding gap in UNRWA's general fund and emergency programmes, which affected services at a time of increased need, and expressed support for the Commissioner-General's efforts to decrease that gap, as described in the recent resource-mobilization strategy. The European Union would maintain its high levels of humanitarian and economic assistance to the Palestinians. The Temporary International Mechanism had been extended at Palestinian request until the end of 2007 and work was under way to make the transition to direct international assistance to the Palestinian Authority as soon as possible. In that context, she underlined the importance of the donors' meeting to be held in Paris in December 2007. She also welcomed the resumption

of transfers of withheld Palestinian tax and revenues by Israel.

62. The European Union had given its full support to the Government of Lebanon in its efforts to combat the armed extremists in the Nahr el-Bared camp and had welcomed the end of the fighting in September 2007. It strongly supported the vital work of UNRWA in Lebanon in the aftermath of the fighting and endorsed the Secretary-General's call for Member States to support reconstruction at the camp.

63. The European Union welcomed the current opportunity for progress towards Israel-Palestine peace and encouraged the parties to take bold steps in their political dialogue. That dialogue must lead to concrete results, including meaningful final-status negotiations and a two-State solution involving the establishment of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours. The forthcoming international meeting would provide a crucial opportunity for regional and international partners to support a comprehensive Middle East peace process. The European Union looked forward to early developments that would lead to a fair, stable and equitable solution of the Palestine-refugee issue in the framework of a permanent-status agreement in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions. Until such time, the services provided by UNRWA would remain essential to ensuring human development and a decent life for Palestine refugees.

64. **Ms. Phan Thi Kim Hong** (Viet Nam) expressed appreciation for UNRWA's enormous efforts to provide services to Palestine refugees under very difficult conditions. Noting that the UNRWA budget for 2006-2007 was seriously underfunded, she called on the donor community to ensure full funding. She was deeply concerned by the humanitarian situation of the Palestine refugees, which was aggravated by increasing violence and the heavy-handed measures imposed by Israel, such as restrictions on the freedom of movement of UNRWA personnel and vehicles in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the declaration that the Gaza Strip was "hostile territory" and could have its power and water cut off and see its banks shut down.

65. The privileges and immunities of UNRWA must be respected, and she called on the Israeli authorities to respect the 1967 Comay-Micheltmore Agreement and

the Fourth Geneva Convention. She also urged all States and the United Nations agencies to give stronger support to UNRWA, and hoped the Agency would in turn make greater efforts to coordinate with other agencies of the United Nations system. Lastly, she reiterated her delegation's unfailing support for the work of UNRWA.

66. **Ms. Ziade** (Lebanon) said that UNRWA faced a tragedy of enormous proportions, and shortfalls in its budget would ultimately affect the quality and quantity of services. Her Government supported the Agency's request for 12 additional posts to respond to urgent needs.

67. Israel had illegally raided UNRWA facilities, detained staff and taxed aid shipments, in addition to its ongoing aggression against civilians, which in 2006 had killed hundreds and injured thousands. Israel's recent decision to declare Gaza "hostile territory" had resulted in a wave of international condemnation, including by the Secretary-General and the European Union. Even Israel's own Attorney-General had halted planned cutbacks in electricity to Gaza following protests that such measures constituted collective punishment.

68. Her country's efforts to help Palestine refugees in its territory were well known. Most recently, it had provided temporary shelter and services to the over 30,000 refugees displaced by the clashes between the Lebanese Army and the Fateh al-Islam terrorist group at the Nahr el-Bared camp. In September 2007, Fouad Siniora, Prime Minister of Lebanon, together with UNRWA, had called on the World Bank to provide \$55 million in aid, and as many as 1,200 families had returned to Nahr el-Bared.

69. A permanent solution to the refugee problem could be reached only with Israeli's withdrawal from occupied Arab lands and the establishment of a Palestinian State. With the United States-sponsored conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict only weeks away, it was hoped that a comprehensive solution could be reached and that the mandate of UNRWA could revert to being temporary, as originally intended.

70. **Mr. Endo** (Japan) said that his country supported regional peace efforts such as the regular meetings between Ehud Olmert, Prime Minister of Israel, and Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, as well as international peace efforts. It regarded the Palestine refugee problem as the core

issue of the peace process and had provided over \$500 million in aid for Palestine refugees over the previous half century as part of its policy of "human security", which focused on ensuring that people were empowered to live in dignity.

71. He urged the international community to increase its support, given the continued deterioration of conditions in the Palestinian territories, and in particular the Gaza Strip. Japan had, through UNRWA, provided several million dollars for emergency medical supplies, food aid and temporary accommodation for refugees displaced by fighting in northern Lebanon. Palestinian population growth would put pressure on UNRWA resources, and he expressed appreciation for the organizational development being carried out under the leadership of the Commissioner-General, Ms. Koning AbuZayd, which would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Agency. His country remained committed to supporting UNRWA, and hoped that the international community would do the same.

72. **Mr. Hijazi** (Observer for Palestine), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that, listening to the representative of Israel, one might be forgiven for thinking that there was no 40-year occupation or 60-year refugee problem or that Israel had not adopted terror as a doctrine for dealing with the Palestinian people, as shown by the way Israel dealt with the internationally recognized right of more than 4.5 million Palestine refugees to return to their homeland and by its practices in the Occupied Territory. He reminded the Committee and the representative of Israel in particular that the situation and unbearable suffering of the Palestine refugees was not only a humanitarian issue but also a political one caused by the refusal of the occupying Power to respect the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

73. The representative of Israel had referred to his Government's support for the work of UNRWA, yet its occupying army closed crossings into the Gaza Strip, cutting off essential supplies, thus seriously aggravating the humanitarian situation for a population more than 80 per cent of whom lived in poverty. More than 200,000 Palestinian schoolchildren went to school cold and hungry, and he expressed outrage at the statement by an Israeli Government adviser that the purpose of the siege of the Gaza Strip was to put the Palestinians on a diet but not to the point that they died of hunger. It was clearly not true that Israel was committed to alleviating the suffering of the

Palestinian population and allowing the free flow of humanitarian assistance.

74. With regard to the claim that security concerns justified the excessive actions of the occupying Power, he wondered what reaction from the Palestinian population Israel would find appropriate. He recalled that the Quartet had issued a Roadmap, endorsed by Security Council resolution 1515 (2003), according to which an independent Palestinian State was to have been established by the end of 2005. Implementation of that resolution and the Roadmap must be comprehensive and without the reservations expressed by Israel.

75. The representative of Israel had chosen numbers to make a convincing argument to support his statement. He therefore recalled to the Committee the more than 14,000 artillery shells fired into the Gaza Strip, the 573 air strikes, the more than 4,000 Palestinians killed since the second intifada and the 124 children killed in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 2006 alone.

The meeting rose at 6.10 p.m.