

Statement by Peter Hansen
Commissioner-General of UNRWA to
the Special Political and Decolonization
Committee

1 November 2004

Mr Chairman,

I present to you today my annual report of the activities of UNRWA for the period 1 July 2003 – 30 June 2004.

As in previous presentations, I will review

- 1) programme achievements,
- 2) the extensive emergency programme the Agency conducts in the occupied Palestinian territory, and
- 3) internal developments within the Agency,

but I will devote particular attention today to

- 4) the specific sets of growing challenges that confront UNRWA in these uncertain times and the road ahead.

I hope to provide not only an overview of UNRWA's programmes in the past year, but also a sense of the Agency's working environment, both operational and political, so that we can continue to work together to envision and create a better future for Palestine refugees.

1) Regular programme

UNRWA's regular programme of activities provides education, health, relief and social services, as well as microfinance and micro-enterprise opportunities to a population of over 4 million Palestine refugees.

Education

By far the agency's largest activity, the education programme serves almost 500,000 pupils at the preparatory level in 658 schools in the five areas of operation, employs 73% of the total Agency staff and accounts for 60% of its expenditure. The Palestinian people's educational achievements are well-known, and UNRWA prides itself on having contributed to this high standard, which has included achieving gender parity in our school system. However, while the performance of our students remains good, the quality of the educational environment is deteriorating, simply because we are unable to provide adequate classroom space, or keep old buildings, some of them built in the 1960s, in adequate repair. Average classroom size is now 41 students, and many schools operate on a double-shift system, one building actually serving two schools. The Agency has had to resort to renting buildings that were not designed as schools and lack adequate ventilation and common spaces. On a positive note, we completed construction on nine new schools during the reporting period, and another seven are currently

under construction, but this is a fraction of what is required to match the needs of the students.

An additional burden has been the modernization of host country curricula, including the introduction of English at the primary level as well as IT courses, which our schools are obliged to follow. Most dramatically, the Agency remains unable to match the extension of the basic education cycle from nine to ten years in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Health

Spending less than \$15 per refugee per year, UNRWA's health programme has been able to provide the Palestine refugee population with comprehensive primary health care services, including maternal and child health care, family planning, school health care, disease prevention and control, dental care, as well as outpatient care, laboratory and radiology support services, physical rehabilitation and referrals for hospitalization. Behind this impressive list lies a disturbing fact: UNRWA doctors see on average 100 patients a day. That figures to less than 5 minutes per patient.

There are several other alarming developments that will affect the ability of the Agency to sustain this level of service. One, the demographic profile of the Palestine refugee population is changing. While birth-rates have dropped, infant and maternal mortality rates have dropped as well. Forty percent of the population is below 18 years of age, and 24% are women of reproductive age. Further, the population is now undergoing a change typical to developing countries – a dramatic rise in cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. All this increases demand on UNRWA services. Of particular concern are developments attributable in great part to the humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory: A 60% increase in the utilization of general clinic services, and increased incidence of malnutrition and anaemia. Also, psychological effects of the crisis are an insidious and serious health concern, particularly for children. A joint study by Save the Children US and the Secretariat of the National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children found that 90% of parents reported that their children exhibited traumatic stress-related symptoms. Palestinians will be dealing with the effects of the current crisis for decades to come.

Relief and Social Services

The demand on the Relief and Social Services Department is growing quickly, and 84% of the Department's resources go simply to provide food and cash support to over 61,000 of the most destitute refugee families. While only 17% of refugee families are headed by women, almost half of

special hardship families are female-headed, illustrating the particular burden that women bear under such circumstances.

Shelter repair and reconstruction is entirely dependent upon extra-budgetary contributions, and the current period saw a significant decrease in the Agency's ability to maintain refugee shelters. This period we completed only 1.2% of the needed repair.

The Department continues its efforts in social services with dynamic results. Support to a network of 102 community-based organizations that address in particular the needs of women, children, youth and disabled persons. Sixty-four Women's Programme Centres provide awareness sessions, legal advice, skills training, and day-care. Many generate their own income, creating jobs as well and improving the sustainability of programs. Thirty-eight Community Rehabilitation Centres provide services to the families of some 25,000 refugees with disabilities through a social approach that involves the participation of families, the community, and the integration of children into the school system. This is a radical departure from the historical approach of segregating the disabled.

Micro-finance and Micro-credit

A shining light in our program activity is the self-financing micro-credit program, which provides credit to support small businesses and micro-enterprises, creating jobs, economically empowering women and alleviating poverty. It is now the largest source of credit in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and is expanding in Jordan and Syria. Of the \$12 million disbursed in the reporting period, 31% of almost 16,000 loans were to women. Women participating in the solidarity-group lending product in Gaza had a 93% rate of repayment. This is quite remarkable in itself, but even more so when one considers the conditions of turmoil and economic hardship under which these women live.

Mr. Chairman,

2) UNRWA emergency activities in the occupied Palestinian territory

In addition to the challenges posed by running such a large and varied program, UNRWA faces enormous hurdles in the occupied Palestinian territory that have developed as a result of violence, curfews and closures.

UNRWA launched its Emergency Program in 2000, at the beginning of the *intifada*, and strives to mitigate some of the hardship of the crisis. During the past year, the Agency provided food aid to over 1.3 million refugees and the emergency job creation program generated over 1,823,000 work days. The Agency provided temporary accommodation and emergency assistance, including tents, food, water, blankets and kitchen kits to families when their houses were destroyed, and launched several rehousing projects giving refugees new dwellings.

Last year I expressed concern over the building of the 'wall/fence' in the West Bank. I should have expressed alarm. This 'separation barrier' is having severe detrimental effects on the Palestinian population and UNRWA operations. Refugee families are cut off from agricultural land, and access to schools and health facilities is more difficult. The permit regime for the 'seam zone' consists of 13 different types of permits. Residents require permits to live in their own houses, some of which are valid for only three months. UNRWA is undertaking a series of surveys to determine how the barrier is affecting refugees and how UNRWA can best adapt its services. For example, the number of mobile clinics was increased, providing health care to over 91,000 patients who could not reach UNRWA health care facilities due to movement restrictions in the West Bank.

This past year has unfortunately seen a dramatic increase in the scale of military operations in the Gaza Strip. In May 2004, the IDF conducted large-scale incursions into densely-populated areas of Rafah, destroying the housing of some 710 families as well as infrastructure, agricultural land and other private and commercial enterprises. The rate of house demolitions this year is unprecedented: an average of 45 people a day are made homeless. The rate of fatalities in Gaza is even more astounding: Israeli forces killed an average of 60 per month so far this year in Gaza.

The largest incursion yet followed "kassam" rocket attacks¹ launched from the Gaza Strip, some of which killed a number of Israeli civilians, three of whom were children. The operation named "Days of Penitence," occurred between 28 Sept and 15 October. Two-hundred armoured vehicles entered the towns, villages and refugee camps of the northern Gaza Strip, launched raids into civilian areas, fired on Palestinian targets from the air and ground, sealed off neighbourhoods and restricted the movement of civilians and humanitarian / emergency relief workers. Almost 200 homes were destroyed or sustained damage. Thirty-six thousand Palestinians were under siege, with access restricted to schools, health-care facilities,

¹ These rocket attacks came after earlier Israeli targeted killings of Palestinian militants, which were themselves attributed to earlier Palestinian actions, etc. etc.....

and sources of food. One-hundred and seven people were killed and 431 injured. Twenty-seven of those killed were children. The dead include nine UNRWA pupils and two teachers. In the last two years, three young girls have been killed by IDF gunfire *while actually sitting at their school desks*.

I doubt anyone would argue that such indiscriminate and disproportionate destruction, and disregard for life do not constitute grave violations of humanitarian law. Children, above all, deserve the utmost protection and are accorded such by human rights law and international humanitarian law. Israel has full military control over the Gaza Strip and is obliged to bring perpetrators of crime to justice in accordance with international law, as well as its own legal standards. Israel is responsible for the safety of these children.

While 'Days of Penitence' attracted the attention of the international media, incursions, house demolitions, air-strikes and extra-judicial killings have continued. And we continue the body counts and assessments of material damage. In the last two weeks, an additional 41 people have been killed, 132 injured and 378 people have been rendered homeless. On Thursday, Rania Iyad Arrad, age 9, was killed on her way to an UNRWA school in Khan Younis. The violence is relentless and reprehensible.

The irony is that these lives and communities have to be rebuilt and the international community, through humanitarian organizations, will bear the material costs. UNRWA simply cannot keep up. We send claims for destruction of our facilities to the Government of Israel, but do not receive compensation or even a reply. And these bills represent but a fraction of the cost to the Palestine refugee community.

3) Developments within the Agency

UNRWA remains under considerable financial constraint. This is most true of the Emergency Programme, which currently has received pledges for only 45% of its budget. While the funding gap of the General Fund and Project Budget is less significant, this is largely because we have been buoyed by the favourable Euro-Dollar rate, which could, just as easily, reverse itself. There has been no increase in funding in real terms.

The Agency launched two initiatives in the reporting period designed to increase voluntary contributions and widen its donor base. One was the decision to give a strong, new thrust to our fund-raising efforts in the Arab World. From a base in Abu Dhabi, the Agency now has greater outreach capacity among the Gulf States. Second, the Agency is in the process of establishing two country support groups, one in Spain the other in the USA. These 'Friends of UNRWA' associations will work

closely with local governments, the private sector and individual donors to raise funds and improve understanding of the Agency's work.

As you know, an important development this year was the holding of a large international conference in Geneva at the invitation of the Swiss government designed to strengthen our partnerships with stakeholders. Three hundred delegates gathered on 7-8 June for the largest conference on the Palestine refugee issue in 56 years. Discussions centred on the well-being of Palestine refugee children, housing, infrastructure and the environment in refugee camps, the socio-economic development of the refugees, and the management and mobilization of resources on behalf of the refugees. Most notably, a structural linkage was set between the Conference and UNRWA's future planning process to ensure that the strongest recommendations from the Conference will be reflected in the Agency's Medium Term Plan for 2005-2009, and its budget preparation processes. The 'Geneva Follow-up', as we call it, has become a real working partnership with engaged donors, host authorities and other important stakeholders, resulting in intensive budget discussions and working group sessions, particularly on stakeholder relations and the protection of children. Rather than a one-time event, the Geneva Conference represents the beginning of a dynamic process that can only lead to improvements in UNRWA's effectiveness. An important result of these consultations to date has been the agreement with the University of Geneva to develop data collection and analysis tools that will vastly enhance our ability to assess, represent and improve our programmes.

4) UNRWA's working environment and the road ahead

The Agency continues to face severe operational obstacles in carrying out its humanitarian mandate in the oPt. Closures and checkpoint delays prevent schools from operating normally as teachers and students regularly can not reach schools. Doctors and nurses can often not reach their clinics. Trucks carrying humanitarian supplies can not reach their destinations in time, ambulances are delayed or prevented from moving patients. Agency vehicles are fired on, staff members are injured, beaten, or humiliated by Israeli soldiers.

Incursions by the IDF have led to destruction of equipment in UNRWA schools, training centres and health care facilities. These facilities have also been seized and used by the IDF as temporary detention and interrogation centres. UNRWA staff members have routinely been denied free movement in and out of the Gaza Strip for unspecified reasons, often for extended periods, without explanation.

During the reporting period, 34 staff members from the West Bank and Gaza Strip were detained by the Israeli authorities, and there are now 23

in detention. In most cases the Agency was not provided with adequate or timely information as to the reasons for the arrest/detention of its staff members, and was systematically refused access to them.

Restrictions on freedom of movement of UNRWA staff in the occupied Palestinian territory have seriously impeded the effectiveness of the organization's operations. These include external closure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, imposition of curfews and internal closures, checkpoints, and the continuation of cumbersome procedures requiring permits and magnetic ID cards for West Bank staff entering East Jerusalem. Further restrictions are imposed at borders, most significantly the Erez crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip. The Agency has also had significant problems moving containers with humanitarian commodities from Ashdod into the Gaza Strip, and empty containers out of the Gaza Strip. The number of stranded containers has ranged between 400 and 600 since April of this year. The accumulated costs of these delays to UNRWA since the beginning of the crisis will soon reach \$5 million. All these restrictions are inconsistent with 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, as well as the Comay-Michelmore bilateral agreement where Israel agreed to 'facilitate the task of UNRWA.'

In July of this year, the unpredictability of the Erez passage into the Gaza Strip, and the increasing danger caused by major Israeli military operations in its vicinity led to the decision by the UN as a whole to move into security Phase IV, necessitating the temporary relocation of most international staff from the Agency's Gaza headquarters to Jerusalem and Amman. One can well imagine the disruption to even routine work caused by lack of office space, support staff, filing systems, difficulty in holding meetings, and so on.

The future is uncertain, not only for UNRWA and its ability to effectively fulfil its mandate, but also for the Palestine refugees, particularly those in the Gaza Strip. Regarding the proposed disengagement by Israel from the Gaza Strip, I fear that a disengagement that is not accompanied by a radical easing of movement for both people and goods, will exacerbate economic stagnation, and the donor community will continue to bear the burden of the humanitarian crisis.

Operational constraints and program constraints are at an all-time high. I continue to be thankful for the dedication of UNRWA area staff members, who perform their jobs at great personal risk, are paid much less than other UN local staff and are the only UN employees in the area not receiving hazard pay. I ask again for your support in addressing this anomalous situation.

On top of all these strains, UNRWA has been coping with a series of unfortunate and unfair accusations by the IDF and Israeli government officials, culminating in the demand for my withdrawal from post. I do not wish to dwell on the details, but simply ask that we all move forward in a productive manner that benefits all people of the region. I hope that any further concerns the Government of Israel may have will be dealt with between us, rather than through campaigns in the press. Our tasks are enormous, and we need to devote our energies to overcoming difficulties, not creating them. I look forward to working in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.

Mr. Chairman,

The annual report before you has been examined by UNRWA's Advisory Commission on 30 September in Amman, Jordan. The Advisory Commission's letter is contained in the report. I hope you have found the report useful in assessing the Agency's performance during the last year. I stand ready to respond to any questions the members of this Committee may have.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
