

Summary Record of the Geneva Conference Steering Committee Meeting Radisson SAS Hotel, Amman - 11 December 2003

Introduction

The Deputy Commissioner-General (DCG) welcomed participants to the second Steering Committee meeting (the first was held on 25 September in the same location) preparing for the Geneva Conference. This meeting was being held to inform participants of preparations underway and to endorse the general format envisaged for the Conference, as discussed at length with Core Group (CG) members. UNRWA desires a strong field-based conference, based on the outcome of the Working Groups' deliberations; it is not a typical UN conference: the first day will be devoted entirely to workshops, while the plenary session on the second day will contain no formal speeches. The objectives of the conference are the strengthening of UNRWA and building support for its Medium Term Programme.

The Ambassador of Switzerland took the opportunity to thank UNRWA for the assistance it provides, which has made a difference to the refugees. He said that Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), has changed its relationship with the Agency into one of partnership. Protracted conflict in the region has shifted international attention. Switzerland has offered to host this special conference on 'Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of Palestine Refugees in the Near East' as a platform for discussing important humanitarian issues and challenges that UNRWA faces to meet its humanitarian mandate. Switzerland hopes UNRWA can strengthen its cooperation with refugees and is encouraged by the interest in, and support for, the conference shown by donors and other stakeholders, and by the organisational work that has already taken place.

Organisation of the Conference

The Director of External Relations (DER) referred to the one-page summary about the conference, the latest conference scenario, and provisional agenda sent to participants the previous day. On rules and procedures for the conference, the following points were made:

- UNRWA's proposal is for English, French and Arabic to be the official languages, similar to the bi-annual Major Donor and Host Government meetings. All workshops will be working in parallel, so for reasons of practicality and cost, simultaneous translations will not be provided. To do so in all six UN official languages would be extremely costly.
- All those invited will have the same rights. There will be no observer status.
- Working Groups (WG) chaired by countries will undertake the preparations in the field. The result should be a manageable document that can be discussed during the first day of the conference, with people who will come from capitals and others may not have worked with the WG in the field.
- At the end of the first day, the conclusions and recommendations of each WG will need to be prepared.
- The SDC Director General and UNRWA Commissioner-General will address the conference in the morning of the second day. During the final afternoon session, the outcomes of the workshops will be presented and discussed. A final conference declaration is still envisaged. Drafting has not yet begun.

Conference Workshop Themes

DCG invited comments from Core Group members.

The European Commission and US representatives regretted that they had received the documents only the day before. There was general agreement about the four themes, although it was considered that the fourth workshop on 'Resource Mobilization' should include an explicit reference to 'resource management' as well.

The EC representative commented that the scenario provided could have placed more emphasis on the areas of agreement by CG members. On the contentious issue of the *obstacles in service delivery* topic he understood that this would be considered within the four workshops. He emphasized that the subject has to be addressed and included in the Agenda. The two themes of *management of resources* and *obstacles in service delivery* were proposed by the EC and others because they have an important impact on how resources made available for refugees can be most effectively used.

DCG replied that some 'fleshing out' of the workshops was still required, particularly with regard to empowerment, education and employment. She confirmed that 'Management' could be included in the title of the resource workshop.

DER added that another working document covering the workshops had not been shared with participants because it was a work in progress, under frequent revision. The issue of access or 'obstacles to service delivery' is included within each WG.

The U.S. said had been opposed to the proposed separate workshop on humanitarian access and wanted to work with all four WGs to ensure that the access issue is woven into each Group responsibly.

The PLO representative said that all four themes tabled by UNRWA were important. Previously access had been treated on a separate basis. Difficulties with access and resources were preventing UNRWA from providing services. A discussion on how these obstacles would be addressed in each WG would be helpful.

The representatives of Syria and Jordan expressed the need for further clarification of the four workshops in terms of their contents and implications of their titles. Referring to the conference scenario, the representative of Syria said it required further study and clarification. He suggested that a short summary be provided for each topic and for the envisaged deliberations resulting from the meetings, to be sent to the ministers of invited countries for their opinions.

The representative of Jordan said that refugee rights, their needs and community development are sensitive issues because of their close linkage to the issue of a political solution. Hence, more explanations are needed. While the possibility of political statements in the conference could not be ruled out, the focus had to be on development issues. Jordan had agreed to chair the WG on community development. The delegate expressed the need to concentrate on development activities in refugee camps for which he hoped to benefit from the support of other organisations. He looked forward to a CG meeting in Amman, as meetings in Jerusalem could pose obstacles for some participants.

The delegate of Syria noted that resource management was an important point to be added to the title of the fourth theme. Also of importance however, was the need to speed up the improvement of infrastructure in camps, particularly in the oPt and to continue providing services to refugees, until fundamental problems were resolved.

The representative of the Netherlands thanked UNRWA for the conference preparations which had reached the stage of a proposal on the table. He said that the themes were good, well chosen, balanced and, most important, forward looking. He thought it was better that they were not too detailed - allowing some flexibility to the WGs. He felt it unwise to give more details on the themes as it was important to be able to have a free and open discussion. He asked for more elaboration on the organisational side, and enquired whether experts and NGOs would be in the WGs, and if journalists would be welcome.

DCG responded to several of the points raised. She assured the meeting that access delivery would be discussed in every workshop and that efforts would be made to have more preparatory meetings in Amman. Another SC meeting would also be needed to discuss issues further. The location of WG meetings depends on the location of the Chair, but a flexible working structure had been developed for all of them. She acknowledged that the brevity of the titles of the workshop themes did not provide sufficient explanation about their contents. The reason for not sharing documents earlier was due to last-minute discussions held with some Working Group chairs. Comments were particularly solicited from participants who were not members of the Core Group working closely with UNRWA on preparations.

DER suggested that, as a model, Sweden, leading the WG on children and youth, elaborate later on the theme it chairs, as this was the one most fully discussed. In response to Netherlands' query on organisational matters, he explained that the approach was to find some uniformity. A main principle was the empowerment of the Chair to be the convenor of meetings and to invite those countries and other stakeholders who could make the most useful contribution to its work. Agreement was near on identifying all four Chairs and documents describing the content of each WG existed but were subject to almost daily modification, in close liaison with the Chairs. He confirmed that external experts would be involved as commissioned resource persons. UNRWA staff from the programme departments would also be requested to provide advice and support. This was one reason for WG meetings to take place in Amman. The Department of External Relations would provide a secretariat function to ensure linkages between the WGs and UNRWA programmes.

The intention was not to invite journalists to the workshops. Participation would be open to countries and UN agencies. Guidelines had been sent to the WGs on the frequency of meetings and on the coordination between them and the CG; this document could be shared more widely, if SC participants wished. On individual topics, the EU had suggested to include environment within the theme addressing the development of camp infrastructure. This discussion would also cover the overall issue of standards appropriate for refugees and a range of other practical issues of importance to camp residents. The third theme, empowerment of refugees was about improving the economic prospects of refugees, enabling them to get good jobs. It will also include the work of UNRWA's MMP. These suggestions were indicative of the

Agency's ideas; but the designated Chair of each WG should settle on the selection of topics to be covered within each theme. The ownership of the process should stay with WG members themselves. The fourth theme was mainly about the mobilization of resources. This includes better public awareness of UNRWA's work. Management issues are the other side of the same coin.

Sweden explained actions taken by them as Chair of the first theme on promoting the wellbeing of refugee children and youth. It had started the process of convening a WG meeting for early 2004. Meetings would be monthly until June and open to anyone. Four main objectives were identified: (a) Bring high profile international attention to the situation of children and youth, addressing also the issue of access. (b) Provide a comparison of the situation of children in the oPt with children in the other host countries, and comparing the conditions of refugee and non-refugee children. (c) Strengthen networking between organisations, the UN and other relevant bodies. (d) Build the capacity of UNRWA to improve the quality of services provided. Taking the standpoint of children, and using the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant treaties as a starting point, the issues of children's rights to protection, basic social services and social development would be reviewed from all stakeholders' points of view.

Syria requested further clarification from Sweden. The issue with Palestinian children as he saw it was the need for UNRWA to build schools to address the situation of over-crowding and double shifts. The workshop should find a solution to this problem. He asked Sweden what was meant by 'protection' and the 'right to social development'. There was a need to ensure that drug taking does not occur and that health clinics are properly staffed. He called for a clear and detailed scenario showing how education and health needs would be addressed. Syria and Jordan said they were treating Palestinian children and youth in the same way as their own nationals, and that the issue of protection applied more to those living in the oPt.

DCG suggested that Syria join the WG chaired by Sweden.

Jordan added that there were many sensitive issues and one should focus on the needs of refugees. Regarding the summary description of the conference circulated to meeting participants for their comments, he questioned the paragraph quoting ComGen as saying UNRWA wanted to be ready to hand over assets, not liabilities, when the time eventually came to hand over its responsibilities. He felt this was inappropriate.

DCG explained that this statement referred to the decline in standards resulting from many years of austerity measures and therefore the idea of bringing infrastructure up to the level of being an 'asset': this was an issue that had been discussed previously.

Switzerland (SDC) said that the preparatory process was a joint one covering all five areas of operations. More meetings should take place in Amman. An over-concentration on the oPt should be avoided. On the issue of non-discrimination against refugees, this could be seen as striving to provide equal access to services.

Conference Participation

The Deputy Commissioner-General said that 60 to 65 countries were expected to be invited comprising participants to UNRWA's Major Donor and Host Country Meetings, others who have begun to indicate interest and UN organisations involved in the region. Once pre-invitations were sent out, before the end of the year, additional countries may show interest to attend. It would then be seen whether others would be allowed to participate in the WGs or attend them as observers.

The delegate of Syria said that invitees should mainly be the donor countries, host countries and UN organisations. Prior to sending invitations, Syria wanted to know which other countries the Commissioner-General wishes to invite. Scenarios must be sent well before June to have sufficient time for study by capitals.

DCG said it was planned to send out all documentation six weeks prior to the conference. Regarding NGOs, three international umbrella groupings based in Geneva would be invited to participate.

Netherlands asked whether an uninvited NGO showing interest to attend would be allowed to participate. Given the importance of publicity to inform the public, how would the media be involved?

SDC replied that the media issue was being reviewed together with UNRWA's Public Information Office to identify the best means to use. A new (Swiss-funded) network 'Development TV' would help inform the region's media outlets. There would also be a preparatory media workshop. DCG said that UNRWA's information chief has prepared a tentative media strategy and would be visiting Geneva to prepare beforehand. An exhibition area at the conference centre could also be used. Apart from the umbrella NGOs, others would not be invited but they could participate in the field-based preparations of the workshops.

Jordan asked if there was any plan to publicise the conference during the preparatory phase, and if the WGs and their results would be open to the media before the conference.

DCG answered that a press conference with the ComGen and the Swiss would be held when the formal invitations were sent out. Media tours to the region would also be promoted.

Identification of refugee needs / refugee participation

The PLO delegate outlined the PA's proposal for a survey in refugee camps to present the views and needs of refugees. This would aim to identify within a general framework those needs of refugees requiring more attention by the international community. Refugee problems have existed for a long time and various developments in the region have increased their suffering and led to new needs which should be better defined. There was concern about Palestinian refugees in Iraq, expelled from their country for many years, who are out of reach of UNRWA. They are in a worse situation now and the intention is to include this group within the survey.

Preparatory Process: timetable

DER said that pre-invitation notifications to intended participants would be sent in the next two weeks. The formal invitations, co-signed by the Swiss and UNRWA, would be sent in late January giving a date for response to pre-register attendees and identify which thematic workshop they wish to participate in. The Steering Committee will meet two more times: once in February and a final meeting in the third week of April prior to the finalisation of all documentation. The CG is recommended to meet every six weeks. The next CG meeting will be held mid-January in Amman. Jordan and Syria should decide if they wish to come as two separate delegations or with a single representation. WGs should meet roughly once a month, preferably alternating between Jerusalem/Ramallah and Amman, taking into account the needs of those who cannot travel to the oPt.

On request from the delegate of Lebanon, the Deputy Commissioner-General agreed to send an official timetable in writing.

Sweden's delegate asked for UNRWA's views on the process for people to join WGs. DER said that those who wish to be involved can notify his Department or the Chair; preferably both. He encouraged cross-fertilisation in participation in WGs. The Chairs would have the right to invite those they think are most appropriate to their work.

Conference Outcomes

DCG said that a Chairs' Summary and a Conference Declaration are the planned outcomes. It is hoped will this result in more support to UNRWA and particularly its Medium Term challenges. It would also be desirable that the outcomes be included in the ComGen's Annual Report to the General Assembly, providing the opportunity to demonstrate what UNRWA was doing over the Medium Term.

The US asked about the preparatory process for the Geneva Declaration. DCG said she preferred not to call it as such to avoid confusions with other initiatives. The first draft will be prepared by UNRWA and circulated to all for feedback. As proposed by the EC, it was agreed to first circulate it to Core Group members according to the planned timetable, to obtain initial ideas in mid-January and then submit it to the SC - as requested by Syria - for approval in April. The aim would be to have a final text before the conference begins.