

STATEMENT BY FILIPPO GRANDI, COMMISSIONER-GENERAL OF UNRWA, AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE ADVISORY COMMISSION

DEAD SEA – JORDAN (18 NOVEMBER 2013)

Mr. Chairman,

Mr. Vice-Chairman,

Deputy-Commissioner General,

Distinguished delegates,

Good afternoon and thank you, Engineer Aqrabawi, for welcoming us here on behalf of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

I thank my friends as well Dr. Khaldoun El Cherif of Lebanon, Chairman of the Advisory Commission, and Axel Wernhoff of Sweden, the Deputy Chair, who has also ably led the Sub-Committee with the support of Jordan and the United Kingdom.

As has been the practice for some time, we have a special guest, again, whom I welcome: Paulo França of Brazil. I hope his presence here foreshadows future membership!

Mr. Chairman,

It will not be a surprise if I say that this is the last session in which this Commission advises me as Commissioner-General. My mandate will end soon and my successor, whose appointment will be announced imminently, will attend the next session.

When I joined UNRWA, I used to listen with a bit of impatience to those who spoke of the good old times. Today, eight years after, you will have to be patient with me, as I will not resist looking back at my time with UNRWA. But rest assured, I will do so with the purpose of reflecting on the future.

I have served Palestine refugees and UNRWA at a difficult time. Mind you, none - absolutely none - of my predecessors would have said anything different upon leaving the Agency. UNRWA was created to support refugees in their darkest hour - just after they were forced to leave their homes and land - and it has been with them ever since, trying to wrestle opportunities out of the challenging crises which a people exiled throughout a troubled region has had to face for more than six decades. With them, we have been waiting for a just solution to their long exile: a solution that continues to elude them, and us.

I have also served at a time of change: a changing world, in which extraordinary technological opportunities and the shaping of multi-polar power arose amidst increasingly complex international crises and a severe, global economic downturn; and a changing region, where the hopes and promise of the Arab Spring have collided with resistance, reaction and the heavy inheritance of poverty, inequality, lack of freedoms and conflicts - most of them unresolved since the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

During this time, in stark contrast, the issues that matter to Palestinians have gone through a frustrating period of stagnation: the peace process has languished, unity in the Palestinian leadership remains elusive, and occupation and exile continue to characterize the lives of most Palestinians.

Amidst these powerful and contrasting trends, UNRWA itself has undergone change. Through “Organizational Development”, and the programme reforms which followed, UNRWA has strived to become more efficient and effective, to increase its transparency, to improve its dialogue with partners and stakeholders. In other words, it has tried to remain relevant in today’s complex aid world, and to continue to make a difference in the lives of those it serves.

It is difficult to measure the success of these processes in a short time span. I can, however, tell you - and especially the newcomers - that the organization you see today is in many ways very different from the one which we set about to reform eight years ago. Change continues to be difficult for UNRWA, steeped as it is in the extraordinarily complex dynamics of this region, and sitting as it does - literally - across your different and sometimes conflicting agendas, which we have to harmonize in order to gain your full support. And why should we expect Palestinians to be indiscriminately open to change, when change, in their recent history, has always brought with it a fresh reversal of fortunes?

However, at least in UNRWA, some taboos have been broken. Change - if properly planned, with due consideration for the risks it might generate, reasonably resourced and clearly communicated - can and will be embraced by UNRWA’s staff and stakeholders, and especially the refugees. What has been achieved in the past few years proves it, in spite of all odds. But it has to be handled with care so that all (and especially refugees) understand that change is made to do things get better, not to stop doing things.

You - the Advisory Commission - have been a crucial partner and an important actor in this process. In 2005, as part of Organizational Development, we jointly undertook to revitalize this group so that it could better “advise and assist” the Commissioner-General, to promote a new sense of engagement on your part, and commitment towards transparency and communication on ours. I have found you to be demanding of us, but addressing those demands has been worthwhile. I would like to declare ours a fairly successful marriage -- one which, like all long-term relationships, goes through a few exciting and also a number of unexciting (but necessary) moments, but one in which we have been working towards the same goal.

You have helped us make strides in many different areas: better procurement, recruitment, and financial processes, for example; more effective decision-making and implementation of decisions; stronger external relations tools such as professional public advocacy; and a comprehensive resource mobilization strategy. Transparency has increased: our oversight committee now includes only external members, and last year we started sharing with you our annual oversight report. The Enterprise Resource Programme will “go live” in 2014, at a fraction of the cost incurred by other organizations. There are areas requiring further work: for example, communicating with staff and refugee communities; managing projects; establishing a more rational area staff structure and a clearer accountability framework - however, work has started and results are expected soon.

When we ended Organizational Development in 2009, we were acutely aware that reforms were not yet tangible for the most important stakeholders: the refugees. We then started to address the key questions pertinent to the core programmes: is our teaching of the quality required in today’s world? Is our health

care appropriate to address non-communicable diseases? Are we reducing poverty through cash and food transfers?

I am pleased to say that the reforms in education and health have become, since then, an integrated part of the normal flow of our business. Their advantages are now well understood by staff and we should not say any more that refugees are not feeling the improvements - they are, certainly in our clinics, where the family health approach and e-health tools are improving the management of care and the fight against non-communicable diseases; and - more slowly because it is a much larger overhaul - in our schools, where refugees are starting to see a difference in the way teachers teach, and children learn.

UNRWA's approach to poverty and vulnerability has been the subject of considerable reflection. UNRWA will unfortunately continue to need temporary, emergency tools to address the requirements of those affected by conflict, such as in Syria today; but also by the protracted hardship caused by the occupation of the Palestinian territory and in particular the blockade of Gaza; and by more localized but severe situations such as the continued displacement from Nahr el-Bared. In those situations, which should not be pushed aside by fresh emergencies in terms of attention and funding, aid must meet primary needs: food, cash, short-term jobs, shelter and protection.

However, the regular relief programme of UNRWA must be considerably improved if we want it to really mitigate poverty and reduce vulnerability. We are concentrating, with your support, on better internal synergies, partnerships with other organizations and a sharper focus on children and youth, in an attempt to break the transmission of poverty across generations. This is the gist of the new poverty strategy, which we are asking you to support.

Mr. Chairman,

Soon after UNRWA embarked on its reforms, the context worsened. Conflicts arose that directly affected Palestine refugees, and in 2008 the world entered a period of economic downturn, which had a profound impact on our ability to raise adequate resources. Let me elaborate on these two themes.

In our June session, I focused on Syria, saying that things had never been worse. Well, they have become worse. The Field Director, who is leading our courageous and determined staff in a nearly impossible task and in spite of the heavy toll - eight colleagues killed and 19 disappeared - will brief you later in detail. The gravest current feature is our inability to reach several groups of refugees, including those trapped inside Yarmouk, for months on end, which means that they have been cut off from all assistance and are exposed to terrible hardship including, reportedly, epidemics and starvation among the young and infirm. In recent days, with the approval of the government, we have made attempts to bring relief items inside Yarmouk, but regrettably we have been turned back at checkpoints.

Some Palestinians, like Syrians, choose to leave their homes for safety. Yet for Palestinians, flight options remain limited. Their places of further refuge inside Syria are increasingly precarious. They are prohibited from crossing the Jordanian border; 50,000 have sought second refuge in Lebanon, where they join almost 300,000 resident Palestine refugees, adding to the burden of a country already submerged by Syrian refugees, and to the hardship of the existing, right-deprived, impoverished Palestinian refugee population. And at the other end of the spectrum of suffering, two boats, both with Palestinians on board, sunk last

month in the Mediterranean. Although figures are uncertain, it was reported that as many as 200 Palestinians perished.

The plight of those trapped in Yarmouk - previously a symbol of regional hospitality and solidarity for Palestinians - and the tragedy of those who lost their lives in a desperate attempt to reach the shores of Europe, are but the latest, dramatic examples of the vulnerability of Palestine refugees.

Clearly, the plight of civilians in Syria will only cease when fighting stops and a political solution is found. But more efforts, meanwhile, must be made to protect them. Once more, I wish to condemn in the strongest terms the profound suffering being endured by civilians trapped in embattled areas, and any attempt to manipulate their situation to pursue military objectives. The Syrian authorities and all opposition forces must grant Palestinian civilians the full spectrum of protection to which they are entitled.

I also appeal to all of you not to forget that the Syria crisis has - among many others - a Palestinian dimension which needs special attention and funding, because a second dispossession brings human suffering, but also risks changing the geography of Palestinian exile, complicating further the search for a solution to the overall Palestine refugee question, and this in parallel to the new, massive refugee crisis.

You will hear about the impact of the Syria crisis on Lebanon and Jordan from the respective Field Directors. Palestinians from Syria have also reached Egypt, where some 6,000 are left extremely vulnerable as UNHCR is not permitted to assist them, and UNRWA has no operations, though we have arranged food assistance through WFP and continue to engage the authorities in order to provide further humanitarian assistance.

Let us be clear: it has been difficult for Palestinians to cross borders to seek refuge from violence; more difficult than for Syrians, to the point that old Palestinians say that the traditional solidarity they enjoyed in the region has worn out. It is important to heed the call of the Security Council Presidential Statement of 2 October, asking for borders to remain open to all refugees, without discriminating against Palestinians, and to continue to support countries shouldering an increasing refugee burden.

But the crisis in Syria, and its regional consequences, should not make us forget that the plight of Palestinians and Palestine refugees under Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, continues to worsen. I will leave it to the respective Field Directors to elaborate, but wish to stress a few points.

The situation in Gaza has deteriorated substantially - and I repeat, substantially - in the last few months. I regret having to raise once again issues that we hoped were going to be eventually overcome by Israel's partial and gradual relaxation of the blockade since 2010. Instead, since March we have not had any construction projects cleared by the Israeli government, and for the past month, we have been unable to import building materials. Nineteen of our 20 construction projects have now ground to a halt and this is also likely to have financial consequences. More broadly, following the closure of most smuggling tunnels, and given that Israel does not allow exports and hence a resumption of normal economic activities, prices are rising because commodities are becoming scarce, lack of fuel has provoked the closure of the power plant, the few jobs available in the construction industry are disappearing... and the list continues.

I have personally observed this situation deteriorate steadily in the past few years, with conflict erupting intermittently - twice with the gravest consequences. Gaza's neighbours, Israel and Egypt, have security concerns. The internal Palestinian political fracture has not been addressed. The international community is focused on Syria, on the broader region, on peace talks. Those who pay the price of these concerns, and of that distraction, are those whose security and wellbeing few really care about: the people of Gaza. It would be inappropriate for me to suggest ways forward in areas - security and politics - that are outside our mandate. However, UNRWA has a major responsibility for the welfare of two thirds of the population, and from that perspective I must remind you, once more, that Gaza is quickly becoming uninhabitable, and that further conflict - bound, as before, to affect civilians in Gaza and southern Israel - will erupt unless its causes are addressed.

Perhaps the time has come to rethink security concerns and political considerations. Perhaps strengthening the human security of the people of Gaza is a better avenue to ensuring regional stability than physical closures, political isolation and military action. To obtain this, first and foremost, the Israeli blockade - which is illegal - must be lifted. Meanwhile, the United Nations must be allowed to at least continue construction projects and provide a few extra jobs to the beleaguered population. This is urgent. Second, the Palestinian leaders must listen more carefully to the appeal coming from their own people: reconcile, so that the concerns of ordinary women and men can be finally addressed by a unified leadership, with the encouragement of the international community. Third, donors must not forget Gaza. In spite of the situation I have described, we had to retrench some of our much-needed humanitarian activities, especially food aid.

In the West Bank too, we have been unable to maintain the same level of activities funded under the inter-agency consolidated appeal: emergency job creation for example, is under serious threat. This risks generating unrest at a time in which multiple other factors are increasing tensions: especially the shameful expansion of illegal Israeli settlements, and the impunity with which it simply happens, and the equally multiplying demolitions of Palestinian houses and denials of permission to build new ones. There have been protests in refugee camps and by refugee committees. They will grow, no doubt, in the next few months. Of course, the root causes of this malaise lie in the stalemate of the peace process and in the incremental strategy of the Israeli occupation. While hopefully this is tackled in the political sphere, however, sufficient resources must be provided to organizations working on the ground to address some of the consequences of this situation.

Mr. Chairman,

The global economic crisis has meant that UNRWA has had to meet increased needs with insufficient resources. Voluntary contributions to all our budgets have actually increased. In 2008, our overall income was US\$ 660 million. This year, it is more than US\$ 900 million as at end of October. We expect income to the General Fund - the financial support to our basic programmes - to increase from US\$ 518 million in 2012 to at least US\$ 542 million at the end of this year. This shows that donors are generous, that UNRWA is credible, and that resource mobilization is effective. However, needs have grown at a faster pace, making it increasingly difficult for us to overcome financial shortfalls.

A later session, chaired by the Deputy Commissioner-General, will provide more details. In short, we have continued to implement austerity measures. This, coupled with strong fundraising, has meant a reduction

of the currently projected cash shortfall to US\$ 36 million. It is not insurmountable but we must manage it carefully. We have suspended payments to creditors in order to ensure the payment of November salaries. But unless some fresh contributions are made, we will have to delay the payment of December salaries of teachers, medical staff, social workers and other personnel: a very negative signal to be conveyed to Palestine refugees at this delicate political juncture. I therefore appeal to donors to make one additional effort before the end of the year.

Austerity has also been applied to our budget for 2014, which will be closer to zero growth than ever before. I say close because a modest increase of US\$ 18 million will be required to meet needs linked to population growth, especially in the Gaza schools. Otherwise, we have been rigorous in prioritizing requirements. Salaries, as always, will be the critical element. We are committed to respecting our policy and ensure that UNRWA staff are not paid less than comparable public service categories. On the other hand, salary increases can be granted only if salaries fall below those of the comparators, and only for those categories in that situation. Without this discipline, the financial situation will not be manageable.

We are also counting on a successful outcome of our current discussions with the Palestinian Authority regarding tax exemption, for which I wish to thank Prime Minister Hamdallah. And last but not least, let me appeal to all donors for maintaining and if possible increasing support to UNRWA - not only traditional ones, which continue to account for 75% of contributions and 85% of those to the General Fund - but also emerging donors, including our special guest, and especially the member states of the Arab League, who have recently reaffirmed in New York their engagement to fund 7.8% of UNRWA's basic programmes - a target which is still far from being met and on progress towards which we will report regularly to the UN and LAS. To Arab donors, my appeal is especially strong and insistent. The amount missing to achieve that very 7.8% - a rather modest amount, if I may say - would have been exactly sufficient to bridge the financial gap every year in the last few years.

Mr. Chairman,

UNRWA was conceived in a very different political, social and economic context, and with a limited timeframe in mind. Yet, its contribution to the welfare of refugees and the stability of the region is more needed than ever. The planning of a new comprehensive strategy from 2016 to 2021 is a good opportunity to reflect on how UNRWA's work remains relevant and - most importantly - how it can be sustained.

In June, we proposed a number of principles that will guide our thinking: ensuring universal access to quality basic education and primary health care; continued dedication to protection, registration, emergency preparedness; a focus on youth; and making the most effective contribution we can to addressing poverty. The "blueprint" that is before you outlines these principles - the foundation of the Medium Term Strategy - and some of their operational implications.

As predicted, a number of questions on the boundaries of UNRWA's role are emerging. They are included in the "blueprint". We have begun the process of analysing these questions. The answers must be determined by the needs and vulnerabilities of refugees, which vary from place to place. But the MTS comprises much more than these questions. The new poverty strategy, which I mentioned, will be at its centre. Another key question is how to establish partnerships with organizations whose contribution can strengthen ours. Much work is currently underway in this regard and you will be consulted regularly as

part of the process. It will be not be easy, as the agendas of hosts and donors do not necessarily coincide in all aspects of this debate. But only through compromises and mutual efforts we will achieve the consensus which UNRWA needs to plan effectively.

You will appreciate that we embark on this planning exercise amidst very substantial uncertainties. For example, a peaceful, political resolution of the conflict in Syria would open the door not only for the reconstruction of the country and the return of those displaced, but also for the resumption of Syria's role, hopefully, as a stable host for Palestine refugees. Conversely, the continuation of conflict would create new challenges, which will be difficult to address. Another uncertainty is represented by the current talks between Israelis and Palestinians: whether they succeed, or even just progress - or not - has potential implications on UNRWA's role and relevance in the coming years. These are factors on which obviously we have no control. Of course, we are used to working in very fluid contexts. For this reason, however, though planning is crucial, it is equally important to remain flexible, adaptable to changing situations, and able to respond to crises and opportunities, as they emerge.

Mr. Chairman,

Before I close, let me draw your attention to this wonderful picture, which was taken in Khan Younis in 1955. Khan Younis is a very significant camp for Palestine refugees. It is also, by the way, the camp where our first Goodwill Ambassador, Mohammad Assaf grew up and went to UNRWA schools. These photos are part of an important legacy: UNRWA's audiovisual archives, inscribed in UNESCO's Memory of the World. They were long stored in basements, exposed to flooding, mildew and heat. Now we will be able to share this invaluable collection through preservation and digitization, an effort funded by Denmark and France, but crucially, also by Palestinians themselves, through the Welfare Association and the direct involvement of private sector partners.

To preserve this legacy is an important duty we have to the Palestinian people. They raise awareness about the history of the Palestine refugee issue, about their dignity in facing hardship, and the importance of UNRWA's work. Prior to the official launch of the project, scheduled in the Old City of Jerusalem on 28 November, we will have a special session later today with Palestinian private sector partners, and a photo exhibit will feature at this evening's reception.

I will make use of the time allocated to me for closing remarks tomorrow, to say proper thanks and goodbyes. Now let me just add that the mention of the archive project is a fit ending to my last opening statement at a session of this Commission, and not only because it is a project very close to my heart.

These images evoke important things associated with UNRWA and its contribution to Palestine refugees - things that, over the years, have made my own work with UNRWA so interesting - sometimes frustrating, but always meaningful; and two things above all.

One is that we must remember that a fundamental injustice was perpetrated against Palestine refugees, and that injustice needs redress in order for peace to prevail. For this to happen, the parties to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must of course find agreement at the negotiating table. We all know how difficult this is proving and we all dread the consequences of failure. But please, today, spare a moment to reflect on how ominous that failure will look in the eyes of Palestinians, and especially of those who are in exile. It will signify that the window for a just solution is closed, perhaps forever. The consequences of this verdict

on the region, on host countries, on donors, on cash-strapped UNRWA, and above all on the refugees and indeed on all Palestinians, will be dangerous. If this will happen, very difficult discussions await you in the future, also in this Commission. If, on the other hand, a just agreement will be found, in line with UN resolutions, I am confident that the positive energy and resourcefulness of Palestine refugees will become building blocks for peace.

The other is that Palestine refugees will never cease to inspire me, long after I will have left UNRWA, with a quality that we have come to associate with all Palestinians, and them in particular: “sumud”, steadfastness, particularly in the face of adversity. It is so visible in those pictures. And in my own time, I have seen refugees under the bombs in Gaza, in Lebanon, in Syria; I have seen them deprived of rights, pushed back at borders and checkpoints, struggling to find food for their children. And yet, despite it all, they remain resilient.

Some have questioned the relevance of UNRWA - even its legitimacy. To those I say: the main role of the organization which I have been proud to serve is to contribute to the foundation on which this resilience lies, and to do so in a very simple, practical, concrete manner: in the classrooms and in the clinics; in the homes of those too poor to stand alone and in the endeavours of those with the strength to build a better future. With your collective contribution - for which we, and the refugees, are profoundly grateful - UNRWA will continue to play this role. Because what can be more relevant and legitimate in today’s Middle East? And what, above all, can be more appropriate to much-needed peace building?

Thank you, Mr Chairman.