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Statement by Pierre Krähenbühl
Commissioner-General of UNRWA
to the Fourth Committee
of the United Nations General Assembly
(Special Political and Decolonization Committee)

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I am greatly honoured to present my first annual report as Commissioner-General of UNRWA to the Fourth Committee of the General Assembly, following the long tradition set by my distinguished predecessors.

In one month's time (9 December 2014) it will be no less than 65 years since the adoption of General Assembly Resolution 302, which created UNRWA, to provide Relief and Works for the benefit of Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

The Palestine refugee community today amounts to 5.1 million, just under a third of the world's total refugee population and some 40% of long term refugees globally (that is, those who have been refugees for more than five years). By way of comparison, the number of Palestine refugees is equivalent to the population of Norway or Singapore.

Historically, UN resolutions on Palestine have never been short of language suggesting the temporary nature of the situation of Palestine refugees.

For example, Paragraph 5 of Resolution 302 states that the General Assembly recognises that "...without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 11 of General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948(...)", "continued assistance for the relief of Palestine refugees is necessary to prevent conditions of starvation and distress among them and to further conditions of peace and stability, and that constructive measures should be undertaken at an early date with a view to the termination of international assistance for relief".

We are still waiting, 65 years later, for these "constructive measures" to come to fruition.

We are also still waiting for a "just" settlement of the refugee problem to be found in accordance with relevant resolutions of the General Assembly, including Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967.

And we are still waiting for negotiations foreseen in Resolution 338 of 22 October 1973 to establish a "just and durable peace in the Middle East" to be realised.

It is against this backdrop that I wish to look in more detail at the exceptionally charged and difficult circumstances affecting the Palestine refugee population today. As I do so, it will become apparent that today, more than ever and despite all the pessimism and skepticism that surrounds us, hope is needed and political action is urgently required to tackle fundamental issues that determine the fate and plight of Palestine refugees.

It has been a torrid year for the Agency.

Twelve months ago, my predecessor, Filippo Grandi, in his final address to this committee, expressed his profound concern about the situation in Gaza. He pointed to the moribund economy, the drastic level of unemployment particularly of the young, the lack of exports, the rise in food insecurity and dependence on food aid - which UNRWA is now supplying to over 860,000 people. He underlined the untenable situation of Gaza with its infrastructure, energy water inadequate to sustain society. He said "(...) the combination of deteriorating material conditions and growing political and security tensions – Israeli military incursions, rockets launched towards Southern Israel – is the recipe for yet another crisis". Tragically, he proved to be right.

In Gaza today, Palestine refugees and non-refugees alike, are just emerging from the unprecedented violence and destruction experienced during the 50-day conflict in July and August. We have all been shocked by the killing of over 1,500 civilians in Gaza, including 538 children, 306 women and 11 UNRWA colleagues. Some 1,500 children have been orphaned, 11,000 people were injured including 1,000 children who will live the rest of their lives with permanent disabilities. Five civilians in Israel have also been killed.

We have witnessed the widespread traumatising of civilians and children, the obliteration of homes – leaving 110,000 people homeless – the loss of livelihoods, the destruction of more than 500 businesses, the crippling of the Gaza power plant, the killing of 40% of Gaza's livestock as well as the wrecking of prime agricultural land.

At the peak of the crisis almost a third of the population of Gaza fled their homes; UNRWA alone sheltered and assisted almost 300,000 displaced persons in 90 of our schools.

Shockingly, UNRWA was affected by seven incidents of munitions fired at its schools, three of them with deadly consequences resulting in over 42 deaths and an estimated 200 persons with multiple injuries. We unreservedly condemned those attacks on UN premises which constituted violations of international law by Israel and we have called for investigations and accountability, a call I repeat here today. We also discovered weapons components hidden in three of our schools: we were proactive and transparent in informing all key parties about these discoveries and we publicly condemned these violations of international law. The independent Board of Inquiry to be established by the Secretary-General will look at all major incidents that affected UN operations, notably those of UNRWA, during the crisis.

The accent now is on rebuilding Gaza. The Cairo donors' conference of 12 October, ably co-chaired by Egypt and Norway, brought forward significant pledges to rebuild Gaza. It is urgent to

concretely activate these pledges. For its part, UNRWA is seeking \$1.68 billion to enable it to rebuild 14,000 destroyed refugee homes, repair over 70,000 refugee dwellings and 118 UNRWA buildings, rehabilitate camp infrastructure and provide essential relief, food, and temporary shelter to those in need. Rebuilding refugee homes alone is expected to cost around \$700 million. Other UN Agencies also require financial assistance to support non-refugees.

It is now essential that the international community supports the Palestinian Government of National Consensus to lead the way forward in reconstructing Gaza. Much needs to be done. I was particularly pleased by the outstanding coordination between the Government of National Consensus and the UN family in preparing the joint assessment document ahead of the Cairo conference.

For major rebuilding to take place, the commercial traffic through the crossing points into Gaza - Kerem Shalom, and also Erez- needs to be massively and sustainably expanded. This, in turn, requires the swift and full implementation of the UN-brokered temporary reconstruction mechanism between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Government of National Consensus setting out the arrangements for bringing increased supplies of building and other material into Gaza. In addition, exports of goods and produce from Gaza, reduced to virtually zero in recent years under the blockade, need to be resumed. Without rapid progress on these two tracks, Gaza will continue its precipitous slide, with growing unemployment and a total lack of prospects, especially among young men and women, increased aid dependency and increased poverty.

In these desperate times, with winter approaching, I cannot emphasise enough the imperative need for the beleaguered people of Gaza to see progress on the ground now. To allow this to happen, building sites and rubble also need to be cleared. An urgent task is to secure and destroy a minimum of 7,000 explosive items including unexploded aircraft bombs and ammunition left in the rubble of buildings. UNMAS, which has been immensely important in helping to secure UNRWA premises and clear over 200 sites, needs a further \$2.5 million for the period 2014-15 to continue and complete its work in Gaza.

Meeting these challenges will require all stakeholders to uphold their responsibilities and be held to account if the movement of supplies into Gaza is impeded or not facilitated in good faith. For its part, UNRWA will continue to assist the just over 30,000 displaced persons remaining in 18 schools, as well as provide rental subsidies and support to others pending the rebuilding of their homes. We are immensely grateful to donors who have funded 75% of our \$300 million emergency appeal and to those who will help us rebuild refugee homes in the future. I wish in this context to thank the many new donors who have come forward in recent months to support UNRWA – Mexico, Colombia, Namibia, Azerbaijan, and Thailand to mention just a few, as well as the remarkable generosity from our traditional donors and the private sector. We were also greatly touched last week by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Malala Yousufzai's announcement in Stockholm, that she was donating \$50,000, the entire proceeds of the World's Children Prize she was awarded, to rebuild an UNRWA school damaged during the recent fighting in Gaza.

Yet, nowhere in the world does the provision of humanitarian assistance alone make up for the denial of dignity and human rights, the opportunity of a job to provide for family members and to

live in freedom and self-sufficiency. To illustrate this point let me quote some disturbing examples illustrating the highly fragile psychological – as well as physical – state of the people of Gaza and which, alarmingly, suggest that the latest conflict has pushed many people over the edge into isolation and despair.

From a recent letter to the UN by a Palestine refugee living in an UNRWA refugee camp in Gaza desperately seeking work, I read "(...) Poverty kills me and my family every day, I swear we cannot live more in this situation, and I do not have the means to live. (...) my brother tried to kill himself because of poverty....no work, no money, food decreased, family problems..." Another manifestation of this despair is the readiness of a growing number of people to put their lives at risk in the hands of ruthless human traffickers in the search for a new beginning in Europe. Many Palestinians from Gaza have failed in this attempt and have tragically lost their lives. Why do they do it? In the words of one who survived, quoted in the New York Times, "Life in Gaza is like having no life ... everything is destroyed". A mother of five recently said to me in Gaza: "For the first time I have to seek an alternative for my children outside of Gaza. I was always determined to stay but now things are different now".

The only way this sense of despair can be overcome is to make Gaza a liveable place again. This means, as the Secretary-General has recently emphasised, once and for all addressing the underlying causes of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: an end to the occupation that has ground on for nearly half a century and a full lifting of the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. Indeed there is no doubt in my mind that, after years of collective punishment of the population in Gaza and after the recent devastating conflict, it is simply inconceivable to return to the pre-existing conditions under the blockade. A change of paradigm is required and only dedicated and determined political action by the international community can bring it about.

Turning to the West Bank, the situation of the 750,000 Palestine refugees there has also deteriorated since last year. In 2013, at a time of intense efforts to achieve a negotiated breakthrough in the Middle East Peace Process, one would have expected a calmer environment to have prevailed. The reality was different: UNRWA observed a significant upsurge in violence towards Palestinians and Palestine refugees, a trend which has worsened further in 2014. Of the 27 Palestinians killed in the West Bank in 2013, 17 were Palestine refugees including one UNRWA staff member in Qalandya refugee camp in August 2013. The year 2013 also witnessed a 12-fold increase in the number of Palestine refugees injured with 51 refugees injured by live ammunition compared to none in 2012. In 2014, to date, 46 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank of which 18 were Palestine Refugees. Of the 458 Palestinian owned structures demolished by the Israeli authorities since the beginning of 2014, the majority in Area C, at least 100 belonged to Palestine refugees.

An important element of UNRWA's protection work in the West Bank relates to our concerns about the threatened forcible displacement of approximately 7,000 people in around 45 residential areas including in the sensitive E1 area. Forcible displacement of persons from land under occupation is a breach of international humanitarian law. Many of these Bedouin are registered with UNRWA as refugees. Actions to force Bedouin families to forego their traditional pastoralist lifestyle for one of imposed urban living will result in a severance from their ancient traditions and a destruction of

their way of life. UNRWA has documented in detail the destructive cultural, social and economic impact that earlier forced displacements had on Bedouin communities in the West Bank.

Overall, socio-economic conditions in the West Bank including East Jerusalem continue to deteriorate for Palestine refugees, with systematic Israeli restrictions on the movement of Palestinians and their conduct of trade causing widespread poverty and unemployment including in the 19 refugee camps. This is compounded by the pressures resulting from further illegal settlement construction and recent events in Jerusalem itself have raised the very serious spectre of widening insecurity and violence.

Adding to the challenges facing UNRWA are the high level of conflict and instability in other countries hosting the Palestine refugees, which contribute to a regional dynamic of insecurity that the refugees have not experienced in decades.

In Syria, the catastrophic conflict is now into its fourth year. The situation of Palestine refugees, whose plight is too often forgotten, is highly precarious. Prior to the armed conflict, Palestine refugees in Syria had enjoyed safe refuge, and a range of rights and freedoms. Now almost all of the 540,000 refugees registered with UNRWA, wherever they now live, are in need of assistance. UNRWA has lost 14 staff in Syria and has 24 staff missing or presumed detained.

Despite extremely harsh and often dangerous conditions, UNRWA has continued to provide vital assistance and services to refugees in need, including food, temporary accommodation in shelters, cash assistance, psychosocial support, primary education and health care. Over half of the Palestine refugees in Syria are internally displaced. During my first visit to Damascus as Commissioner-General, I was deeply marked by the fact that we are dealing here with yet another generation of Palestinians faced with the trauma of dispossession and loss. All refugees grapple continually with the perils and suffering inflicted as a result of an armed conflict in which all sides frequently disregard international law, notably the obligation to protect civilians and their property.

Yarmouk, a neighbourhood of Damascus once home to the largest Palestine refugee community in Syria, is an extreme representation of the plight of Palestine refugees in Syria. Since mid-January this year, UNRWA's periodic distribution of food and hygiene kits has slightly eased the previous conditions of widespread hunger. However, access remains irregular and refugees are trapped in grave humanitarian conditions. UNRWA continues to press the parties to cease hostilities, and provide for full humanitarian access and a restoration of UNRWA services. Similar situations to Yarmouk can be found in Khan Eshieh, Muzerib and in Jilin near Dera'a. But also in areas less dramatically affected by the conflict, services and therefore the refugees suffer. As example, of our 68 school buildings, only a third are accessible, the majority being closed due to damage or insecurity, or are operating as emergency shelters.

Regardless, UNRWA has largely maintained core health and education services, for instance by moving with refugees to areas of relative safety and opening temporary health-points or schools. Our 4,000 local staff often show incredible courage keeping services running, also in areas unreachable from our main offices.

In light of the precarious situation of Palestine refugees in Syria and in neighbouring countries, it is incumbent on me to mention that only 47% of UNRWA's regional crisis response needs of \$ 417 million have been met this year, an amount which is not sufficient to enable us to provide enough regular basic support to the Palestine refugee community in Lebanon, Jordan and in Syria. If this funding trend continues, it will effectively mean UNRWA is forced to give up its focus on human development and give priority to life-saving activities only.

In Lebanon, with its history of complex relationships between ethnic and religious communities, the approximately 400,000 registered Palestine refugees live in often very difficult economic and social circumstances, many in cramped dwellings in overcrowded refugee camps. Among the five fields of UNRWA operations, Lebanon has the highest percentage of Palestine refugees living in abject poverty. In addition, approximately 44,000 Palestine refugees from Syria have fled to Lebanon, almost all of whom UNRWA is assisting with health, food and educational services. While UNRWA fully recognises the enormous burden placed on Lebanon by the massive influx of refugees from Syria, amounting to 25% of the entire Lebanese population, and the need to strengthen the resilience of local communities hosting these displaced people, UNRWA believes nonetheless that Palestine refugees from Syria should be admitted to Lebanon, notably those in need of special medical treatment and those seeking to reunite families. UNRWA also considers that efforts to provide greater work opportunities for Palestine refugees should be pursued so that the refugees can take care of their families and contribute productively to Lebanese society.

I also want to emphasise the importance of providing support to UNRWA so that it can complete the reconstruction of the Nahr el Barad camp which was destroyed in 2007. After a recently announced and most welcome contribution by Saudi Arabia, \$142 million is still needed to complete the work so that all 27,000 displaced residents can be rehoused. In addition, \$6 million is needed to support those still waiting for new homes. Not completing the reconstruction of the camp could lead to further unrest in an already fragile area.

Jordan, which has been stable by comparison to its neighbours, hosts the largest number of registered Palestine refugees in any single country, amounting to some two million amongst its total population of 6.5 million. Many in this refugee community have been able to secure a living; others face economic and social hardship. UNRWA's role remains important to the human development of the refugees in general, and to the most vulnerable refugees in particular. Jordan is also hosting over 14,000 Palestine refugees from Syria who are being assisted by UNRWA; they should be allowed to remain until the conflict subsides and conditions for their return to Syria improve.

Once again, from these descriptions, one cannot but be struck by the extreme circumstances now facing Palestine refugee communities in the region. It is a major pressure for UNRWA to address both long-term developmental aspects of our work and respond to the growing needs generated by so many emergency situations brought about by conflict and occupation.

Despite these considerable challenges, UNRWA has not held back from undertaking complex internal reforms designed to make the Agency more effective and innovative in implementing its work, resulting in the improved provision of services. My predecessor launched these changes known as "Organizational Development", and the related programme reforms which followed.

Today, UNRWA is a more efficient and effective Agency than it was ten years ago. It has improved its dialogue with partners and stakeholders in a transparent manner, notably through intensified engagement with its expanding Advisory Commission, through which hosts as well as traditional and major donors assist and advise the Commissioner-General. The Agency has also built stronger external relations with partners using a resource mobilization strategy designed to sustain and strengthen ties with traditional donors and broaden the range of donors and has also enhanced public advocacy outreach.

I am also pleased to report progress in reforming our education and health programmes. In our primary health care clinics, we have introduced a patient-centric, family health team approach which has reduced waiting times improved the quality and effectiveness of medical consultations. We are pursuing as also a holistic approach to non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, which are increasingly affecting refugees. Improvements in education are also beginning to be felt by the students. After positive initial tests, education reform components will be deployed across the Agency's education system in 2015. Human rights education has become a staple of the curriculum of UNRWA schools and we are continually seeking ways to improve and develop this teaching.

Reforms under UNRWA's relief and social programmes include an increased focus on development, economic empowerment and sustainable livelihood activities. UNRWA is moving gradually in fields, where local markets exist, to the 'best practice' of providing assistance to food-insecure households and to people unable to work through cash transfers, while expanding, wherever possible, job opportunities for those able to work . To really mitigate poverty and reduce vulnerability, UNRWA must also improve internal synergies, partnerships with other organizations and concentrate on children and youth, in an attempt to break the transmission of poverty across generations.

Before turning to the financial challenges confronting the Agency allow me to take this opportunity to convey my sincere thanks once again to your governments for their continuous support to UNRWA. UNRWA relies for 97% of its funding from voluntary contributions from Member States and the EU. Today, the US, the EU, UK, Sweden and Norway, UNRWA's top five donors, still contribute some 50% of the total core budget. Other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE have become more engaged in UNRWA's funding, contributing in particular to emergencies and projects. In this context, I welcome the growing support of Arab countries, and encourage them to strive to reach their engagement to provide 7.8% of UNRWA's core funding as reiterated in last year's Special Meeting of a Group of Supporters of UNRWA in the margins of UNGA week. Let me also add here that we look forward to welcoming Brazil and the UAE as future members of the UNRWA Advisory Commission.

In discussing these funding trends, I wish to be clear about the deeper significance of your support to UNRWA, which has been crucial in helping the Palestine refugees build their human capital with exceptional results. Over the decades, the refugees have formed a reservoir of skilled men and women, to be found in the leading professions in the occupied territory, the broader Middle East, and beyond including South and North America – engineering, medicine, business, education, the non-profit sector, and the like. This outcome, and by that I mean the inordinate contribution that

Palestine refugees have made to social and economic development in diverse settings around the globe, would not have been possible without the support of stakeholder Governments represented here today. If I may say so: UNRWA is responsible - with your support - of probably one of the most successful development processes ever. We believe that donors - and hosts - should recognize this and sometimes take more credit for it.

Sustaining this outcome requires the continued support of our stakeholders, if we are to ensure that all we have helped the Palestine refugees achieve is not undermined, whether by the corrosive forces of military occupation, conflict, or neglect. In this context financial support remains essential, and the continuing engagement of the international community is vital.

Allow me here to address our current financial concerns. As in previous years, UNRWA, which has no financial reserves, is facing a shortfall in its General Fund, which is used to finance the Agency's core activities of education, health, protection, relief and social services. The funding gap presently stands at \$56 million, equivalent to one month's operating costs. We took a series of internal measures first to reduce our initially higher deficit but with only two months to go before the end of the year, and noting the dire consequences that would result from a failure to meet this shortfall, I urge all Member States to find ways to fund UNRWA's core work before year end.

While UNRWA has made stringent efforts to continue controlling its expenditure, something I am determined to take further, the fact is that the refugee population is growing. Needs are not static. We would like therefore to encourage new partners to come forward and play a role in investing in the human capital and the human security of the refugees. Your help and support are needed. The upcoming UNRWA Pledging Conference on 3 December will provide an opportunity to commit financial support to UNRWA.

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge and pay tribute to the work of UNRWA's 30,000 staff spread across its five fields – doctors, nurses, teachers and social workers who are, for the most part, themselves refugees – who give us an unparalleled connection to the communities we serve. UNRWA's many achievements would not be possible without the dedication, bravery and expertise of its staff. From Jabalia in Gaza to Yarmouk in Syria, UNRWA colleagues have worked tirelessly, often risking their lives, to bring desperately needed assistance – and services of high quality – to Palestine refugees. I pay tribute to them, and we mourn all those who have lost their lives in these conflicts: 11 in Gaza and 14 in Syria. I must tell you that I know of no international agency that would have continued operating under these circumstances and after losing so many staff members. I humbly ask that this not be taken for granted.

We also need to constantly bear in mind that, for all Palestine refugees, UNRWA is not a mere purveyor of services typically provided by any local authority. For Palestine refugees, UNRWA represents the institutional pillar which, to a significant extent and with all our strengths and shortcomings, encapsulates and embodies them as a collective, while remaining their source of support and sustenance until a just and lasting solution is found to their plight.

Yet, a powerful sense has emerged of the sheer unsustainability of the situation of Palestine refugees. Some 65 years after UNRWA was created, Palestine refugees themselves are increasingly

speaking about facing an existential threat. That threat expresses itself in all too many ways; some may well be outside the immediate and direct influence of the Member States represented here today, but other threats – including the continuing occupation of the Palestinian territory - should obligate us to take concrete and remedial action in keeping with responsibilities and obligations under international law.

To neglect the plight of Palestine refugees is a risk that the world cannot take, the more so because, notwithstanding the importance of UNRWA to the refugees themselves, the Agency's programmes bring a much needed measure of stability to a profoundly insecure region.

It follows that until political progress towards a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is achieved, sustaining UNRWA, preventing extreme forms of suffering and providing human development and protection to Palestine refugees must continue until permanent solutions are found to the underlying intractable political issues.

This is all the more important because, as the UN moves towards the adoption of ambitious post-2015 sustainable development goals with an accent on eliminating poverty, and reducing inequality, for the international community, it is essential that there are no pockets of humanity excluded from implementation of these important goals. UNRWA's new Medium Term Strategy from 2016-21, which will be presented in final form to UNRWA's Advisory Commission this month, will focus on these themes.

However, reaching these goals will require sustained cooperation and engagement of all actors -host countries, donors, other UN Agencies and NGOs- with UNRWA. It will also require, in the occupied Palestinian territory, Israel's cooperation with UNRWA. I do welcome the fact that, despite our at times significant differences on many fundamental points, a critical but more transparent dialogue between UNRWA and Israel is beginning to emerge, aimed at seeking practical solutions to the many problems which exist on the ground. For its part, UNRWA has underlined its expectation that efforts to undermine the Agency and its General Assembly mandate - from whatever quarter they emanate - will be decisively rejected, by all UN Members States.

My message to you, therefore, is straightforward.

International solidarity in support of Palestine Refugees and our Agency is essential. By supporting and sustaining UNRWA in its mission to provide health, education, social services, protection and emergency assistance to refugees, and by providing the diplomatic and financial support necessary for UNRWA to discharge its tasks in a landscape which is complex, challenging and, in places, highly dangerous, the international community can ensure that the vulnerability of the Palestine refugee community is addressed and that refugees' rights are protected.

I am confident that, with your help, during my time as Commissioner-General, we can deepen this solidarity and that our Agency will fulfil its role to carry out its essential work to support Palestine refugees, until a final -and very long overdue- settlement to the Palestinian issue is at last found.