**Refugee Agency Will Soon Lose Ability to Carry Out Most Critical tasks, Director of Its New York Office Tells Palestinian Rights Committee**

United Nations Meetings Coverage

September 4, 2018

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/gapal1415.doc.htm>

Despite emergency support from dozens of partners, the United Nations agency charged with providing health care, education and other basic services to some 5 million Palestine refugees will soon lose its ability to carry out much of its critical work, the director of the agency’s New York office told the Palestinian Rights Committee today.

“As thing stand now, we will run out of funding for most of our programming at the end of this month — four weeks from now,” said Peter Mulrean, Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Representative Office in New York. Briefing the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People on the impact of UNRWA’s funding crisis, he expressed regret at the 31 August decision by the United States to end its support to the Agency, noting that, in light of the cut, UNRWA is now in need of $200 million in additional funding to carry out its work through the end of 2018.

Describing the decision as a “radical departure” from what has long been one of the world’s most robust development and humanitarian relationships, he said that, while it is every nation’s sovereign right to allocate its funding as it chooses, last week’s cuts regrettably appear to be linked to political agendas. Rejecting recent statements by United States officials who described UNRWA’s schools as “irredeemably flawed”, he said the World Bank and other reputable partners have long recognized the Agency’s school systems as among the region’s best. Since the unexpected decision by the United States to freeze $300 million in support, UNRWA has undertaken unprecedented steps, including diversifying its funding and changing its management in order to cut costs. Meanwhile, other partners have generously stepped up their support, with some 25 countries moving up their annual contributions and more than 30 donors providing $238 million to UNRWA’s core and emergency activities.

Despite such support, however, the Agency does not currently have enough funds to continue to carry out all its core functions through the end of the year, he said, adding that they include millions of medical visits providing food to millions of people in need. Emphasizing that a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli crisis is not part of the Agency’s mandate, he said UNRWA will continue to push forward with its support of Palestine refugees — the only task mandated to it by the General Assembly — as long as the latter deems it necessary. “UNRWA should not become a bargaining chip in political negotiations,” he stressed.

Feda Abdelhady Nasser, Deputy Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine to the United Nations, briefed the Committee on the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and on developments in the political process. Thanking Committee members for their support “in these very worrying and difficult times”, she said that confronting the current threats facing the Palestinian people is crucial as the socioeconomic, humanitarian and political crises facing them become increasingly severe. Citing Israel’s recent attempts to legitimize its human rights violations — including collective punishment, restrictions on movement, the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip and the continuation of illegal Israeli settlement activities — she said the decline in living conditions, particularly in Gaza, is exacerbating the situation and eroding belief that peace is still possible.

“We are regrettably facing countless assaults on the rights of our people,” she continued, citing, in particular, Israel’s adoption of the so-called “Nation State Law” and its continuing attempts to displace Palestinians, including those belonging to Bedouin communities. Such actions are emboldened by support from the United States, including the decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem, its funding cuts to UNRWA and its recently stated intention to redefine who qualifies as a refugee. Indeed, she said, it is shocking in 2018 to see the passing of such racist legislation as Israel’s Nation State Law, which amounts to a system of apartheid and defines Palestinians as a separate, second-class population. The law could result in attempts to further ignore international laws relating to the plight of Palestine refugees, long understood to be a final status issue, she cautioned.

Emphasizing that refugee status is strictly defined under international law, and applies equally to the descendants of refugees as long as they remain unable to return to their home, she appealed to Member States and others to urgently make clear their support for UNRWA’s mandate and for Palestine refugees, expressing hope that those issues will take prominence at the upcoming General Assembly high‑level general debate and at the next session of its Forth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization).

Dian Triansyah Djani (Indonesia), Vice-Chair of the Committee, provided an update of its recent and upcoming activities, including its fourth annual retreat, during which it considered the programme of work for 2019. Bureau members also discussed a strategy for action at the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as outreach activities, among them the need to consider one-sided narratives about the question of Palestine, and the Committee’s mandate and work as being “anti-Israel”. For those reasons, and given the current political climate, it was agreed to increase Committee activities in the United States, targeting youth in particular, he said, noting that the Bureau agreed to craft common messaging to be used for those purposes.

Recalling that the Bureau also held a meeting with the Secretary-General on 15 August, he said participants acknowledged shared objectives and committed to working to advance intra-Palestinian unity and the peace process on the basis of a two-State solution. They also committed to doing their best to ensure sustained financial support for UNRWA. Other topics of discussion included mechanisms to hold Israel accountable for its illegal actions; implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016); support for the Committee of Inquiry mandated by the Human Rights Council to investigate violations committed at the perimeter fence between Israel and the Gaza Strip during 2018 protests; and the Secretary‑General’s report on the protection of civilians.

Turning to upcoming activities, he said the Committee will meet in mid‑November to consider draft resolutions on the question of Palestine. The General Assembly will then consider them on 29 November. In addition, a delegation of the Committee will travel to Brussels and Berlin from 15 to 20 October with the aim of enhancing political and diplomatic support for a two‑State solution, recognition of the State of Palestine, and to re-engage regional and local civil society organizations, as well as Palestinian solidarity movements active across Europe.

In other business, the Committee approved, by consensus, a draft report to the General Assembly covering its work, as well as relevant developments since 6 September 2017 (document A/AC.183/2018/CRP.2).

Cuba’s representative, speaking on that item, said the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is becoming increasingly difficult and complex in light of the United States decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem in flagrant violation of international law and various United Nations resolutions. That action undermines the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people and will lead to “very serious consequences”, as witnessed in the violence witnessed over recent months, she said. Despite numerous Council resolutions to the contrary, Israeli settlement activities — declared illegal under international law — continue unabated, she added.

Meanwhile, UNRWA — while facing a growing number of refugees — is being forced to seek new sources of funding to bridge a $248 million shortfall from its $440 million annual budget, she said. Spotlighting the violence recently committed by Israeli security forces at the border fence between Israel and Gaza — which resulted in the deaths of 177 civilians and the wounding of more than 18,000 others — she said the draft report adopted today stresses the need to continue to work tireless for peace, in support of Palestinian self-determination and the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian State.

Namibia’s delegate echoed those sentiments, declaring: “We are running out of time.” The situation of Palestine refugees cannot continue indefinitely, he stressed, urging Committee members and other actors to redouble their efforts in seeking a resolution of the long-standing conflict.

Providing updates on their activities relating to the question of Palestine included representatives of Afghanistan, Turkey and South Africa. A representative of the Israel-Palestine Working Group also participated.