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**DEBATE ON UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY
FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST**

Statement by
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on behalf of the European Union

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Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, Croatia* and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, as well as Moldova and Armenia, align themselves with this declaration.

Allow me to begin by stressing the appreciation of the European Union with the commitment by UNRWA staff and management in fulfilling their duties under especially difficult and often dangerous circumstances. The European Union underlines its strong support for the essential work UNRWA carries out and for the extension of its mandate.

The European Union also wishes to express gratitude to the Governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria whose countries for more than five decades have been providing assistance to Palestinian refugees.

The European Union is the largest contributor to UNRWA. With contributions from the European Commission and Member States of over to 228 million dollars in 2007, the EU contributes more than half of the revenues of UNRWA. In addition to supporting UNRWA's general budget, the European Union also contributes largely to the funding of special projects and emergency appeals.

The European Union commends the valuable work of the Advisory Commission which supports the efforts of the Commissioner General to develop a comprehensive strategic response to the enormous challenges UNRWA is facing. We support the Organizational Development process, initiated in 2006, which we believe will contribute to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the service to Palestine refugees in all five areas of operations.

* Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

We also commend the recent establishment of an UNRWA office in Brussels, which will enhance cooperation with European Union institutions.

Mr. Chairman,

The European Union continues to be concerned about the humanitarian and economic situation affecting the refugees. In this context, we would like to stress the particular situation of children and call on all parties in the region to give children special protection and to fully respect their rights.

We are particularly concerned with the critical humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza where nearly 80% of the inhabitants are living in extreme poverty and with the deterioration of the situation there after recent violent events. We would like to reiterate the importance of uninterrupted emergency and humanitarian assistance as well as the continuing of the provision of essential services.

The closure system has negative consequences for the humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. It restricts Palestinian access not only to assistance basic services such as health and education, but also undermines the economic viability of the Palestinian Territories. In this context, the European Union recalls the utmost importance of the obligations pursuant to International humanitarian law and of implementation of the Agreement of Movement and Access and therefore calls on all parties to work urgently for the reopening of crossings in and out of Gaza for both humanitarian reasons and commercial flows.

The European Union notes with concern the potentially severe humanitarian consequences of any decision to reduce the supply of fuel and electricity to Gaza. While condemning the unacceptable and continued attacks on Israel's territory and recognizing Israel's legitimate right of self-defense, the European Union underlines the need for carefully weighing the negative impact of such measures on a civilian population already living under very difficult conditions.

The situation on the ground has indeed seriously hampered the capability of humanitarian operators including UNRWA and other UN Agencies to provide essential services, particularly in Gaza. Limitations to the freedom of movement also of UNRWA's staff are of particular concern. The EU urges all parties to ensure full and secure access for all humanitarian personnel and goods as required by principles and practices of International Humanitarian Law, and reiterated by the Road Map.

The European Union is extremely concerned with the safety of UNRWA staff as well as other humanitarian personnel and would like to call on all parties to ensure that UNRWA can provide its services with security.

The recurrent financing gap that still exists in UNRWA's general fund and emergency programmes which risks diminishing the level of security and services provided, when expectations and needs are raised, is also a reason for concern. We support the Commissioner General in her efforts to enlarge the donor community as well as other initiatives to decrease the funding gap, as described in the recently developed Resource Mobilization Strategy.

The European Union reaffirms its readiness to maintain its high levels of humanitarian and economic assistance to the Palestinians. The Temporary International Mechanism has just been extended until the end of 2007, at Palestinian request, and we are working to achieve the transition to direct international assistance to the Palestinian Authority as soon as possible. In this context, we underline the importance of the donor's meeting due to take place in December, in Paris.

The European Union welcomes the resumption of transfers of withheld Palestinian tax and revenues by Israel.

Mr. Chairman,

The European Union strongly supports the vital work that UNRWA has been carrying out in Lebanon, particularly in the aftermath of three months of fighting between armed extremists and

the Lebanese Army at the Nahr El-Bared camp. The EU gave its full support for the efforts of the Government of Lebanon and the Lebanese Armed Forces to bring the situation under control, and we welcomed the end of fighting in September. But large parts of the camp were destroyed and much remains to be done to rebuild it. The EU strongly supports the Secretary's General call on Member states in the latest Report on UN SCR 1559 to support the reconstruction process at the camp. This will be an important part of efforts to ensure further violence does not break out.

Mr. Chairman,

The European Union welcomes the present opportunity for progress on Israel-Palestinian peace. We commend the efforts of President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert and encourage them to take courageous steps in their political dialogue. This dialogue must achieve concrete results, leading to meaningful final status negotiations and to their shared goal of a two-state solution with the establishment of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours.

In this context, we express our full support to the upcoming international meeting as a crucial opportunity for regional and international partners to effectively support a comprehensive Middle East Peace Process.

We sincerely hope for positive developments leading without delay to a fair, stable and equitable solution to the Palestine Refugees issue in the framework of a final and comprehensive permanent status agreement, in line with the relevant UN resolutions. Until then, the services provided by UNRWA remain essential to ensure human development and a decent life for Palestinian Refugees in the Middle East.

Thank Mr. Chairman.