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STATEMENT

BY

HON'BLE MR. SHRIPAD YASSO NAIK
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
AND
MEMBER OF THE INDIAN DELEGATION

ON

AGENDA ITEM 33 :
UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR
PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST

AT THE

62ND SESSION OF THE
UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

NEW YORK

NOVEMBER 8, 2007

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I express India's appreciation to the Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), for the annual report on the Agency's extremely important work over the past year in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We also thank the UNRWA Advisory Committee and the members of the working group on the Financing of UNRWA, for their efforts in support of the work of UNRWA. India also places on record its admiration for the difficult and often risky work that UNRWA has carried out over the past nearly six decades, placing service to the Palestinian refugees as its highest priority.

Mr. Chairman,

The report, and other reports of the UN Secretary-General under this agenda item, bring out very clearly that UNRWA is faced with a serious crisis. As the report notes, several of the challenges directly impinge upon the well-being of Palestine refugees and the Agency's ability to efficiently and effectively discharge its humanitarian and development responsibilities. The outcome of our collective failure to address these issues will be felt inevitably in the already volatile political and social situation in the region.

The first of the challenges before UNRWA that needs to be addressed is the crisis of financing. The budgetary shortfall of UNRWA is growing, and this takes place at the same time as demands upon UNRWA for assistance and support have increased. The overcrowded refugee camps of the Palestinian refugees—many of whom are in camps for more than one generation—are increasingly in need of upgradation of basic services. Separately, the tightening of access controls including the closure of the Sufa border crossing, the weakening financial position of the Palestinian Authority due to the lengthy international boycott, and the inter-Palestinian conflict has led many refugees to seek assistance for the very first time, after decades of self-reliance. Therefore, there is need for greater international effort to improve UNRWA's financial health.

Mr. Chairman,

The insecurity bred by extreme levels of poverty among the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories is heightened by the perilous security situation in Gaza and the West Bank, particularly since the events of June 2007. At the same time, continued expansion of Israeli settlements, in contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Road Map, and continued construction of the separation wall will only contribute to a further sense of siege of the Palestinian people. As the report by the Commissioner-General notes, the degree to which civilian lives and safety are currently at risk requires us to think of expedited, creative and forthright political measures to create an environment of stability.

Paralleling its financial constraints, the operational window for UNRWA continues to shrink. It is a matter of grave concern that the security environment has forced UNRWA to evacuate its personnel from Gaza, and that its own access to persons in the Occupied Territories remains tenuous. The detention, on occasion, of its staff by Israel is unacceptable; respect for humanitarian access and the sanctity of humanitarian premises is imperative for all parties on the ground. The regrettably-continued levy of fees and charges for the transit of humanitarian goods through

Israeli ports is worsened by the increasingly frequent closure of the few existing crossing points into Gaza. The decision to limit crossings to one border point would only further worsen access issues and exacerbate shortages. In the latest briefing to the UN Security Council, the UN Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs had underscored the fact that the "humanitarian situation in Gaza is deteriorating alarmingly", adding that it was "difficult to see how security concerns could justify the hardship" that such measures were causing.

Mr. Chairman,

This leads us to the larger point: the only lasting solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees is a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the long-standing conflict in the Middle East. The ongoing cycle of violence and counter-violence only makes the prospects of an eventual peace more remote. It remains critical for the parties to the conflict and the international community—in particular the Quartet—to redouble their efforts to find a way to bring peace to the Middle East. Nevertheless, until that day when a mutually-acceptable peace is in position, it is incumbent upon all of us to fully support UNRWA, as the primary source of humanitarian relief assistance to the Palestinian refugees.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.