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Statement by H.E. Ambassador Dr. Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, before the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (4th Committee), Agenda item 32, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 7 November 2007:

Mr. Chairman,

I thank you and congratulate you upon your chairmanship of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, congratulate all of the Bureau members, and express our confidence in your ability to guide the Committee's important work this session to a successful conclusion.

At the outset of our consideration of the item on the "United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East" (UNRWA), I wish to thank the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Mrs. Karen Koning Abu Zayd, for her report to the General Assembly on the Agency's work in the past year and for her presentation to the Committee today. I express our immense appreciation to the Commissioner-General for her adept leadership of UNRWA and her unflinching dedication to its humanitarian mission to assist the Palestine refugees at a time when the situation in the region has continued to deteriorate and challenges for the Agency have continued to rise. At the same time, I convey Palestine's deep gratitude to all of UNRWA's staff for their tireless efforts and commitment, including in circumstances of danger to their own safety, to mitigating the hardships and contributing to the human development of the Palestine refugees through the many services offered by the Agency in the fields of education, health, and other relief and social services.

UNRWA has played a central role since its establishment, providing assistance to the Palestine refugees for meeting basic needs and for coping in emergency situations, as well as preserving their rights and acting as a protecting presence for them in areas of crisis and conflict. We thus reaffirm the necessity for continuation of UNRWA's mandate for both the well-being of the Palestine refugees and the stability of the region, pending the just resolution of the question of the Palestine refugees in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948. In this regard, the long-standing support of the international community, including the host governments of Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, for UNRWA's work has been crucial and has been a testament to the international community's humanitarian commitment to the welfare of the Palestine refugees as well as its political commitment to the ultimate resolution of their plight and the realization of their rights. For this moral, principled commitment and support we reiterate our deep gratitude.

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Mr. Chairman,

The just resolution of the plight of the Palestine refugees, in accordance with resolution 194, remains one of Palestine's highest priorities. It is one of the core issues that must be resolved to achieve a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine as well as peace in the region as a whole. The regional nature of this problem was starkly illustrated again by events of the past year concerning the refugees. As we approach the 60th year since the creation of the Palestine refugee problem, we echo the Commissioner-General's call for the international community to redouble its efforts to secure a just and lasting solution to the plight of the Palestine refugees, who for too long have suffered and whose plight has been immensely compounded, with the refugees now numbering 4.5 million persons and constituting the largest refugee population in the world. In fact, millions of them still live in the camps originally established as temporary shelters for them throughout the Middle East in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, many in the most impoverished and unstable conditions.

The Palestine refugees - those persons who fled or were expelled from Palestine during the period of the 1948 war and their descendants - remain a stateless, dispossessed and dispersed people due directly to the intransigence of Israel and its flagrant disrespect for international law. Israel continues to deny the refugees their inalienable right to return to their ancestral homeland, while at the same time Israel implementing a "law of return", permitting the immigration of any Jewish person from anywhere in the world.

Obviously, if Israel had chosen to respect international law and comply with U.N. resolutions - as all Member States are obligated to do under the Charter - the problem of the Palestine refugees would have long ago been resolved, the international community would not continue to face the many humanitarian and political challenges arising from this ongoing crisis, and an entire people would not be forced to continue suffering in exile. Regrettably, however, Israel continues to deny the collective and individual rights of the Palestine refugees and to even deny any responsibility for their plight. This position was recently repeated by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in March 2007, when he publicly stated the following regarding the refugees: *"I'll never accept a solution that is based on their return to Israel, any number... I will not agree to accept any kind of Israeli responsibility for the creation of this problem..."*

In light of this continued Israeli rejection, we must explicitly reaffirm the following:

- The right of the Palestine refugees to return is, in accordance with the rules and principles of international law, an abiding and inalienable right that cannot be altered or diminished regardless of the passage of time or the change in circumstances on the ground. The U.N. General Assembly, in resolution 194 (III), paragraph 11, clearly affirmed the right of the Palestine refugees to return to their homes and to just compensation. The international community has rightly reaffirmed and safeguarded their rights ever since.
- The Palestine refugees also have the individual right to private ownership of property and land. As reaffirmed annually by the Assembly, the Palestine refugees are entitled to their property and to the income derived therefrom, in conformity with the principles of equity and justice. The ownership by the Palestine refugees of 5.5 million dunums of land, fully documented by the UNCCP, must be recognized by Israel and restitution or fair compensation, if accepted by owners, must also be part of any just settlement of the refugee problem.

- Moreover, in this context, we reaffirm the right of the thousands of Palestinians who were displaced from their homes and land in 1967 by Israel, the occupying Power, to return, as called for by the Security Council in resolution 237 (1967) and by the Assembly annually, and we call for accelerated realization of this right via the agreed-upon mechanism by the two sides.

Mr. Chairman,

I wish to refer now to the Commissioner-General's report and the situation of the Palestine refugees this past year. As Palestine has submitted a detailed paper in this regard, annexed to the report of the Secretary-General in document A/62/312 for consideration by delegations, and as the Commissioner-General has given a comprehensive presentation, I will try to be brief.

Over the past year, UNRWA, despite financial constraints and difficult conditions on the ground, continued to effectively operate its schools, health clinics, training centers, and community centers for women, youth and the disabled and to run its micro-finance and micro-enterprise programs for poverty alleviation and economic development, providing valuable assistance to the Palestine refugees in all fields of operation. At the same time, the decline of the political, socio-economic and security situation in the region, forced UNRWA to expand emergency-related programs and launch additional appeals for funds for urgent aid, including food, medicine, shelter for displaced refugees, repair of damaged shelters and cash assistance for basic living needs for refugees.

The situation of Palestine refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in Lebanon was most acute in the past year. In addition, the situation of thousands of Palestine refugees in Iraq also worsened and continued to be of grave concern.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, the socio-economic conditions of the Palestine refugee population, particularly in the Gaza Strip, continued to deteriorate further. Israel, the occupying Power, continued its military assaults and raids on Palestinian population centers, including refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, inflicting human and material loss on Palestine refugees. More refugees, including children, suffered death and injury and more damage and destruction to shelters, properties and civilian infrastructure in the camps, including Agency property, was caused by the Israeli occupying forces, who even fired on UNRWA schools while children were in their classrooms and in schoolyards.

The occupying Power also continued to collectively punish the Palestinian people by imposing prolonged closures on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly on the Gaza Strip, and severe restrictions on movement, negatively impacting the Palestine refugees and the operations of UNRWA. In the West Bank, Israel's imposition of more than 500 checkpoints, its continuing unlawful construction of the Wall and settlements, and its racist permit regime continued to impair the economy, to exacerbate socio-economic conditions and to affect access to UNRWA services, particularly in the Occupied East Jerusalem area. Movement of the Agency's staff, vehicles and essential supplies into and out of the Gaza Strip in particular has been vastly obstructed by the illegal, punitive measures imposed by the occupying Power, including its continued closure of all border crossings.

Unemployment and poverty, especially in Gaza, have continued to soar as a result of Israel's illegal policies and practices and as an enduring consequence of the international aid boycott

imposed on the Palestinian Authority in 2006. In turn, demand for UNRWA services rose, including, as noted by the Commissioner-General in June 2007, by many refugees who sought assistance for the first time after decades of self-reliance. The humanitarian situation in Gaza in particular is deplorable. There, refugee families, many who no longer have any source of income, have become ever more dependent on aid for survival, with 1.1 out of 1.4 million people in Gaza now in need of food aid. Of course, UNRWA continued its efforts to alleviate hardships, including, as noted earlier, by launching emergency appeals and working cooperatively with other U.N. agencies to meet the needs of poor and hungry refugees. UNRWA efforts in this regard have become even more critical in light of Israel's continued tightening of the siege on the Gaza Strip and the continued deterioration of the living conditions of the civilian population.

This cyclical rise in refugee needs and in demand for UNRWA services in the Occupied Palestinian Territory has been a common pattern over the years directly and primarily caused by Israel's unlawful, punitive actions. The ultimate responsibility of Israel for this situation must be seriously addressed. Israel must be held accountable for its actions - both towards the Palestinian civilian population and towards UNRWA - and it must be compelled to abide by its legal obligations under international law. This issue should be of major concern to Member States, particularly donor countries, which are repeatedly called upon to provide emergency funding to alleviate the negative impact of illegal Israeli actions on the Palestine refugees and on the Agency's work.

Mr. Chairman,

In Lebanon, the situation of the Palestine refugees continued to be difficult, particularly in the northern refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared following the outbreak of fighting in May 2007 between the Lebanese army and the so-called Fateh al-Islam militant group, comprised of armed persons from outside the camp who had established a presence in the camp. The fighting resulted in extensive loss of life and destruction throughout the camp, including to UNRWA facilities, and caused more than 30,000 Palestine refugees to flee for safety. Most of these again-dispossessed refugees fled to the Beddawi camp and other refugee camps in Lebanon. UNRWA immediately responded, providing food, shelter and medical assistance to needy refugees. Moreover, in cooperation with the Government of Lebanon, UNRWA launched another emergency appeal to support its provision of aid to the refugees affected by the crisis and to begin planning for future reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp, to which the displaced refugees should be returned as speedily and safely as possible.

As for the Palestine refugees in Iraq, their situation remained critical, with many attempting to flee Iraq for fear of persecution as they remained targeted with violence, harassment, and eviction from their homes by militias seeking to expel them from the country. While the Palestine refugees in Iraq are not covered by UNRWA's mandate, despite the fact that many of them meet the criteria to be registered with UNRWA, the Agency has, in cooperation with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), tried to assist them, particularly the hundreds of refugees stranded on the Syrian-Iraqi border at Al-Tanf camp and the more than 1,400 refugees at Al-Waleed camp in a nearby desert area, the majority of whom are women and children. We thank the countries that have responded to appeals in this regard and call for continued efforts to address their crisis. Here, we convey special appreciation to the Government of Brazil for the refuge and assistance it has offered to more than 100 of the refugees.

Mr. Chairman,

As noted, all of these developments affected UNRWA's operations and placed added strain on its human and financial resources. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory in specific, the Israeli occupying forces continued to physically harm, kill and harass UNRWA staff, to inflict damage on the Agency's infrastructure and properties, including schools, and to hamper UNRWA's movement and access. In this regard, UNRWA's Office of the Director of Operational Support has played an important role, facilitating access of UNRWA staff and vehicles, including ambulances and humanitarian convoys, monitoring the crisis, monitoring UNRWA facilities and providing some protection to the Palestine refugees.

In light of ongoing violations by the occupying Power, we are compelled to reiterate that UNRWA, like all other U.N. agencies and humanitarian organizations, is entitled under the law to carry out its mandate free from harassment, intimidation, obstruction and destruction. Israel must cease its illegal actions against the Agency and its staff. It should immediately lift all restrictions on the movement and access of UNRWA staff, vehicles and supplies, including into and out of the Gaza Strip, ensure the safety of its staff, compensate the Agency for damage caused to its properties and reimburse the Agency for charges and financial losses incurred as result of imposed delays and restrictions. Israel must be compelled to fully respect the Charter, the Convention on Privileges and Immunities of 1946, the Convention on the Safety of the United Nations and Associated Personnel of 1994, its 1967 bilateral agreement with the Agency, and, of course, the 4th Geneva Convention, which is applicable to all of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

In this context, we express our concern about reported incidents of Palestinian violations of UNRWA facilities and violence towards staff and assure the Agency that the Palestinian Authority rejects these actions and is doing its utmost to bring an end to such lawlessness. On another note, we regret that due to the instability of the situation in the Gaza Strip, which was worsened by the illegitimate actions of Palestinian militias there in June 2007, the majority of UNRWA's international staff has been relocated from the Gaza Strip. We hope for restoration of the Palestinian situation in Gaza to that which existed prior to June 2007 and for calm and stability on the ground. In this regard, the occupying Power must also be demanded to cease its illegal policies and practices in the Gaza Strip and to allow unimpeded access so that the Agency can carry forth with its humanitarian work there in the most effective, safe manner possible. Accordingly, we would hope for a return of UNRWA international staff to its Headquarters in Gaza City in the near future.

Mr. Chairman,

At this time, I convey our deep appreciation to the host countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, for helping to care for the Palestine refugees and to alleviate their plight. We also express our appreciation for their efforts to facilitate UNRWA's work, including their efforts as members of the Advisory Commission.

I also reiterate our deep gratitude to the donor community for their firm support of UNRWA, their generous contributions and their responses to the emergency appeals. We urge all States, specialized agencies and non-governmental organizations to continue supporting the Agency's valuable programs and assistance to Palestine refugees in all fields of operation.

We convey additional thanks to those countries members and observers of the Advisory Commission and express appreciation as well to the members of the Working Group on the

Financing of UNRWA. The constructive roles they play certainly contribute to advancing the Agency's work and organizational reform efforts. In this regard, Palestine expresses support for UNRWA's requests for additional posts to strengthen its capacities and enhance its ability to address Palestine refugee needs. We are hopeful this request will soon be approved and, until then, commend UNRWA for its innovative efforts to overcome the challenges it faces in fulfilling its mandate.

Mr. Chairman,

In conclusion, I reiterate our thanks to Commissioner-General Abu Zayd and UNRWA's staff for all of their dedication and efforts. UNRWA is playing an indispensable role, and we thus hope that the General Assembly will again firmly support the resolutions under this item and pursue their implementation as part of its ongoing and important contribution to the international effort to redress the plight of the Palestine refugees and provide them with basic needs and human dignity until the day that a just resolution to their plight is achieved.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.