

ISRAEL

61st Session of the General Assembly

FOURTH COMMITTEE

Statement by Mr. Ran GIDOR

Israel's Representative to the Fourth Committee

Agenda Item 31: United Nations Relief and Works Agency
for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

United Nations, New York

1 November 2006

Check Against Delivery

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to start by thanking you for the skillful and expeditious manner in which you have administered this Committee's proceedings so far.

Mr. Chairman,

Another year has gone by, and again we find ourselves here, in New York, discussing the myriad contradictory events, incipient hopes followed by false starts, fresh initiatives followed by tragic miscalculations, gestures of good will followed by reckless violence, that combine to make up the tragic tapestry of Israeli-Palestinian relations. It is but one of the many national and ethnic disputes which feature regularly on the international agenda, yet the only one which continues to imbibe the seemingly inexhaustible resources and exclusive attention of innumerable UN bodies – not least, the Fourth Committee.

It is important to stress time and again, that – perhaps contrary to popular belief – assistance to the Palestinian people is – and has always been – central to Israeli policy, arising from our belief that stimulating the economic growth of the Palestinian economy and enhancing the welfare of the Palestinian population is integral to the stability of our region. Israel continues to attach great significance to UNRWA's activities and understands the difficult conditions under which the Agency operates. Despite an intensely challenging situation on the ground, it remains Israel's policy to facilitate and assist the humanitarian operations of the Agency as much as possible.

Tragically, we are very often prevented from implementing our policy on the ground, due to reasons beyond our control – namely: the murderous activities of terrorist organizations, which seek to disrupt, divert and destroy any semblance of normality in our region.

And that – put simply – is the crux of the matter. UNRWA is entrusted with a heavy task indeed: preserving and contributing to the welfare of the Palestinian refugee population. The Government of Israel is also entrusted with such a task: preserving and contributing to the welfare of the Israeli people – Jews and Arabs alike. However, the scourge of terrorism requires us to give much attention to security issues, which unfortunately can impinge upon the smooth operation of UNRWA. Surely, Mr. Chairman, our choice between the two is painful – but obvious. Would any other government, of any other nation, act differently?

I would like to remind our distinguished colleagues that Security Council Resolutions 1373 (2001), 1566 (2004) and 1624 (2005), specifically obligate states to combat terrorism wherever it may be found. Furthermore, the 1967 Comay-Michelmores Exchange of Letters establishing the relationship between the Government of Israel and UNRWA clearly states that: "... the Israeli Government will facilitate the task of UNRWA to the best of its ability, subject only to regulations or arrangements which may be necessitated of military security."

UNRWA has expressly recognized in its Report Israel's right of self-defence and its duty to protect its citizens. Israel, in turn, respects its obligations towards UNRWA and will continue to endeavour to facilitate its mandate. Nevertheless, we have no

choice but to limit at times the movement of goods and individuals, when necessitated by the security situation. That is implicit in the Agreement, and UNRWA has itself agreed to this reality.

The figures are, indeed, startling: during the period covered by the Report, no less than 2,343 terrorist attacks were carried out, including 1,262 shooting incidents, 935 launching of Qassam rockets, 117 road-side bombing devices, 16 hand-grenade attacks and 7 suicide bombings. All those incidents resulted in 57 Israeli civilians and 5 soldiers killed and 546 (both civilians and soldiers) wounded.

Such is the intensity of the terrorist campaign, that it inevitably affects the daily lives of people on both sides of the political divide, and hampers the smooth operation of international aid agencies.

Let us look at one illustrative example. Paragraph 50 of the Report states that "...restrictions on movement of goods through Karni crossing remained closely linked by the Israeli authorities to security incidents and alerts...." That is very true, and calls for an elaboration.

Karni is the main humanitarian crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, and Palestinian livelihood and welfare is largely dependent upon its smooth and uninterrupted operation.

Nevertheless, in the very first month of 2005, an IDF position one kilometer west of Karni was attacked by a four member terrorist cell. A few days later, another Israeli position next to Karni was targeted by a missile. That, in turn, was followed several days later by yet another devastating attack on the Karni terminal itself, when three terrorists arrived there purportedly driving a commercial van, which actually contained powerful explosives. Upon detonation, the terrorists managed to break into the terminal building, where they murdered six employees and injured five more. In February there was another attack, two more in May, and one each in June, August and September – all of them near or around the Karni terminal.

On 26th April this year, the IDF successfully thwarted yet another attack on Karni, this time by the Popular Resistance Committees cell. The operation consisted of a parallel attack, launched simultaneously from three vehicles: one of them filled with a large amount of explosives, while the other two carrying armed gunmen.

The last incident occurred as recently as 27th August, 2006, when the IDF uncovered a long tunnel (150 meters long and 13 meters deep), dug from within the Gaza Strip in the direction of the Karni crossing. The tunnel was intended to be used for a large-scale terror attack, apparently at the terminal itself. The tunnel entrance was found inside a private house in the residential area of Sajaiya.

It is important to stress, that these attacks were not unique to the Karni Crossing. Similar incidents occurred in all the terminals and crossings around the Gaza Strip.

So, Mr. Chairman, the various restrictions mentioned in the Report, are unfortunately necessary to protect not only the lives of Israeli civilians and soldiers, not only the lives of the terminal employees – whose very task is to facilitate the transfer of

humanitarian goods into Gaza, but also the lives of many UNRWA personnel who operate there. Notwithstanding those restrictions, there was, in fact, a marked increase in the Palestinian trade flow through the various terminals. In Karni itself, the total number of Palestinian trucks moving in and out of Gaza during the year 2005, went up from 115,000 to 133,000 (i.e. an increase of 16 percent). The total number of trucks traveling via the Allenby bridge went up by 6 percent, those passing through the "Sufa" terminal – by 32 percent. The total number of trucks engaged in the so-called "back-to-back" trade with Israel, increased by 10 percent, from 266,000 to 292,000.

All of that contributed, of course, to a tangible – if modest - improvement of Palestinian economic indicators, as indeed the UNRWA report acknowledges. According to the World Bank figures, total Palestinian GDP shot up by 9 percent and per capita by 5 percent. The volume of bilateral trade with Israel increased by 13 percent, and unemployment diminished by 3.4 percent. The number of tourists visiting the Palestinian town of Bethlehem went up by 165 percent and the Palestinian "El Kuds" share-index propelled upwards by 300 percent. By the end of 2005 – again, according to the World Bank – the Palestinian GNP was equal to about 90 percent of its 2000 (pre-Intifada) level.

Mr. Chairman,

The Report under consideration here, which pertains to the period between 1st January and 31st December 2005, refers to circumstances that are considerably different to those of today. The two major developments which occurred since were, of course, the election of a Hamas terrorist government in January 2006, and the Palestinian terrorist attack on 25th June 2006, which left two Israeli soldiers dead, four injured and one captive. That, in turn, resulted in an IDF operation designed to bring about the soldier's release, as well as the termination of Kassam rocket attacks against Israeli towns and villages.

Last year, in this very venue, we expressed the hope that the UNRWA report may very well be the last of its kind. We said that Israel was no longer in Gaza. There was no longer a scapegoat around to blame for every hardship, obstacle, or personal loss suffered by the Palestinian population. We then continued to say: "...now—when the Israeli military and civilian administration has ceased to exist in Gaza—it is the duty of the Palestinian Authority to boost its nation-building efforts and assume some of UNRWA's responsibilities on the ground, especially those related to education, health, and food."

Unfortunately, the challenge was not met. A Hamas-led government was put in place, which persists in its policy of triple denial: "no" to recognizing Israel's right to exist, "no" to giving up terrorism, and "no" to acknowledging existing agreements signed by the Israeli government and the PLO. For once, the international community held the Palestinians responsible for their own decisions. The election of a terrorist government triggered a chain of events, which led to more hardship, disillusion and frustration for all of us in the region.

Mr. Chairman,

This year we are pleased to note, that notwithstanding the occasional differences in opinion, methods and priorities, the dialogue between UNRWA and the Israeli authorities has been most constructive and useful. We congratulate Commissioner-General Karen Koning AbuZayd on producing a report, which is refreshingly factual, balanced and forward-looking. Furthermore, we are grateful for the fact that we are accorded a fair hearing, and our version of events is sometimes acknowledged in the final text of the Report.

Admittedly, we are not beyond criticism, and there is always scope for improvement. Israeli officials, at all levels, have been continuously available to meet and coordinate matters with UNRWA officials regarding both general and practical issues arising out of Agency operations. For example, Israeli coordination officials continuously facilitate the movement of medical personnel and ambulances, as well as the transit of patients in need of urgent or chronic medical treatment to hospitals within the Palestinian Authority and in Israel. We remain committed to such coordination even in times of increased security alert and widespread military activity, which can impose great difficulties on such efforts.

Mr. Chairman,

Every year we are treated here to a long parade of Arab diplomats, who seem to be engaged in a rhetorical contest of hyperbolic sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinian refugees. If the issues involved were not so tragic, these speeches could be dismissed off-handedly with little or no comment on our part.

For let us look at the hard facts. According to the UNRWA website, the most generous donors to its 2005 budget were the EU (123 million USD), US (108 million USD), Sweden (39 million USD), Norway (31 million), Japan (30 million), The Netherlands (27 million) and the UK (28 million). The oil-rich UAE gave 500,000 USD, the no-less-rich Kuwait gave 1.5 million, Qatar gave 35,000, Egypt gave – well – nothing, as indeed did Oman, and Syria gave a meager 154,681 USD. Now, whereas it is true that Syria was responsible for the actual transfer of significantly larger sums of money into the Palestinian Autonomy, they were unfortunately channeled into terrorist cells and secret bank accounts of Jihadist organizations, rather than the alleviation of the misery of Palestinian refugees. In fact, what Syria actually gave to UNRWA is probably less than what it spends on the annual upkeep of its representative to the Fourth Committee. Just for comparison's sake, King Abdullah II gave a private pledge of 917,062 USD, which is almost six times the amount donated by Syria. The only Arab country which raised a significant contribution to UNRWA was Saudi Arabia, with a total pledge of 20 million USD.

But one should not be surprised at the figures, which reflect a well-known and regular pattern. Again, according to UNRWA's website, during the years 2000-2006 the US alone was responsible for more than a third of UNRWA's total pledges (35.37 percent). The EU came second with 10.68 percent, and the UK not far behind with 10.39 percent. Saudi Arabia occupies the eighth place on the list, with an accumulated pledge of 3.21 percent (i.e. less than a tenth of the total American contribution). And then – nothing. Not a single Arab country crossed even the threshold of 0.5 percent of the total pledges to UNRWA's Emergency Appeals.

In short, not a single Arab country is prepared to spend any more than a miniscule part of its ever-increasing oil revenues in order to help alleviate the plight of the Palestinian refugees. At the same time, my Arab colleagues here clearly prefer to continue squandering the United Nations' budget on repetitive sessions, inefficient committees, endless resolutions and useless documents, which do nothing to improve the situation on the ground or help the prospects for peace.

Mr. Chairman,

To sum up, UNRWA has become, after almost 60 years of existence, the second biggest employer within the Palestinian Authority. We believe that UNRWA mandate and modus operandi serve, in fact, to perpetuate the problem, rather than resolve the refugee status of the Palestinians or rehabilitate them. It devotes all its resources to three functions normally undertaken by a state or governing authority, namely: elementary education, public health and food security. It is our position, that it is possible - in the long term - to transfer the daily tasks, together with existing budgets, of the agency to governmental bodies in the PA, as should be done in Jordan and elsewhere as well.

Israel believes that all people should be able to exist in security and in peace, with standards of living befitting the principles of universal human dignity. Israel hopes for adequate living conditions for all our neighbouring communities, especially the Palestinians. Prosperity within a nation fosters harmony between nations. The Palestinians are not our enemies; they are our neighbours. We seek to live side by side with them in mutual respect and dignity. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live in security and peace - both peoples' suffering is a humanitarian problem - both peoples' rights to self-determination must be respected. We look forward to working together with those Palestinians who acknowledge our right to exist, towards the achievement of sustainable peace in the region. We look forward to consolidating our dialogue and cooperation with UNRWA, in order to improve the living conditions for our neighbours, and the prospects for reconciliation in the Middle East.

I thank you Mr. Chairman.