

"Engaging Youth"

UNRWA Stakeholder Conference

Brussels, 19-20 March 2012

Introduction by Filippo Grandi, UNRWA Commissioner-General

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for having responded to our invitation to attend "Engaging Youth". I am grateful to the European Union for supporting this event, and to the Government of Belgium for hosting it. Many senior leaders are lending us their valuable time; this proves that Engaging Youth in a Changing Middle East is a theme of interest and relevance among decision-makers.

Our introductory speakers - representing their governments and institutions, but also through their own personal commitment - are an impressive cross section of all those who support Palestine refugees, and are thus UNRWA's key stakeholders: the European Union, our largest collective donor; the Government of Belgium, whose support to Palestine refugees dates back

to 1949; the Government of Jordan, host to the largest single Palestine refugee population; the League of Arab States, the refugees' main global and regional ally and advocate; and Foreign Minister Malki of the Palestinian Authority, who will speak today on behalf of President Abbas. The Palestinian Liberation Organization, I remind you, is UNRWA's key partner and counterpart in its role of representing all Palestinians and through its efforts to find a solution to the question of refugees. Further, I would like to welcome Jordan's Minister of Social Development, Nisreen Barakat; the Minister of Education and Higher Education of the Palestinian Authority, Lamis al Alami; Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Khaled Attiya, and the United Kingdom's Minister of State for International Development, Alan Duncan - as well as all other delegations, speakers, moderators, and guests. Let me also thank the United Nations Secretary-General for his important message delivered earlier through my friend and colleague Robert Serry - I am familiar with the

Secretary-General's commitment by having accompanied him in two of his three visits to Gaza. And last but not least, let me salute here the 24 representatives of young refugees from Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and from the occupied Palestinian territory in Gaza and the West Bank - whose lives, whose hopes and aspirations, but also whose plight and frustrations, we want to highlight today and tomorrow as thoroughly and candidly as possible, with a key practical goal in mind: how to better address them through the concrete work that we must continue to carry out in support of all refugees.

There is no doubt that we are at a critical juncture in the Middle East. Many things are happening -- political uprisings, conflict, the rise of social media, the unprecedented numbers of young people, economic uncertainty -- and this has created volatility and at the same time great potential. For refugee youth, the transformations amplify the profound stresses of the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian situation, of the continued Israeli occupation of

Palestinian land, of rights often violated or not granted, of the vulnerability and anxiety generated by lives in exile in a region plagued by repeated conflicts, even as we speak.

At the same time, young people across the region have proven that they are not ready to give up - that in spite of all odds, they have hope; otherwise they would not be as courageous and as determined as they have been. Youth is the future - this is what everyone always says. But - and I speak to you, young refugee representatives - it is increasingly clear that today, too, is also very much in your hands. Your energy, your optimism, your intelligence and your innovative spirit but also your strong demands and sometimes your anger are shaping the world around us, and rightly so.

I have often said that UNRWA, the most operational of all United Nations organizations, through its schools, health centres, engineers and social workers, focuses on practical action, and does not organize conferences. Well, I cannot say this any more - but I can assure you

that we have organized this conference not only to talk, but also - and especially - to improve the way we collectively support almost five million refugees, with much more attention to, and a more clear focus on youth.

Thanks to host and donor countries and institutions, UNRWA has been an important life-line to Palestine refugees over the decades, ensuring, above all, solid educational foundations and widespread access to community health-care - trying to improve the lives of refugees pending - and I stress pending - a just and lasting political solution to their exile. My fellow speakers will allow me to say that it is important that the quest for peace - and, I insist, for a solution to the refugee question - must be pursued with determination. But all of us, and our speakers in particular, know too well how difficult this quest continues to be, and what daunting obstacles lie on the road to peace.

However, I hope you all agree that organizing this conference carries an important message: those difficulties must not stop us from creating better conditions for young refugees to exercise their rights, develop their skills, support their communities and find socially and economically productive ways to realise their many ideas and innovations. Today, unfortunately, there are not many investments that carry the prospect of a more hopeful and stable Middle East. This is one of them and is what this conference is about.

Therefore, in the next two days we must concretely examine the main issues of concern for Palestine refugee youth and the ways in which those supporting them, including UNRWA, can best work with and for them. This is a beautiful and very serious room, but don't forget that innovative approaches require that we are at least a bit informal and unconventional - that the conference is not business as usual. Let us ensure that our discussions are dynamic, provocative but also

concrete; let us examine in a frank and constructive way what is done for young refugees, and what could be done - I say this to all participants, to our panelists and to the youth representatives in particular: it is after all about their lives that we will talk, so we should listen carefully to their voices: something we don't have many opportunities to do in other conferences and international meetings, and even in our daily work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my goal to come away from this discussion with the main elements of a renewed UNRWA strategy for youth, and with a number of concrete commitments on how to make it real, with the support of all. Of this I will speak at the end, after listening to you. But let us now begin this conference with a clear sense that the moment is critical, the challenges are many, and the responsibility - collectively - is of all of us.