



UNRWA Conference

« *Engaging Youth – Palestine refugees in a changing Middle East* »

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19 March 2012 – Egmont Palace, Brussels

Mr. Commissioner-General,
Mr. Secretary General of the League of Arab States,
Madam the High Representative,
Dear colleagues,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you all in Brussels for this event. I am particularly honored that Belgium was given the opportunity to host this conference on "Engaging Youth – Palestine refugees in a changing Middle East".

North Africa and the Middle East have been witnessing some dramatic events over the past year. The young Arabs have often played a decisive role in the quest for democratic reform, the respect for basic human rights and a decent standard of living. Young people are the fastest growing segment of Arab countries' populations. Around two third of the population is under 25 years old, making this one of the most youthful regions in the world. It is up to the Arab leaders to provide for the opportunities for young people to develop themselves, get a good education, find a decent job and have prospects for a life in freedom. We must not forget that it was this pursuit for a better living that ignited the Arab uprisings and the Arab youth played an essential part in this process. But there are still many challenges ahead, in particular to improve their social and economic situation.

The struggle of the Palestinian people goes back a lot further than the beginning of 2011 and the fate of young Palestinians in particular cannot be ignored. The Palestinian refugee population is ever changing. Almost 70% of the Palestinians are under 24 years. The importance of youth is increasing and should be our main priority. Therefore, the focus of this conference on the needs and challenges of the Palestinian youth is essential for the development of the Palestinian people as a whole. Every young person, whether here in Europe or in the Middle East, should have the opportunity to develop its personal talents through education in order to find a decent job. UNRWA's school system has proven to be an excellent tool in helping the Palestinian youth to achieve this goal. Bringing concrete perspectives to the young Palestinian is indeed crucial.

Since the tragic bus accident last week in Switzerland, the emotion has been very high in Belgium, and in fact well beyond. Allow me to seize this opportunity to thank all your Governments and organizations for the condolences and messages of sympathy. This solidarity has been highly appreciated by the Belgian authorities, as well as by the Belgian people. This emotion shows once again what the lives of children means to our societies. The youth is indeed our future and we need to keep investing in them and creating the conditions to enable them to fulfill their potential.

It is a great pleasure to see present here today, not only so many dignitaries, but also representatives of the Palestinian youth from Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. I am convinced that the results of this conference will help UNRWA improve the lives of these young Palestinians and help them build a better future.

Belgium has been, since its creation more than 60 years ago, a staunch supporter of UNRWA which is one of our partner organizations for development cooperation. More than 9.4 million € were provided in 2011. My country highly values UNRWA's activities improving the daily lives of over five million Palestinians. This frontline work offers concrete assistance and opportunities to Palestinian refugees, contributing to peace, stability and security throughout the region. Belgium tries to keep up with the growing needs of the Palestinian refugees. This is not an easy task in a world that is witnessing one of its worst economic crises in decades.

Instead of hoping for an increased role of UNRWA which we have witnessed over the past few years, I think everybody in this room will in fact hope for a smaller role for UNRWA in the future, when the Palestinian people have their own state, living side by side and in peace and security with Israel and decide their own fate as a people without the extraordinary assistance of UNRWA.

In the meantime, the entire international community has to take its responsibility to help the Palestinian people in its development, without prejudging the outcome of the refugee problem as a whole. The absolute necessity of a political solution should not be a pretext to withhold the Palestinian people of its basic right to a free and decent life. I want to

underline here the efforts and contributions of Belgium, together with our European Union partners and within the Quartet, to the Middle-East Peace Process.

Mr. Commissioner-General,

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely pay tribute to the tremendous work UNRWA-staff is performing in extremely difficult circumstances to assist the Palestinian people and not the least its youth in the field of education, health and social support. I want to especially commend UNRWA for the assistance it provides to the Palestinian refugees in Syria where UNRWA has to operate under often violent and hazardous circumstances with the risk of their own lives. I call upon the Syrian authorities to fully grant access to all humanitarian organizations, including UNRWA, to allow them to freely provide the basic needs of the population. To this end, it is essential that the neutrality of humanitarian assistance be guaranteed and that Palestinian refugees in Syria be not used to complicate an already dramatic situation any further.

We all know that the question of the refugees will be the thorn of any durable peace agreement and we will all have to deal with it and assume our share of responsibility. Any permanent solution will have to mobilize all stakeholders, including the host countries, the Palestinians and the international community as a whole. That definitive solution will not be easy but has to be acceptable to everybody. Its main outcome must be the full respect of everybody's dignity and human rights.

I wish you all fruitful and frank exchanges over these 2 days and, above all, agreeing on concrete contributions and projects in order to improve the fate the young Palestinians deserve.

I thank you for your attention.
