

Secretary-General's Message to UNRWA Stakeholders Conference, Brussels

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Secretary-General's Message to UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Stakeholder Conference [***delivered by Mr. Robert Serry, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority***] Brussels, Belgium, 19 March 2012

"I am pleased to see this conference taking place, supported by the presence of so many stakeholders. Especially at a time of upheaval in the Middle East, Palestinian refugees will be encouraged to know of your steadfast commitment to ensuring their well-being.

I welcome your focus on youth. Addressing the needs of the largest generation of young people the world has ever known is one of my top priorities. Yet opportunities for youth are falling short. Youth unemployment rates are at record levels. We must do more to help young people make the most of their enormous potential. This means making sure their rights and freedoms are respected, and that they receive a good education and are able to make a living once they graduate. I will be appointing a Special Representative for Youth as part of my efforts to mobilize the international system in support of this goal.

In the Middle East, children and youth outnumber their elders. They are the majority, and one of the region's most precious resources, yet their choices are severely limited. Over the past year, they have taken their demands for change to the street and the ballot box.

Palestinian refugee youth face bleaker realities of their own: occupation, exclusion, conflict and poverty. Despite this hardship, they are full of promise and ambition, as anyone who has met them can attest. They have a right to fulfill their aspirations without barriers and without discrimination.

As hosts, donors, and moral supporters, we are committed to helping them achieve precisely that. One way is through support for UNRWA, whose resourceful and creative programming continues to contribute to the human development of the youngest Palestinian refugees.

In Gaza, schools flying the United Nations flag are an oasis of learning and openness in a place largely closed to the outside world. In Lebanon's Nahr el-Bared camp, UNRWA is rebuilding what conflict has destroyed and what youth crave: a life of self-reliance and dignity. In Jordan, most UNRWA trainees graduate into skilled employment. In Syria and the West Bank, micro-financing from UNRWA is helping refugee youth to create livelihoods.

UNRWA is also promoting digital literacy. At this moment, in the camps and elsewhere, Palestinian refugee youth are following our event through live blogging. To them I say: continue to explore the digital world, and make sure you and your fellow refugees take advantage of this source of freedom and connection, which can open opportunities to learn, work, network and communicate.

Through UNRWA, the generosity of donors has empowered countless refugees to seize and create opportunities for a better life. But what we owe above all to the youth of the Palestinian refugee camps is peace. We must persist in our efforts to make progress towards a resolution of the Middle East conflict, including a just and agreed resolution of the refugee question as one of the core issues. It is the refugee's right, and it is our responsibility, to see this realized.

Thank you again for your support. I wish you a productive meeting."

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