

Rome, 15 March 2018

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL REMARKS AT MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE
ON SUPPORT FOR THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY
FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank Egypt, Jordan and Sweden for co-chairing this gathering.

I also welcome the high-level presence of the League of Arab States, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation and the European Union.

I would like to start by recalling a memorable encounter I had last year with students at an UNRWA school in Gaza.

We all know the pressures that Palestinians in Gaza face -- the poverty and power shortages, the closures and restrictions, the periodic violence and fear that yet another conflict could erupt at any moment. Yet in that place of uncertainty, the young people with whom I met were composed in talking about their situation. They spoke with passion about their commitment to democracy and their thirst for human rights. They shared with me their desire to make a difference in the world. In that place where hope is eroded daily, these students held on to their aspirations for the future. If only, I thought, the world could do more to respond to their plight, and more to translate their dreams into tangible improvements in their lives.

That is precisely what UNRWA does every day with such steadfastness, not only in Gaza but in the camps, communities and countries across the region that host Palestinian refugees. We have gathered today to fortify that mission and to uphold our responsibility as an international community to support and protect the vulnerable. We are here to help UNRWA overcome the worst financial crisis in its history. In the early days of the United Nations, the General Assembly created UN Relief and Works Agency to provide Palestine refugees with assistance, and to help them achieve their human potential.

Today, UNRWA's mission is just as crucial as it was sixty-eight years ago. But until a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is achieved, the work of UNRWA remains vital. Vital to providing life-saving humanitarian relief and health care. Vital to building the future of Palestinian society through education. Vital to ensuring human security, rights and dignity for over five million Palestine refugees. UNRWA has a solid record of achievement. Its schools are among the best performing in the region. Its health, relief and social programmes are low-cost and high-impact. And by keeping half a million children in school and millions of people healthy and nourished, UNRWA is contributing to stability in the occupied Palestinian territory, as well as in Jordan and Lebanon -- and

has undertaken extraordinary efforts to support Palestinians who have suffered as a result of the tragedy in Syria.

UNRWA is an asset to the international community that we must protect and support. Unfortunately, today's financial crisis places all of UNRWA's achievements at risk. Without a collective solution, UNRWA will soon run out of money. We must not allow this to happen. I have spoken to many of you about the situation. UNRWA's Commissioner-General has also been seeking your support. We sense a very high level of concern. Now we need high-level action to translate concern into cash.

I deeply appreciate the generosity of donors who support UNRWA, including those who have already pledged their contribution to its 2018 budget, including through multi-year agreements. We are also grateful to donors who have fast-tracked their contributions. Recognizing the urgent needs, the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund is releasing an exceptional combined rapid response grant and loan allocation of \$30 million. I thank all donors to CERF who have made this possible. But we must also recognize that the financial crisis facing the Agency today is unlike those in the past. It is far more grave, and threatens to cut programmes far more savagely.

For 2018, with pledges reduced, UNRWA faces a shortfall not of millions, not even of tens of millions, but an estimated \$446 million. Critical services could be reduced or eliminated entirely – from schools to sanitation, from medicine to microfinance to food security for some 1.7 million refugees in abject poverty or affected by conflict. This would have severe impacts – a cascade of problems that could push the suffering in disastrous and unpredictable directions.

So today I ask you to bridge the Agency's shortfall for 2018 with predictable, sustained and additional funding. I also appeal to you to increase support in the years ahead to ensure schooling, health care and food assistance. Such spending is an investment with wide-ranging dividends – in the human development of the Palestinian people, in stability today and in a peaceful future in and beyond Palestine. It can also address some of the despair and other factors that lead to radicalization.

I commend UNRWA's dedicated and highly skilled workforce -- the teachers, doctors, emergency responders and others who operate 700 schools and 140 clinics under often dire conditions. Let me also acknowledge the extraordinary solidarity of the host countries in accommodating Palestine refugees over seven decades.

As you know, I have prioritized UN reform and I appreciate the advances made by UNRWA and its current leadership. This reflects our commitment to all stakeholders, including beneficiaries in our field operations, to be effective while constantly enhancing our efficiency.

In that spirit, I appeal to all donors – each government and organization in this room today – to step forward and give UNRWA what you can. Truly, what you can.

If each of you does that, we will be able to address UNRWA's shortfall.

More importantly, we will send a strong message to Palestine refugees that we are committed to their rights, their well-being, and meeting their daily needs.

To those who may question the expense, let me echo UNRWA's fundraising campaign: Dignity is priceless.

As a matter of human solidarity, and as a matter of smart steps for peace, let us give UNRWA our full and generous support.

Thank you.