Twenty-first special session of the Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, Wednesday 23 July 2014

Statement of Lance Bartholomeusz, Acting Director of Legal Affairs, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Mr President,

UNRWA is deeply alarmed and affected by the escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip and the devastating human and physical toll it is taking on civilians, including Palestine refugees. As the High Commissioner has stated, all indications are that women and children make up a sizable number of civilian victims of the current military offensive. People with disabilities are also among the victims, reportedly as a result of Israeli strikes. Far too many lives are being lost and the traumas resulting from the military operations will mark the population for years to come.

I echo the United Nations' call for all parties to respect international law, and protect the civilian populations. This includes an end to rocket fire from Gaza aimed at Israel, which the United Nations has described as indiscriminate.

Among ordinary Palestinians there is a profound crisis of confidence in the ability of international law and international mechanisms to protect civilians, and to prevent and address violations of international law.

Because of military operations, and because over 40% of Gazan territory is affected by Israel evacuation warnings or declarations of “no-go zones”, thousands of people continue to flee to shelters run by UNRWA and by partners. By yesterday evening, 22 July, approximately 118,000 Palestinians had sought refuge in 77 UNRWA schools. That is about 6% of the Gazan population and double the peak in UNRWA shelters during the 2008/2009 conflict.

Despite the overwhelming displacement UNRWA and WFP have been able to provide basic food parcels to all people in UNRWA shelters. UNRWA has also continued its regular operations, wherever security permits. For instance, on 21 July, 13 out of 21 UNRWA Health Centers were open and saw almost 7,000 patients. Sanitation labourers collected 200 tonnes of solid waste from UNRWA shelters and many camps. I want to pay tribute here to the formidable courage and resolve of UNRWA’s 12,500 national and international staff in Gaza. Within the last three days two UNRWA female teachers were killed as a result of Israeli strikes.

The conflict has not spared UNRWA premises. Worryingly, 77 of our premises, whether schools, clinics or warehouses, have been damaged by air raids and other fire. On Monday afternoon an UNRWA school in Maghazi refugee camp sheltering about 300 internally displaced people was struck by explosive ordnance believed to have been fired by Israeli forces.  One person, a child, was injured. The location of the school and the fact that it was housing internally displaced persons had been formally communicated to Israel on three separate occasions. On Tuesday morning when UNRWA officials went back to investigate the incident, despite coordination with Israeli authorities, there was again shelling of the school, seriously endangering the lives of UN humanitarian workers and displaced civilians. Further, during routine installation inspections, UNRWA found rockets placed in two vacant UNRWA schools. This is totally unacceptable. All parties to the conflict must respect at all times the neutrality and inviolability of UNRWA’s premises. Civilian lives must not be put at further risk. For further details, we refer you to UNRWA's separate public statements issued yesterday and last week, condemning such unacceptable events.

Together with our partners in the UN system, with other local and international agencies present in Gaza, UNRWA is committed to keep its engagement strong and effective for as long as it takes.

UNRWA issued a Flash Appeal for $60 million on 17 July 2014 and revised it to $115 million on 21 July in response to the rapid developments on the ground. UNRWA is grateful for pledges as at 22 July of monetary and in-kind assistance of over $56 million from: the United Arab Emirates, Ireland, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Chile, Islamic Relief USA, as well as UN Agencies, several other private partners and individual donors. I call here on the donor and state community to ensure that the activities of UNRWA and our partners are properly funded.

Mr President,

It is evident to those of us on the ground that the situation of the population of Gaza and of Palestine Refugees in Gaza has become completely unsustainable. Israel’s illegal blockade has deepened poverty levels and youth or female unemployment levels (at 65% and over 80% respectively). Gaza's aquifer will have been entirely contaminated in the next three to four years making the strip essentially unlivable. Today, these indicators pale in comparison to the intensity of the bombardments, fighting and the immediate fears for security and survival.

Two things appear most evident when we see the destruction currently taking place in Gaza. One, is that the unacceptable conditions for Gaza's population, resulting in particular from the blockade, will only deteriorate further as a result.

Two, as the Secretary-General has stressed recently, going back to the *status quo ante* in Gaza is unacceptable and the only way to avoid perpetual insecurity for all is to address the root causes of the conflict. While fully recognising that UNRWA's specific role is a humanitarian one, we put the question to all actors concerned: How long will it take before it is recognised that only a political solution will end the cycles of violence and destruction that repeatedly affect the population of Gaza and beyond. And how much longer before this is seriously, meaningfully and comprehensively addressed? An answer to those questions is urgent: the lives of tens of thousands are today at grave and imminent risk.

Thank you.

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