

Fact Sheet 3: UNRWA's Relationship with the Palestinians

Background

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is mandated to provide education, health, and relief and social services for Palestinians. Established in December 1949, the agency spent over \$300 million in 2001 alone. While serving local populations, it is clear that UNRWA's achievements also impact on local issues. This paper will examine the effect of UNRWA's work on the peace process in the Middle East.

Numbers and Social Conditions

UNRWA's mandate covers 27 Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza and another 32 camps in neighbouring countries. Reliable refugee numbers vary. Officially, at least, services are provided to approximately four million Palestinians. However, according to several sources, it is well known that UNRWA rarely updates its records to account for people who have left the area, passed away, or simply no longer require assistance.

Living standards in the camps are not of a high standard. Despite the wealth of many Arab states, little substantial help from these countries is ever sent to the refugees. Clearly, UNRWA can fulfill an essential role in supporting schools, medical services, and other basic needs.

Calls for Reforming UNRWA's Mandate and Operational Role

As a result of the ongoing Palestinian Intifada, the humanitarian situation in the Middle East has deteriorated over the last two years. During the same period, UNRWA's role has often been criticized for an apparent blurring of its responsibilities, and there is growing international pressure for UNRWA to devise to a more balanced code of operation. At issue is the agency's inability to protect its facilities from being abused by local Palestinian terror organizations and the inability of the organization's officials "on the ground" to take an objective view of regional problems. Specifically:

- ❑ **UNRWA** runs over 250 schools in the West Bank and Gaza. In the past two years, they have introduced 58 new textbooks, which ignore the State of Israel, rule out peace agreements, and actually glorify the hatred of Israel and Israelis. There are few who can argue that passing on decades of hatred to yet another generation is beneficial. Yet UNRWA has failed to take a stand against this lack of decent educational materials, which fail to support the professed goals of the international community. In turn, it fails to support a peace agreement between the parties that will encourage understanding and mutual respect and that will condemn terrorism and violence.
- ❑ **UNRWA**-supervised camps have become a breeding ground for terrorists. Tom Lantos, a ranking US politician, has noted in a letter to Kofi Annan that at least 23 suicide bombers have emanated from the Jenin camp alone. Attacks by these same people have resulted in the murder of at least 57 Israelis.
- ❑ **Many Palestinians** have testified that UNRWA facilities are used for military training and storage of equipment. To take but one example, Nidal Nazal, an UNRWA ambulance driver was arrested July 2002. He admitted that his ambulance was used to ferry ammunition between terror cells. To show how widespread this particular abuse has become, the Red Cross in Geneva was forced to issue a statement of condemnation.

- **Peter Hanson**, UNRWA's Commissioner General, described the battle in the Jenin camp in April 2002 as a "human catastrophe". He estimated that 300 to 400 Palestinians were killed. According to the United Nations' own conclusion a few months later (see: <http://www.un.org/peace/jenin/>) "Fifty-two Palestinian deaths had been confirmed by the hospital by the end of May 2002." Palestinian officials on the ground verified the Israeli estimate of no more than 52 bodies, of which only a handful were civilian casualties. The damage created by Hanson's announcement is profound and significant. It calls into question UNRWA's ability to function as a non-partisan, impartial organization.

Beyond these incidents, are some basic statistics that raise even more doubts about UNRWA's ability to be a fair and neutral player in the Middle East:

- **Around 24,000** Palestinians are employed by UNRWA, a vast and near unprecedented number. Without doubting the abilities of these people, they must hinder UNRWA's efforts to administer fairly in the region. .
- **New evidence** suggests that since 1996, some Palestinian officials have been stealing UNRWA-financed food and medical supplies, reselling them on the black market. A prime figure in corruption is reported to be the PA Minister of Supplies, Mr Abu Ali Shahin. There is clearly insufficient supervision and accountability.

The Future

It must be of concern to civilised countries to read Karen AbuZayd, Deputy to Peter Hansen. He was recently quoted as saying that most UN camps around the world do try to keep out armed elements. Here, "the refugees are the armed elements". Kofi Annan, in a reply to Lantos, does nothing to allay these worries. He states that "...the UN has no responsibility for security matters in refugee camps".

The future success of UNRWA's own operations in the West Bank and Gaza is now at risk, as it fails to prevent terror organizations from establishing an infrastructure in the refugee camps, it supports these organizations and allows anti-peace materials to be used in UNRWA-run schools. The important humanitarian work that can be done by such an agency to help one local civilian population must be questioned when that same work facilitates the harming and murder of another local civilian population through acts of terror, violence and hatred. Basic internal reforms and accountability must be established within a short period of time.