



منظمة التحرير الفلسطينية

أمانة السر

The Palestine Liberation Organization  
General Secretariat

August 4, 2020

**Your Excellency the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres,**

**Member States of the United Nations,**

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is submitting this urgent appeal in light of the rapidly escalating trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic in the occupied State of Palestine, particularly among the refugee community in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, as well as in the host countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. We appeal for your urgent and tangible intervention to uphold the rights of Palestine refugees to health, safety and protection in accordance with the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), as well as the standards and protocols of the World Health Organization in this time of pandemic, until a just solution to their plight is realized in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

We are deeply concerned about the recent dangerous and rapid increase in coronavirus infection cases among the refugees in the camps in particular. The West Bank refugee camps, including in Jerusalem, have lately recorded large numbers of infection cases exceeding 1,200<sup>1</sup> cases thus far, while concerns remain high that the virus may spread in the Gaza Strip and its densely-populated refugee camps. We are also extremely concerned over the increasing number of infection cases in the Palestine refugee camps in the host countries.

The risk of virus spread in the refugee camps is very deeply worrying given the inherent vulnerabilities in terms of the density of population and narrow streets, alleys and cramped shelters in the camps that make social distancing measures extremely difficult. Such conditions are further exacerbated by inadequate power, water supply and sewer systems, and lack of proper shelter ventilation, which complicate hygiene and sanitation efforts, particular standards of which are all critical for curbing this highly contagious virus.

In addition to other illegal and repressive policies and practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel, the occupying Power, continues to impede UNRWA personnel from accessing the refugee camps in the West Bank to combat the coronavirus outbreak. Moreover, "the occupation authorities launched a campaign in Jerusalem preventing beneficiaries from accessing UNRWA and the Ministry of Health services"<sup>2</sup>. This is part of ongoing attempts to isolate UNRWA under a legislative measure presented by the mayor of the occupation municipality. Such legislation bans UNRWA activities, especially in occupied Jerusalem as of the beginning of the year 2020, in addition to calling for the shutdown of its health, education and other service provision facilities. Furthermore, the legislation calls for establishing schools under the Israeli Ministry of Education in Shuafat refugee camp and

<sup>1</sup> UNRWA spokesman Sami Mushasha on 21 July 2020. <https://palsawa.com/post/269363/>

<sup>2</sup> Interview with UNRWA spokesman Sami Mushasha with the Palestinian News Agency 'Wafa' on 15 April 2020.



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Anata as a substitute for UNRWA schools, in pursuit of the longstanding occupation policy of fully Judaizing and imposing sovereignty on Jerusalem.

This is happening at a critical moment as UNRWA is preparing to inaugurate the new school year in accordance with the deadline set by the Arab host countries. This requires preparations to receive a total of 532,000 students in 708 schools buildings, while also introducing prevention and protection measures developed by the host countries to counter the coronavirus. In this regard, UNRWA has prepared a plan based on self-education (distance and hybrid learning methods). This plan entails substantial financial cost, in particular given the high poverty and unemployment rates in the camps, as well as the lack of sufficient internet services, computers, smart phones, and digital tools, which are all essential instruments to the success of self and hybrid learning.

Sufficient funds must be urgently raised in order to meet the requirements of this type of education, including training teachers, providing digital tools to needy students, and covering the costs for self-learning, while also ensuring the provision of essential health requirements, e.g. sanitization, public sanitation facilities, water and useable laundry facilities. Additional funds are needed to enable UNRWA to meet these requirements at a time that the Agency is already suffering from an acute financial deficit estimated at \$756.77 million, which is roughly 50.6% of the total budget for the year 2020, which stands at \$1,949.4.

This deficit is having a significant impact on UNRWA's relief services (ration and emergency cash assistance), affecting in particular nearly 1.9 million Palestinian refugees classified under the abject poverty threshold, including the 418,000 Palestine refugees in Syria and the 1.2 million Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip. We recognize that UNRWA has dedicated its services to meet this global challenge and to reduce the rates of infection in the refugee camps while strictly following the World Health Organization protocols. UNRWA has also worked in compliance with the strategy of the State of Palestine and under the guidance of the Palestinian Ministry of Health to provide health services and adapt to meet the needs of refugees. Yet, the risks of the pandemic outbreak have become more dangerous under the financial crisis, which further undermines the Agency's ability to continue the uninterrupted provision of vital services to millions of Palestine refugees who rely on this assistance in the absence of a just solution to their plight.

## Mr. Secretary-General and Member States,

The UN General Assembly has affirmed in its seventy fourth session on 13 December 2019 *'the necessity for the continuation of the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the importance of its unimpeded operation and its provision of services, including emergency assistance, for the well-being, protection and human development of the Palestine refugees and for the stability of the region, pending the just resolution of the question of the Palestine refugees'*<sup>3</sup>. Supporting UNRWA remains an urgent necessity and responsibility in the absence of a just political solution and the failure to implement Resolution 194.

<sup>3</sup> UNGA resolution A/RES/74/83: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/assistance-to-palestine-refugees-ga-resolution-a-res-74-83/>



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Since the onset of the Nakba in 1948, the refugees and their descendants have been living in a perpetual and dire state of emergency that is only been exacerbated with every passing year. This has been compounded by the current global crisis, bringing the Palestine refugees are on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe should we collectively be unable to stop the spread of the pandemic among the refugee community. This makes even more imperative ensuring to UNRWA immediate, sufficient and direct support to ensure its vital humanitarian, development and emergency assistance to those in need, for which we make this urgent appeal, striving to meet the needs of the refugee community in these difficult time and to avoid further aggravating the already many grave challenges that prevail and triggering unpredictable and uncontrollable consequences.

In accordance with the longstanding commitment of the General Assembly in upholding the United Nations' permanent responsibility for the Palestine question until it is justly resolved in all its aspects, including a just solution to the plight of the Palestine refugees; and noting that as UNRWA is a subsidiary agency, whose mandate stems from the UN General Assembly to which it is accountable; and based on the Joint Appeal by the UN Secretary-General's Envoys to the Middle East on 11 April 2020<sup>4</sup>, and in line with the detailed advice issued by the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture with regards to closed refugee camps<sup>5</sup>; and in the spirit of the statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on internally displaced persons and the refugees in June 2020<sup>6</sup>, we hereby appeal for the following:

- We call on the United Nations and its Member States to act with urgency to deter and curb the occupation's human rights violations and illegal measures against the Palestinian people, including the refugees, and to secure urgent international protection for them and for UNRWA facilities, especially in the occupied City of Jerusalem; to support the Agency's ongoing efforts to carry out its mandate while also confronting the coronavirus pandemic; to condemn and call for the rescinding of the Israeli declaration to breach the bilateral agreement between UNRWA and Israel with respect to respecting the immunity and inviolability of UNRWA facilities in the areas under its control; and to insist on cooperation with and facilitation of UNRWA's mission, in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions and the occupying Power's obligations under international humanitarian law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention.
- We call on the Member States to assume their responsibility towards UNRWA by bridging the financial deficit and allocating sufficient, predictable and sustained financial resources, working with the host countries in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and with the Agency's Advisory Commission and donor countries, to provide the required financial and political support and ensure continuity of UNRWA operations and implementation of its General Assembly mandate. This support is urgently needed to reinforce your pronounced commitment to the rights of the Palestinian people, including

<sup>4</sup><https://www.unodc.org/middleeastandnorthafrica/en/web-stories/covid-19-joint-appeal-by-the-un-secretary-generals-envoys-to-the-middle-east.html>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25756&LangID=E>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25756>



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the Palestine refugees, and to finding a just, lasting and peaceful solution on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

- To support UNRWA's allocated budget in response to COVID-19 and the Emergency Appeals for Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, for the year 2020. To ensure that the Agency's work continues in a correlated manner with the current emergency, in order to avoid other crises that may supersede the current pandemic. In this regard, we note that the budgetary financial deficit hindering UNRWA's response to COVID-19 is set at \$ 38 million.
- We call on the UN to allocate \$100 million from the Central Fund for Central Emergency Response to urgently tackle the dangerous situation in Palestine refugee camps, and to cover the additional costs of launching the new school year (2020-2021), which will receive about half a million students next month in 708 schools administered by UNRWA in its five areas of operation. Taking into account the need to finance self and distance learning or hybrid learning programs that combine face-to-face classroom and distance learning while using measures of protection, health care, hygiene, and physical spacing according to WHO protocols in order to protect students against COVID-19 and thereby also protect their families, school staff and the wider community.
- We call on the UN and Member States to redouble efforts at this time of the crisis to seriously address the underlying issues and the main source of all the economic, humanitarian and structural problems we face: the continuation of Israel's colonial occupation of our people and land for more than half a century and the obstruction of their inalienable rights. Urgent collective efforts are needed to achieve a just and lasting political solution to the Palestine question on the basis of the relevant UN resolutions to bring an end to the Israeli military occupation that began in 1967, and to guarantee the independence and sovereignty of the State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, ensuring realization of the inalienable rights and freedom of the Palestinian people, while also ensuring a just solution for the Palestine refugee question on the basis of UN Resolution 194.

## The Signatories:

On behalf of the Secretariat General of the Palestine Liberation Organization:

- The Palestine Liberation Organization Refugee Affairs Department.
- The Palestine Liberation Organization Negotiations Affairs Department.

\*Attached, one page on the dire situation of Palestine refugees due to the pandemic and the systematic Israeli violations against them.





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**Your Excellency the Secretary-General of the United Nations and Member States of the United Nations,**

As the world takes measures to protect mankind and acts in solidarity against the spread of COVID-19, the vulnerability of the Palestine refugee population to the COVID-19 pandemic is being compounded by the virus spread and the systematic Israeli violations against their very existence in Occupied Palestine, including East Jerusalem.

In the besieged Gaza Strip, which already suffers from collapsed economic and health conditions, the widespread poverty and high rates of unemployment, which stand at 65% in the Gaza Strip refugee camps, render it, especially the refugee population, under direct threat because of the severe weakness in all vital sectors, which has been exacerbated by lack of funding, scarcity of resources, equipment and the shortage of medicine and medical consumables. This comes as a result of the prolonged years of the illegal Israeli blockade and the lowest levels of life necessities. We recall here the UN Country Team report that estimated that the Gaza Strip would become unliveable by the year 2020, burdened, inter alia, with 95% of water pollution.

As for the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Palestinian civilian population, including the refugees, remain vulnerable to infection and to the incessant international law violations by the occupation, which is undermining their human, social, environmental, health, education, and food security rights. In the West Bank refugee camps, Israel, the occupying Power continues to systematically violate the refugees' rights. Since the beginning of the year, the occupation authorities have carried out a total of at least 173 incursion, killing, arrest and assault operations. This has caused the loss of life of two persons and the injury of 66 Palestine refugees, including children.

Moreover, Israeli settler attacks and acts of terrorism continue against Palestine refugees, with an estimated 72 assaults since the beginning of the year 2020. By 1 May, a total of 47 homes and properties belonging to Palestine refugees were demolished, causing the forcible displacement of 70 persons. In addition, the occupation authorities continue to hamper and deny refugee access to health services, as they face a structural regime of military barriers, including the wall of annexation, dirt mounds and blocked roads. More than 40 refugee communities encounter difficulties to access health services because of the closure regime, which is composed of 705 different means, and which has also disrupted the work of UNRWA's mobile clinics and increased the financial burdens of the Agency.

In the month of June 2020, UNRWA's Protection Division reported an increase in the number of incursions and arrests in the refugee camps in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The demolition rates dramatically rose hitting the highest monthly record since January 2017. Demolitions continue and are escalating in spite of the second wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Palestine. Consequently, the number of displaced Palestinians rose up to 137, including 37 children. As the occupation authorities demolished two buildings in Anata in the vicinity of Jerusalem on 8 and 25 June, four refugee families consisting of 17 individuals, including 11 children were impacted. In addition, the occupation authorities demolished 6 buildings in the Palestinian Bedouin community in al-Muntar on June 9, affecting 32 individuals, including 13 children.