Speech by UNRWA Commissioner-General, Mr. Pierre Krähenbühl at DIHAD Conference, 5-7 March

Your Royal Highness Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein

Your Excellency Dr. Hamdan Musallam Al Mazrouie, Your Excellency Mr. Ibrahim Bumelha

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first to express my sincerest gratitude for the invitation to address this year’s DIHAD conference. You have created a strong tradition of important dialogue on humanitarian action and policy and it is an honor to join you again this year.

I wish to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the United Arab Emirates for its dynamic and generous partnership with UNRWA. Since the very first contribution in 1972, shortly after your independence, the political and financial support has grown significantly. I deeply value the trust.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by raising three points specific to humanitarian action and the themes of this conference, that I feel strongly about after 27 years of work in conflict zones.

First, I appeal to all of us to confront the sheer horror of what wars, occupation and injustice are about. When we think of wars, we all have certain images that come to mind. Yet, not even the best video footage or still photographs can convey the terror of your neighborhood being bombed, your family forced out of your home at gunpoint or the distress and despair in the face of a relative gone missing.

And it is important never to lose sight of the fact that suffering is not anonymous. 10 days ago, two UNRWA students, Qusai and Bahaa, both 14 years old, were killed in a mortar attack in Rural Damascus. They were on their way home from school.

Half of their young lives were spent in war until it now caught up with them in the most tragic and irreversible way. That is the cost of war and indifference to it is not an option.

I emphasize this because while I understand the importance of themes like coordination, efficiencies and sound management, I know that humanitarian action was born on the battlefield and battlefields are ugly, dangerous and traumatizing.

No matter how much we work towards professionalizing humanitarian action, at the end it comes down to courage, commitment and integrity. It comes down to assisting and protecting people, face-to-face, in situations that will change their lives forever.

Secondly, I believe strongly in avoiding the endless repetition of the word “victim” which leads to overlooking a person’s humanity. You can go to many humanitarian meetings and
hear about the importance of “putting the person, beneficiary or victim at the centre of the response”.

But the reality is that one will approach the person from the perspective of one’s specialization: a water expert will discover needs in relation to water, a project will often be driven as much by the interest of the organization and donor as by the actual need of the community.

For decades, humanitarian organizations for example overlooked mental health issues and education in conflict, often because they were perceived as unrelated to conflict. A tragic oversight.

Education was my biggest discovery when joining UNRWA, precisely because investing in education goes beyond the annual repetition of the same emergency response to a community, goes beyond the dependency and lack of horizon that a conflict creates, because education allows you to look at people – in our case Palestine refugee youth - as actors of their own destiny, as citizens of our world.

In the words of one of our students, Rahaf, who accompanied me to the General Assembly of the UN in September last year: “we know that we are victims, we know that we are refugees, but we do not want the world to see us only as that. We want the world to recognize us for our skills, abilities, motivation and determination to contribute”.

Thirdly, I am convinced that we need a robust defense of the international legal frameworks inherited from World War Two and developed since, that are today under assault. I refer here to international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law.

It took the greatest calamity mankind ever inflicted on itself to obtain these treaties. It is a legacy we would neglect at our own peril.

**

Turning now specifically to UNRWA’s work and outlook, allow me to share the following:

Time is like suspended today in the lives of Palestine refugees, trust in the world is on the brink of evaporation. In my trips over the past year to Palestine refugee communities in Aleppo, Homs and Damascus, in Chatila, Burj Barajneh and Ein El Helweh, in Zarqa and Amman, in Shuafat, Jalazone and East Jerusalem, and in Beit Hanoun, Rafah and Khan Younis, I was again deeply moved by the my encounters with different generations of refugees, defined by their common experience and united in grief and in honor born of perseverance.

I saw the destiny of the generation above 70 years of age, many of whom still have personal memories of the Nakba. It is the generation of Palestine refugees who believed that its plight would be over soon and remain short-lived.

I saw the destiny of the generation in the West Bank and Gaza – my own generation in fact – just above the age of 50 that has lived its entire life under occupation. It is the generation of Palestine refugees whose existence is defined in every aspect by deprivation, violence, dispossession and denial of rights.

I meet frequently with the generation below the age of 25, born after the Oslo agreement, and who was told by much of the world that if it embraced moderation, believed in politics and negotiation, justice would be served. But it was not.
Excellencies,

Behind these deeply painful and often traumatic tales, there is a community in search of reassurance and recognition. Reassurance that its future matters and its rights will be recognized and protected.

It is a community in which I discover strength of a dimension that I have rarely encountered in my life.

In particular among our 525'000 students I see a courage and determination that inspires me every single day. In November last year we created the first ever central student parliament with elected boys and girls representing Palestine refugee students from Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. They have such passion for education, for empowering students and connecting with communities, at home and across the globe.

Why do I describe all this? Because Palestine refugees are not statistics or an accident of history. They are individuals defined by a common humanity and deeply important aspirations.

And UNRWA was mandated by the international community to provide assistance, preserve opportunities, and help strengthen the inherent dignity of Palestine refugees. We have done so since 1950 and we continue to do so with immense determination and energy.

I am deeply grateful to our partners, hosts and donors for their constant political support to our mandate. It is a mandate protected in the General Assembly of the United Nations and it is not for sale.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude the strong moral stance of our Arab partners in support of the refugees, which is now more crucial than ever.

Among its many challenges, UNRWA requires significant financial support from states and beyond. And you are aware that this year we face an unprecedented financial crisis following the US decision to dramatically reduce its contribution by $300 M.

Excellencies, this is not an average shortfall. It is the most severe crisis we have ever faced. Since this was announced, I have been traveling around the world to call for collective mobilization and action to help us overcome this crisis. We will work with all states in search of a solution.

- On 15 March we will hold an Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in Rome to help overcome the crisis. It would be of great importance to having the UAE represented at very senior level of this event.

- In light of our funding crisis we have also launched a global campaign #DignityIsPriceless. It engages the private sector and foundations and will do so also throughout the Holy Month of Ramadan. UNRWA has been declared Zakat illegible and we seek your authorization to engage your related national institutions in this respect.

- Allow me to say that I look to our Gulf partners and other members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation for support with our Zakat campaign.
What is at stake excellencies, is the dignity of Palestine refugees and regional stability. If 525'000 students no longer have access to education, if 3 M patients cannot access health care and if 1’5 M people no longer receive emergency assistance, we will see a catastrophic rise in insecurity.

UNRWA students not in school violates a fundamental right and becomes a matter of national security for many countries.

For the moment, our schools remain open, as do our clinics, because several donors have advanced their funding to UNRWA. But this will only last until May. We therefore truly need a global mobilization.

Our students await our actions. They show resolve and courage every day. May we match that in our own actions. I cannot see myself returning to them saying we failed them.

I thank you.