

Humanitarian Aid to Subvert Palestinian Refugee Rights – Not on Our Watch!

Statement of Position from the National Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba

Recent years have witnessed increased attempts to use the aid donated by the international community to the Palestinian people as a means to subvert Palestinian rights, foremost amongst them their right to self-determination and for Palestinian refugees to return, restitution and compensation. Donor aid has become a political tool for advancing two clear discernable goals: First, advancing the political interests of donor states and agencies at the expense of supporting political solutions based upon principles of international law, including the provisions and best practice which protect and uphold refugee rights; Second, to intensify efforts to do away with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). UNRWA's existence acts as an ever-present reminder of the continued existence of the unresolved question of Palestinian refugees and the ethnic cleansing practiced against Palestinians during the 1948 Nakba.

The post-September 11, 2001 world provided new winds to these interests. Beneath the excuse of "stopping aid to terrorism", a pattern of policies have taken form enacted by Western state sponsors of Israel, that attempt to exploit the 9/11 tragedies for weakening the potential for Palestinians to achieve their rights. They include:

Stopping Aid to UNRWA

UNRWA is perpetually in a state of under-funding and deficit. Budgetary considerations have already resulted in the Agency lowering its service provision to Palestinian refugees to levels that prevent the preservation of their most basic human rights. Various refugee sectors (Gaza, Lebanon) have already warned of a potential humanitarian catastrophe, but these warnings continue to fall on deaf ears. At precisely such a time, the Canadian government has announced that it will end support to UNRWA and redirect its funds to other entities. Victor Toews, then President of the Canadian Treasury Board announced at the beginning of January that Canada, which has traditionally supported 11% of UNRWA's budget, has decided to reallocate its funds to specific projects administered by the Palestinian Authority. This will in turn allow Canada to oversee the allocation of these donations and ensure that they are spent upon specific projects in "alignment with Canadian values regarding democracy, equality and safeguarding Israel's security."

Efforts to weaken UNRWA by withholding or bypassing funding to it have been attempted in the past, notably by the U.S. government during the mid-1990s. At the time the U.S. tried to make its funding conditional upon the political demand that it be spent on projects that promote "peace building" – a euphemistic way to say that its funds should be spent on the U.S. sponsored Palestinian/Arab –Israeli negotiations, which subsequently collapsed with the outbreak of the second Intifada. Preliminary legislation was prepared to incorporate such provisions into U.S. law and foreign policy at the end of 2005, though these legal amendments continue to await legislative ratification.

The decision to transfer aid given to UNRWA's fund to specific projects administered by the Palestinian Authority is an attempt to bypass international responsibility towards Palestinian refugees and harbors grave strategic dangers for Palestinian rights, particularly the right of return.

Stopping European Union (E.U.) Funding of the Gaza Strip's Electricity Generator

The E.U. has announced that it will desist from paying the Gaza Strip's electricity generator bill by mid-November 2010, whose value is estimated at 8 to 9 million euros monthly. This decision comes at a time when our people in the Gaza Strip - two thirds of whom are refugees – have been suffering from an Israeli and international siege for more than three years. It also comes at a time when voices can increasingly be heard calling for ending the siege, which is correctly identified as a war crime. The E.U.'s move is cynically excused with the need to redirect funds "to different sectors such as paying PA employee salaries and covering the special needs of poor families."

UN Acceptance of Partial Israeli Compensation

The inability of various bodies of the United Nations to take practical steps on behalf of UNRWA to ensure coverage of its budget, is amongst the most noticeable evidence of the international community's failure to

address the Palestinian cause and to uphold its own standards. At the same time however, the UN has struck a deal with the Israeli government to accept U.S.\$10.5 million in Israeli compensation payments for the buildings it destroyed during last year's war on Gaza. This is a dangerous indication of the international community's tolerance of Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people and against humanity in general. Moreover the UN's acceptance of compensation for damages sustained by UNRWA buildings ignores the compensation claims and rights of Palestinians who unquestionably were the main target and victims of Israel's assault. The UN's decisions to accept compensation essentially excludes tens of thousands of victims be they those who were killed and injured or those whose workplaces and houses were destroyed and whose inhabitants were displaced. In short, it is a form of conspiring with the perpetrators of these crimes.

Reducing UNRWA Service Provision

The politics of reducing services to Palestinian refugees in the five areas of UNRWA's operations, and UNRWA's own modification of its service provision according to the size of its available budget, is a pressing issue that cannot be resolved through emergency appeals. Since the outbreak of the second Intifada, UNRWA has issued emergency appeals on a seasonal basis, however nothing has changed on the ground. On the contrary, gaps have increased between the services that Palestinian refugees are entitled to receiving as a function of international assistance standards, and which UNRWA is obliged to provide, and the actual services that the Agency does provide. UNRWA attributes this decline to decreases in international donor provisions to its General Fund, the failure of countries to follow up on their pledges, and to the cost of emergency situations. Whatever the causes however, it is not acceptable to remain silent regarding this erosion of these rights. The politics of reducing services requires a comprehensive international and Palestinian plan that works to improve UNRWA's role, and to guarantee that it secures the required budget based upon actual needs, taking into consideration increases in the number of refugees and displaced persons, and increases in the cost of the needs of a dignified living.

In this regard, the National Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba affirms the following:

1. International aid, be it that which is offered by UNRWA, the Palestinian Authority or other Palestinian bodies, is not a gift, but a duty that derives from the particular responsibility of the United Nations towards the Palestinian people, and which played a role in its ongoing crisis and Nakba;
2. Offering international aid, be it to the PA or to UNRWA or to other agencies or bodies, even if in the form of voluntary grants, should not be conditional in any shape or form;
3. Replacing UNRWA with the Palestinian Authority as a recipient body for aid adversely affects the most basic rights of Palestinian refugees, and can only be perceived as a means to impose unfair political compromises on the Palestinian people;
4. The Palestinian people, particularly refugees and other displaced persons, despite its criticisms of UNRWA practices, sees the Agency as an active international body that can be reformed, and whose role can be improved upon until a comprehensive, just resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue is achieved based upon UNGA Resolution 194 of 1948 and UNSC Resolution 237 of 1967.

Based on this, the National Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba recommends the organizing of local and international campaigns to apply pressure upon decision makers to ensure:

1. Holding the PA and PLO accountable for stepping up to these emergent challenges, and to undertake the necessary and clear procedures needed to reject them, while making sure to hold the international community to its obligations towards our people and refugees;
2. Having the PLO officially and declaratively address the European Union and demand that it rescind its decision to stop covering the cost of the electricity generator in Gaza;
3. Having the PLO present these matters to international agencies and various fora so that an international resolution can be passed that improves the role of UNRWA and ensures that the provision of services is congruent with the increased needs of refugees, including their increasing numbers, increases in displaced persons, and emergency cases;
4. Urging UNRWA to reject the Israeli compensation offered for its destroyed buildings as long as it is not linked to an equivalent compensation and accountability mechanism that addresses the rights of the Palestinian victims of this assault. In this regard, the High Commissioner must urge that this matter be

raised at the International Court of Justice, with UNRWA having the right to take Israel to court, and to demand that it compensate all Palestinian victims whose rights were violated as a result of the Israeli attacks;

5. Urging UNRWA to cooperate with Palestinian civil society organizations, particularly those active in refugee affairs, to put in place a plan of action that aims towards improving its role, and ends the policy of service reduction;

National Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba

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The **National Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba** is composed of: National and Islamic Forces in Palestine, High National Committee for the Defense of the Right of Return, PLO Department of Refugee Affairs, Global Palestine Right-of-Return Coalition, Consortium of Residents of Displaced Palestinian Villages and Towns, Executive Bureau for Refugees, Union of Youth Activity Centers-Palestine Refugee Camps, Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, Union of Women's Activity Centers-West Bank Refugee Camps, Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO), National Committee for Political Awareness and Guidance, Right of Return Committees-West Bank, ITTIJAH-Association of Arab Community Organizations, Popular Coalition for the Defense of Jerusalem, Arab Human Rights Association, Palestinian Lawyers' Union, Society for the Defense of the Internally Displaced (ADRID), Palestinian Vision-Jerusalem, Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights.