

8th Special Session of the UNESCO Executive Board
Statement by Julia Dicum, UNRWA Director of Education
25 November 2024

Madame Chair, Excellencies, Observers,

On behalf of the Commissioner General of UNRWA, I extend UNRWA's sincere appreciation to UNESCO's Executive Board for holding this important special session.

For 75 years, UNRWA and UNESCO have had steadfast cooperation advancing education for Palestinian Refugees and fostering peace, human rights, and sustainable development together in UNRWA's five fields of operation in: Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. UNRWA implements one of the few fully accredited refugee education programmes in the world with thanks to the support of our host governments, using the textbooks and curriculum of these ministries of education. Over these 75 years, a total over 2.8 million Palestine Refugees and we have fostered the life and dreams of multiple doctors, teachers, lawyers, engineers, professors and people in every profession you can imagine.

UNESCO's technical and advisory role, including the support of a number of UNESCO institutes, has been instrumental in advancing the quality of UNRWA's education program and ensuring we align with international standards and good practices.

The reason for this special session is both to acknowledge the enduring technical partnership that has been built between UNRWA and UNESCO, and it is to focus on the state of education in the oPT. Quite simply put, the state of education for Palestine refugee children and youth is in critical condition, even on life support.

For over a year now, the entire Education system in Gaza has been closed, putting at risk the futures for a generation of Palestine refugees and non-refugees in Gaza. For UNRWA this means, 300,000 students in UNRWA's grade 1-9 schools and over 1,800 youth in UNRWA's vocational training programme are out of school for the second year. 166 out of the 219 UNRWA colleagues who have died in Gaza to date have been education colleagues, leaving a hole in the sector that will be difficult to fill.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, over the last year UNRWA students have lost a month's worth of classroom time due to nearby military operations.

We have taken steps where we can to provide education continuity, by increasing our psycho-social support activities for all of our students in the West Bank and for children in our shelters in Gaza, reaching over half a million in Gaza in the past year.

Indeed, for the 2024-25 school year, our enrollment in the West Bank has increased by several thousand, bringing UNRWA West Bank enrollment to 47,000 girls and boys.

And in Gaza since August 1 over 16,000 children living in our shelters have started activities that combine psycho-social support with basic literacy and numeracy, making UNRWA the largest implementer of education in emergencies in Gaza.

Throughout this time, UNRWA, UNESCO and our oPT Education Cluster partners – notably the Ministry of Education of the PA - have been working tirelessly to continue finding solutions to alleviate the suffering of these children and youth and to restore their right to education.

In addition to being out of school, children in Gaza are facing famine, medical crises, a resurgence in Polio, constant bombings, a lack of potable water, homelessness, new disabilities, death of entire extended families, child labour, and early forced marriage. All issues that they were not facing a year ago. In short, their entire world as they knew it has collapsed and it will take significant, serious, and sustained effort to bring them back to school.

If the newly passed Knesset Bills are implemented, critical lifesaving services for Palestine refugees in the oPT, including basic education, mental health and psychosocial support, and vocational training and the future recovery of the area economically and socially will be at risk.

We welcome the support of global leaders who have spoken about the essential and irreplaceable nature of the services UNRWA provides, especially the education services.

In the Independent Review by Catherine Colonna, it was found that UNRWA has taken more measures than any other UN Agency to ensure the neutrality of its work, including our 30,000 staff members. And in education, the Independent Review found that we have put in place a system based on best practice to ensure that we use materials in our schools aligned with UN positions, UN Values and UNESCO standards in education.

Palestine refugee children need more than words of commitment and support. They need clear, decisive and timely actions from the world community to protect the continued attacks on the right to education in the middle east region.

I have three asks of you:

- 1) First, we need member states to support us to fully implement the recommendations in the Colonna Report. With your support, UNRWA and UNESCO can take action together to support the implementation of the 2023 UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development in our programme and throughout the region. Member States can take immediate action by supporting UNRWA's request to the 5th Committee in New York for additional technical staff, including in education, to support our implementation of the Colonna Report.

- 2) Second, we ask Member States to Commit to sustained advocacy and leadership for safeguarding the Right to Education for all Palestinians including Palestine Refugee children and youth.
- 3) And third, but in many ways first, do whatever you can to advance progress towards a ceasefire, the release of the hostages, and sustained humanitarian access. For without this, the full restoration of education, notably an education that teaches the UN values of peace, conflict resolution, and tolerance, will not be possible.

Thank you.