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• (1535)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): I call this meeting to order. We have the 59th meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Tuesday, October 25.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we welcome today Karen Abu Zayd, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. We welcome you here today.

Usually the format of these meetings, as I am sure you have been told, is you give a presentation and then we go into a number of rounds of questions and answers.

So welcome, and Zeynep Cordoba, welcome here.

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd (Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East): Thank you very much for having me. It's a good opportunity for me, having been the Commissioner-General now just since the end of June, although acting in the capacity since the beginning of April.

It's a very fortuitous time I think to be here talking to all of you. I've had some good meetings already with various institutions here where we've discussed a number of things on the political side and the economic side, all of which are helpful to me to know what people are thinking and to get some new ideas and so on.

In UNRWA right now and among the Palestine refugees, particularly in the occupied Palestinian territory, we are very much facing a number of different kinds of challenges, both internal and external, I would say. If I start with the external ones, of course, we're quite preoccupied with Gaza disengagement and what's going to happen to Gaza and the West Bank after the disengagement. We'd hoped to have much more progress than we've had so far. The main issues I think you probably know about from the Wolfensohn team, the six-plus-three issues, which are mainly to do with different access issues—the seaport, the airport, the Rafah crossing, the Erez crossing, the link between the West Bank and Gaza—these things are still under discussion. Decisions that we think are close to being made have not yet been finally decided, so there is a lot of uncertainty now, and right now not a lot of hope.

Canada happens to be one of only three countries that have really responded to do something immediately in this rapid-action program we'd hoped to have post-disengagement. So at least for UNRWA, Canada, Japan, and the EC are the only ones that have given us some

funds to get something started immediately, as in our micro-finance program, our job creation program, and with Japan, some housing repairs and construction.

This is something that preoccupies all of us in dealing with what's going on, or not going on yet, in Gaza, and then with the West Bank, worrying about the further construction of the barrier there, the expansion of the settlements and so on. So not only are they not seeing much benefit from the small bit of disengagement that took place there, but they're seeing rather things going in a negative way.

At the same time, we have the challenge of what's going on in Syria and Lebanon right now, but in somewhat more of a positive way for the refugees, and for Palestinian refugees particularly in Lebanon, in that the government is finally, in the last months, making many more positive promises, engagement, in allowing refugees to work in a number of occupations that were banned to them before, and now, just in the last week, in improving the living conditions in the camp, because this also had been forbidden in the past. We weren't even allowed to take in improvement materials for housing or anything.

We have to see action on the ground in these respects, but we're quite happy to acknowledge that there is a change in Lebanon, and our refugees and our staff are very positive about that and are looking forward to action there.

Within UNRWA itself—and what's happening within relates to a number of these external challenges as well—are a number of things that have developed from before and through and after the Geneva conference of last year, where we're trying to create a somewhat different sort of organization that is more outgoing, more engaged with all of its stakeholders, listening more, and getting more advice from others. We've worked pretty much in isolation, being within the UN over the past 50 years or so, and we need to accommodate our sister agencies and all the rules and regulations a little bit more, rather than being out on our own so much. That's what we're trying to do.

We're doing a number of things. First of all, we're trying to expand our advisory commission. UNRWA, as you know, does not have an actual governing board, except for the General Assembly, so we need at least our advisory commission to have those countries on it, like Canada and others that are really engaged with us, to be there and to help us by forming subcommittees and looking at our programs, our finances, our operations, in a way that gives us advice and works with us.

We're also expanding what has been in the last many years a major donors' meeting, to have what we're calling our host and donors' meeting, and inviting everyone who's contributed to UNRWA at all over the last three years. So it's not just a million-dollar club, but it is the people who have shown some interest in UNRWA and have them perhaps become even more interested. If they were in the \$30,000 club, maybe they would like to contribute more. One of the things we want to do over the next year is incorporate our medium-term plan, which goes along with the Palestinian Authority's medium-term development plan, to bring that into our regular budget. So our budget over the next couple of years is increasing by about 30%... which is quite a leap in one year, but it is trying to harmonize what we do for the refugees with what is done for the non-refugees in the host countries, including the Palestinian Authority. So we have something serious to work on in that respect.

We are doing a number of other smaller things that I hope will add up together, accumulate to a lot of bigger things, in just rearranging where we have some of our senior staff located, putting our director of operations in Amman, where his or her responsibilities will be looking at the whole of the region and not just focused on Gaza or West Bank, the OPT, but also Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

We're also bringing our program directors, who are based in our second headquarters in Amman, more to working with us. It is always a complication if you have more than one headquarters

We also plan on having, rather than just quarterly senior management meetings, which has served a purpose, more frequent meetings, as I think most organizations would do, of the senior managers, now that we are improving our video conference capabilities and these sorts of things. So there are lots of things going on in these various respects.

We have some particular problems right now too, which I shall mention, in terms of having our staff be relocated, thanks to the kinds of security problems we are having right now in Gaza, the threats of kidnapping and so on. We are in what the United Nations calls phase four, which means that the staff have to be relocated. So the front office of the headquarters is in Amman and Jerusalem, and we are now really three headquarters rather than two.

Our field office continues to operate fully, so it's doing what it should do, and the operations continue, but in terms of administration and so on, we're operating somewhat less efficiently than usual.

I want to say too that what we're doing within the whole Wolfensohn plan, the post-disengagement, the medium-term plan—and this is something that is becoming more and more of an immediate challenge to us—is in the context of supporting the Palestinian Authority in moving toward building a Palestinian state.

Even though the majority of the people in Gaza are refugees, so that much of what will be done in the next year or so—or beyond that perhaps—is for refugees, and therefore in some ways through us because that's our mandate, it is something we will have, in the Wolfensohn mode, announced by the Palestinian Authority so as to strengthen them and give them the responsibility for all of their citizens, as it were, not just the non-refugees but the refugees as well. That is something we have in mind.

Even our medium-term plan is—one of the slogans we had early on wasn't appreciated so much by some of the host authorities—that we would one day be handing over assets rather than liabilities, so that what we would hand over one day is what they could accept, because it is in conformity with what they are doing for the non-refugees in places.

I think I would like to stop there and have the questions and answers, see what most interests you, either about what I have said or about anything else that you want to know about what we do with Palestinian refugees throughout the region.

• (1540)

The Chair (Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): *Merci beaucoup.* Thank you very much.

Now, with your permission, we will go to questions and answers, and we'll start with Mr. Day, please. It's five minutes for Q and A.

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Thanks, Chairman.

I really appreciate the fact that you're here. I apologize. We received very short notice of your coming. It's not worthy of the huge job you have and everything we could be gleaning from you. I'm just sharing a little frustration with you.

You and I have five minutes to dialogue, and then it goes around the table and you'll have five minutes with everybody else. Now I've used up 60 seconds.

Could I just list off some questions? If you can answer them, that's great; if you can't, I'll leave my card, and if you could communicate back, that would be wonderful.

Thanks again for being here.

Canada, of course, has held the gavel with the refugee working group as a result of the 1991 Madrid process. You mentioned security. Especially with Hamas, can you give me your observations? Have there been improvements? Is it still very difficult? You mentioned you're not allowed to take improvement materials in, or there's been some difficulty. Is that as a result of Israeli intervention or from some other side?

I'll just give you these really quickly.

The U.S. has been the largest contributor; the EU has been second. Canada and some of the Scandinavian countries are ahead of that, of course, if you look at it in GDP, but the Arab states themselves—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Gulf Emirates—have collectively contributed about 2%. Has that gone up at all? Is there any more engagement there?

My final question is this. I can tell you as a former minister of social services provincially—and I have no idea of the magnitude of the issues compared to this—we always worried about who was getting what and whether the funds were being properly expended.

I'll quote from a *Boston Globe* article, and tell me if you feel this is isolated or if it's just anecdotal. The person writing the article suggests this wasn't anecdotal: Faez Abu Amri, a temporary food-distribution worker for the UN agency, says that

This is in the Gaza, in the beach camp.

"90 percent of the people who are getting this food aid do not need it," while the truly needy get less than they should have. "I see people with boats, stores, and jobs" who get the food and resell it, or sell their food coupons....

With any program, there are going to be abusers, no question about it, but can you comment on whether that's anecdotal or do you think that's fairly widespread?

That's all I have time for. Whatever you've got left in two and a half minutes, if you don't need it, you can write me.

• (1545)

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd:

Just in reference to the gavel holder, we're very happy with Jill Sinclair, the gavel holder in the region, because she is very supportive, not of us but of what needs to be done within the PA, in terms of building it up and getting everybody to work together toward what we need to do to have a stronger Palestinian Authority, and eventually a state.

Our security problems are less related to Hamas, which we don't have anything to do with and don't really notice so much. The security problems are more with some of the factions within the Palestinian Authority and actually between families that are troublemakers in Gaza, that happen to have members who are in preventive security or in one of the factions. That's the only problem we have as internationals, because of this kidnapping threat. Otherwise, the security issues, and even law and order—which is bubbling up now—are something new, because you get things happening when you create democracy. But it's generally quite a safe place to be in terms of law and order, so that isn't a problem.

If you're talking about improvements in terms of what Hamas is doing and so on, what you see, at least from newspaper reports and other things, is that there are certainly statements being made by Hamas on the political side that are encouraging. That's one reason many of us feel they should be able to participate in elections. It's much better to have them in and taking responsibilities and so on in the whole political process.

On the question of the materials not being allowed into camps, that's only in Lebanon, and it was the Lebanese government that didn't allow that. It had nothing to do with the OPT.

Overall, Israel has been pretty supportive of us, particularly in leading up to this engagement. They have been helping us prepare for a worst-case scenario in case there are big incursions or closures during the disengagement. They have helped us to get the old containers out and the new supplies in, and that sort of thing. Generally speaking, with UNRWA, we have mostly been able to get our supplies in because we have such a longstanding and intimate relationship with the Israelis on the ground, particularly with the IDF and so on. Even throughout the intifada, that hasn't been a problem. They never let us get into real trouble with what we needed to have for the....

On the Arab funding, yes, it's around 2%. Since the early 1980s, the Arab League has had a resolution that they should give us 7.8% of our budget, although it has never gotten much above 2%. That's a pity, but I would say there are a number of Arab states that give us a lot more than they would be assessed for if we had UN kinds of assessments. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates

are big contributors, of course. They've done a lot for us during the emergency. They like to give things in certain kinds of ways that fit into their *zakat* system, so they're very good on the infrastructure and so on. And they're doing that right now too. They're giving us a lot of money, and that's why we'll now be able to do some housing and infrastructure things in Gaza, thanks to the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. That's one reason we're inviting all the Arabs who give us, as I said, \$30,000—and who can certainly afford more than that—to this host and donors meeting that we're going to have in November. We're hoping they will step up to the plate a bit better on that sort of thing.

On whether our funds go to where they're needed, I think that is anecdotal and is some disgruntlement by somebody who perhaps hasn't gotten as much as they wanted or who sees that some others don't. As you say, we allow for some abuse of the system, but we certainly have a lot of our social workers there and food distribution people. The Palestinians themselves are not shy about making clear that they deserve something they know is there; they will make it known and come after anybody who is not being fair about these things. Don't worry about that too much. There's just not enough to go around, so what does go, goes to the most needy, I believe.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much. You answered all his questions. That's good.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lalonde, you have the floor.

Ms. Francine Lalonde (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Please excuse me for being a little late.

I'm somewhat familiar with the region. I travelled to Syria not too long ago with other members of this committee. I met people from the UNRWA who do quite a wonderful job. That leads me to ask the following question. In view of all the time it takes to negotiate a regulation, depending on the country where they are, certain refugees who could make that country their home, are not able to do so. From what I've gathered, the problem seems less acute in Syria. However, in Lebanon or in Jordan, their presence destabilizes local populations and creates problems. I would like to hear you talk about the right of return as well as the effects on mentalities and the ability to integrate.

You said that security was a problem that exists mainly within the Palestinian Authority. Can you give us any further details in that regard? Gaza was already a strange place to visit. What is the situation currently? Is an economic recovery conceivable? Whether it has to do with agriculture, water or borders, what we know leads us to believe that everything is blocked. Is this situation such that everyone depends on the rations you distribute?

As I recall, Palestinians are better educated than many other Arab populations. With respect to youth education, does the new situation in Gaza make it more difficult? Is there any hope on that front?

With respect to poverty, we noted that the same scenario repeated itself year after year, leading to considerable harm to the people, the children and youth.

[English]

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Thank you.

You said Syria because of the longstanding nature of the problem; perhaps there are less difficulties than in others. It's the same for Jordan, of course. In Jordan, actually, most refugees are citizens, so they are very much more integrated than anywhere else. In fact, Syria treats their refugees extremely well in jobs, schools, and whatever they like, but no passports, whereas in Jordan, they have that. So that's not the problem.

Lebanon is the only place in the past where we really had a problem. I always say that having been at UNHCR for 20 years or thereabouts, this was the only place I felt like I was really back working with refugees or seeing a refugee camp. In the rest of the region, you don't know when you're in a camp or when you're in another poorer part of the town or something.

I think the whole question of integration and the relationship to the right to return is something that has to be handled very delicately in what we say. Probably the idea that four million Palestinian refugees will one day want to go back to Israel is a false argument about what the future should be, because people are integrated where they are. They have homes and jobs and so on. It's a question of where they would go back to and what would they do. So what is important to the Palestinian refugees is the right to return—to make sure it's acknowledged that they have that right, that a wrong has been done and they have the right. As you know, there are UN resolutions that say there is the right to return and/or compensation in order to make sure they maintain that right and have that possibility.

On the security within the PA, as I said, what we're talking about is a situation where we're trying to make changes, where there's democracy. I'm always saying "we" meaning if you live inside an occupied territory, I think you get to feel very much like you are a part of it and a subject of the same restrictions, and so on.

What we see happening there is the proliferation of the various security factions within the Palestinian Authority, through the intifada and others. The PA tries to clamp down and streamline to bring them down to three forces instead of eleven, or however many; some people say even many more than that. Of course, there is resistance to that; there are those who resist.

As I say, those few nasty things that go on in Gaza really emanate from families that have problems between themselves. But because they have members of the security forces in their family, it becomes a wider issue. That's more or less what's happening. Again, this isn't a public meeting in that sense, but I think it's difficult to get control until the elections in January—the legislative council elections—because these are supporters of the PA, although they're having differences among themselves. One doesn't eliminate some of one's supporters by clamping down on them in ways that would make them unhappy. So I think we may have to wait to get this situation really under control until after those elections in January. Let's see. There are promises, and certainly there are some attempts, to improve the situation now.

• (1555)

Ms. Francine Lalonde: With the 26 states?

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lalonde.

[English]

We'll go to Mr. Bevilacqua.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua (Vaughan, Lib.): Thank you very much.

First of all, I want to thank you so much for appearing in front of our committee. We certainly benefit from your perspective.

Secondly, I would like to give you the five minutes allocated to me to allow you to expand on the current situation and the opportunities and challenges we may face in the coming months.

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Okay. And that will answer some of your questions too I think, because the poverty situation is not improving, as I said from the beginning. Until we solve all these problems of access and the borders and being able to move people and goods, none of which is moving right now, we're not going to get anything better.

People in Gaza were quite skeptical about whether the disengagement was going to happen and what it was going to mean for them. They became more excited and more positive as it came closer, and it went well at first and there was a big campaign to show the positive sides of it, but now, of course, they're becoming pretty depressed again because they're not seeing this rapid-action program that was planned by the Wolfensohn team and others.

There were several thousand people, at least out of the 120,000 who used to work in Israel before, who were going intermittently, at least, to Israel to work during the whole of the intifada. Right now there's no one. No one is going out through Erez to work in Israel, and no one has been going out through Rafah for any other reasons. We can't get even get our staff out for training or recruitment procedures and other sorts of things, because Rafah has not been opened. It opened in the last couple of days for humanitarian reasons or for people going to Mecca, but it's not opening for goods or anything, or for anybody else beyond those particular cases.

On the whole question of the link with the West Bank and the opening of the Karni crossing, the goods were coming in, even during the intifada. On good days we had maybe 40 trucks coming in, and about half of them were for UNRWA. Now, if we're lucky, we have five or ten trucks coming in a day. Even the grocery stores that used to be quite full of things from Israel...there's no yoghurt in town, which is a big problem for people during Ramadan and these sorts of things.

The whole situation is not a good one right now post-disengagement. That is a big problem. Until we find some improvement and some of these decisions being made...and I'm not even talking about the seaport and the airport yet, but even getting the Rafah movement of people, and then goods, even if they have to come through Kfar Darom and not through Rafah but through Israel, which the Palestinians are ready to accept.... But we have to have movement if we're going to have movement of the economy.

On the whole question of the settlement greenhouses, for example, the thing we had hoped for from this is that the market mechanism that was there would keep going, keep the Palestinians at work who were working in those greenhouses before, and allow the movement of the produce that's outside the settlements, that's been rotting in Gaza for the last few years, to also move. But right now that's not happening either. We have to see how that develops too.

Right now it's not a really optimistic picture at this moment. But one of the things I saw in the paper this morning was Wolfensohn criticizing Israel for the first time. He's usually very balanced about saying everybody needs to do more here, there, whatever, pushing both sides. But today he said he's very frustrated about the slowness of decision-making on things that he's worked extremely hard on, particularly the Rafah crossing, which he spent his last visit working on day and night. So that's where we are on that.

• (1600)

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: How do you feel about his statement?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: His statement?

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: Yes.

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Being away from it, I'm interested. I think it's quite striking that he has said this. He's upset that he's worked so hard and thought he was so close, and still we don't have a decision on allowing the Rafah border to work between the Palestinians and the Egyptians. I think it's a strong statement from him. It's quite unusual now, given both his character and his whole approach until now, which has been to make sure he's pushing both sides together at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Thank you again for coming.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your organization, UNRWA? When did it actually begin? There's been this problem for quite a while.

You talk about your 20 years. Was that 20 years working with UNHCR?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Could you tell us a little bit more about how big an agency you have, the budget you have, as far as the administration of it is concerned?

Also, is CIDA involved? Do we have any CIDA money, Canadian dollars, going into your organization to help out in some of the different works you're involved in?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd:

I guess I started in the middle and assumed you knew we started in 1949 and 1950 really. We've grown to be an organization of 25,000 people. It's the biggest UN organization, in that sense. We have only 110 international staff who manage things and 25,000 area staff, almost all of them Palestinians and almost all refugees, who are all the teachers and the sanitation workers, because we operate these parallel systems: all the schools for refugees in the five areas—Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank, Gaza—and the health services,

and the sanitation services, and so on. That's why we have so many staff; they're running all these activities.

Our budget now, in round figures for this past year, is about \$400 million. About 80% of that is staff costs for all these teachers and health workers and so on. Then we have another project budget of, let's say, \$50 million with which we do infrastructure things. We've sort of pulled that out of the general budget in order to do big-ticket items—buildings and so on.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Is that \$400 million that comes from United Nations funds?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: No.

• (1605)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Okay, so it's kind of—

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: The only thing the United Nations pays is our international salaries, so they pay for the 110 staff. Then we have to raise the funds on a yearly basis for all these other services. During the intifada we've had emergency appeals for around \$200 million a year; this is for Gaza and West Bank. It's mainly for food and jobs and shelter and some other important things, such as psychosocial and compensatory education and so on.

So this is it. CIDA, of course, is our ninth biggest donor. It's Canada that is our ninth biggest donor, but most of it comes from CIDA, a steady \$10 million a year given to us by CIDA. They've also been quite good on the emergency side in helping us, especially over the past couple of years, with \$1 million and \$2 million over one or another year. They, as I said, have also been the ones to come forward, with just two other donors, to do something on this disengagement, because—

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Could I just cut in here? Can you tell me who some of the other donors are? Would there be a lot of what Mike called Arab or even Palestinian donors? Are they just countries? Are they all countries? Are they organizations? Does Hamas donate?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Hamas donate? Not to us.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Yes. I mean organizations such as the political wing of Hamas, maybe not the—

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: No. No, it's mainly countries. There are some private donations from individuals who give something, and we've recently started two "Friends of UNRWA" organizations, one in the United States and one in Spain. In Spain, for example, we get donations from the provinces as well as from the central government, because there's a lot of interest in Palestine there.

From the American organization, we're hoping we'll get private Palestinian-American donations, but that hasn't quite happened yet. So most of it is from countries. The biggest individual donor is the United States; the EC, however, surpassed the United States last year in the amount of money we get from them. Then the rest are mainly the European and Scandinavian countries and Canada, who come up in the first ten—Japan as well. It's the same countries that donate to every other humanitarian organization; I think we all get our main money from the same places.

This medium-term plan that I'm talking about, out of which has also come our disengagement plan, is very much bigger—as I said, 30% more in the coming biennium, 2006-07—because we're trying, as I said, to recover our previous standards of excellence in having the best schools and the best school results and the best medical services. We don't have them any more. We have all double-shifted schools. We have a lot of rented schools. We have doctors seeing 100 to 110 patients a day. We want to improve those services again, and that's where the additions to the budget are coming from.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: What challenges do you see specific to the election that's coming in the spring or in January or February, whenever it is?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: We hope it's on time, because we think things will settle down more after that. We don't want it postponed.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: What would be the worst-case scenario that might come up for your organization?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: For our organization or for anybody working there, I think what would be the worst is if Hamas won the elections. But I don't think that's possible, because I don't really think Hamas wants to win the elections. I think they can control how well they'll do where, so that they don't take over completely.

What would be the best is that they have as small a percentage as possible, because what it looks like now is that they could get as much as 40%, which would make then a rather large bloc in the legislative council. I think people generally are a little worried about what that would mean in terms of the kinds of law that might be passed in the future.

If things go a bit better, we will have a result that gives the PLO, Fatah, and other parties the stronger role in the future state, that strengthens President Abbas and the people around him, and the very good technocrats he's brought in to his cabinet and as his ministers and so on.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. McTeague.

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Commissioner-General, thank you for being here today. I've been looking forward to this for some time.

We've had a few discussions across the way in the House of Commons from time to time about your organization. We'd like to commend you, obviously, and your organization for its ongoing efforts at institutional reforms, certainly over the past few years. Essentially, I think it's important, and I think we all agree, that you maintain the momentum towards reforms if you're going to continue to maintain the level of donor support.

I know in the past there have been some questions about UNRWA's hiring practices and of course issues about its textbooks and other sensitive issues.

What do you see as the most pressing reform priorities and challenges—short of the telephone call that just came in for me, which might change the sense of my question?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: For me—and this is a bird's eye view perhaps—the most challenging thing is to turn the culture of the organization around, into one that is much more open and much more engaged with outsiders.

As I think I've said, we've spent 50 years and a bit more pretty much on our own, without even, as I say, a governing board, but in some ways even distanced from the rest of the UN. In the last some years, what we're trying to do is take ourselves more into the UN and become more engaged with our hosts and our donors together, because they have very different agendas, let's say, and interests, these hosts and the donors, and we often find them at some loggerheads—on certain issues, at least.

So to work as a tripartite group is what is most important to us, and to open ourselves up a lot more. Many of our staff—even some of the international staff—have worked for us for thirty years and have done quite a good job. I think UNRWA has lots to be proud of. Coming into it much more recently, and coming from the other refugee organization, it's quite impressive to see what they do and how well they do it and how well they serve their beneficiary population.

But there's a new kind of world out there, and if the rest of the world is changing, we need to change too. That's where I see our challenge is.

• (1610)

Hon. Dan McTeague: I'm interested in some of the other fields, related to work in other areas for Palestinian refugees, and in particular Lebanon. There's been a recent new spirit of change there, and I'm wondering whether the change and reforms of that government bode well for your work and your efforts, just north of where you're currently.... Many people believe, of course, you're dealing strictly with the Palestinian issue within the confines of a certain region, but we tend to forget about other places. I won't talk about Syria right now; I'm more interested in Lebanon at this time.

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd:

For us, of course, these are our five fields. It's not just the West Bank and Gaza; it is Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank, and Gaza—our five fields, as we call them.

Lebanon has been quite interesting for us too, because I think we all were very nervous about what was happening. Okay, get rid of the Syrians. Are you then going to try to get rid of the Palestinians? Are they the next target, and is that what will happen?

Instead, at the same time as the Syrians were gotten rid of, you began to have this opening up toward the Palestinians from the Lebanese government, first to say that they could begin to work in some of these occupations, as I mentioned. So already we were very happy about that.

I thought our staff and the refugees themselves would be rather skeptical about this—and I think they are becoming more skeptical, because they haven't seen much action on it—but they were very excited about it, very happy. For them this was a big step, because it was the first time they had actually taken this public position. But now, although we haven't seen many people able to work in any of these positions, what we have seen is that last week they made a new announcement on allowing us—on wanting, themselves—to improve the living conditions in camps. They've always been very hesitant, not allowing us to take materials in and so on. They have been lightening up on that. They actually called our director in, and they want to work with UNRWA on improving the conditions in the camps. This is a major step forward, and I think all our people appreciate it.

President Abbas has said to me, and I think it's very true too, that his relations with the Lebanese government are helpful in this respect. They want to help him along, and he's making the right statements in allowing them to do what they want to do outside the camps on weapons and other things with the Palestinians.

So there is a new spirit, as you say, and I think we have to take advantage of it. And we're very happy about it.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you for your work. It's very encouraging.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paquette.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Firstly, I would like to thank you for being here with us. I'd like to come back to the questions Ms. Lalonde asked you and which you unfortunately did not have the time to answer.

You talked about the situation of young Palestinian refugees. Yet, if nothing is done to improve things, as unfortunate and understandable the consequences may be, there will be outbreaks of violence.

In your opinion, what future can these young people expect with regard to education, poverty, employment, and general development? Is there anything looming for them or is there no light at the end of the tunnel? If this were the case, there would be a cause of despair.

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd:

It's something we all think about a lot. We are trying to work on it. It's part of the whole post-disengagement issue for the OPT particularly. It's to give jobs to people and to get the economy going. If we get the economy going, then we'll get jobs. Many things could happen. If decisions are made on fixing up the seaport or even making the seaport—it really didn't get started in the airport, and so on. There will be jobs for people. These may not be the kinds of jobs

our educated people want, so one of our plans—and we're using some of the Canadian money for that already—is what we're calling an apprenticeship program. We'll have two categories in our job creation program, one for the long unemployed and one for the newly graduated people who haven't ever been able to work. We put them back into lots of institutions.

We've had meetings with many kinds—the private sector, the municipalities, NGOs, universities, and even groups that had bigger numbers of employees earlier. Now they can have somebody, give them minimum wage for a year, and either get those people integrated back into these institutions to build them up again—not just the individual, but the institution as well—or at least give them skills so they can go out and work somewhere else. Unless we have real progress on the economy in Gaza, though, or as long as people can't get out of Gaza, they're going to have to find some way to work there. This is what we hope.

We want also, as UNRWA, working with the PA perhaps, to start a new—second—vocational training school and institute in southern Gaza. We have only 800 places for thousands of applications every year, and we'd like to start up some more. Also, we'd like to give them skills that would maybe allow them to work in an international economy—IT kinds of things, that sort of thing.

On the kids, more generally, and education in the schools, I just can't tell you how much the kids like all the enhancement we do to the curriculum—the human rights, the tolerance, and the conflict resolution. In Gaza recently, all the schools got together and had one big exhibition on human rights. They had competitions on the kinds of posters and other sorts of things that they did to show what they were doing on human rights. All the schools now have these student parliaments that they love. The teachers have gotten as excited as the kids about these kinds of things. I think this is something we have to have as a counter to what is going on with the intifada and what they see on a daily basis. It was especially so when the intifada was going on, more than now, when they were seeing the daily violence.

Certainly one of the improvements in Gaza is that the violence is not happening. There aren't any more checkpoints. There aren't any more Israeli soldiers around, and people can move around the strip easily. We haven't had any house demolitions or shooting of schoolchildren this entire year—since the beginning of the year, before this disengagement. These are things that are bit better in the atmosphere, and they'll be able to take on the lessons of human rights and tolerance and not be totally influenced by listening to bombing all night and seeing what happens to their father at a checkpoint and so on.

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: I would think that the situation also varies from one camp to the next. What explains these differences? Am I right of saying that in some camps, progress is not made as easily as it is in others? What factors determine the success or failure of education and employment projects, etc.?

[English]

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Do you mean in Gaza particularly?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Yes.

[English]

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: A lot of it is related to the same old thing about the families. Some camps are pretty well controlled by.... I guess that's the way they monopolize what goes on. They're strong and have influence in these camps, so those are the camps where you have a little more trouble making inroads, but if you go to any of the schools in any of the camps, you see the same kind of thing. We have taken people to the psychosocial sessions in some of the schools, and they actually think we rehearse them, because what the kids say is so impressive—first about what's happening to them, what they're afraid of, and how awful things are, but then about what they want to do in the future and their aspirations. They have plans. They're going to be doctors or lawyers or journalists and so on. We just have to be there, encouraging all of the positive side.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Madam Guergis.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks very much for being here today. I'm going to ask a few questions around CIDA. You said that Canada is ninth. Have we always been in the top ten in terms of contributors?

•(1620)

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: As far as I know, yes. Or Canada has since I've been around, five years.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'd also like to ask exactly how much you receive from CIDA, how long you've been receiving it, and what accountability measures are required. Is there an audit process, and have you ever been through an audit process?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: You may know that in the UN we do like to do our own auditing. We have our own external audit and so on. With most countries, if we can avoid it, we don't have audits from the countries themselves. I think the EC probably is one that insists on doing that, and we have to let them do that. We have a strong internal audit function, and we have, as I say, the external audit. There are countries chosen by the United Nations that audit all of us, all over the United Nations. Currently they're from South Africa.

The accountability with CIDA is quite strict, I would say. It's one of the donors that we spend a lot of time with on our reporting and so on. The demands are quite a lot for what we do with them. I think you can count on their making sure that everything is spent the way it needs to be done.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Do we have access to this internal auditing that's done—you'll have to forgive me, I don't know how all of this is done—if we want that information?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: To the external audit, yes, because those are public documents. Our books are pretty open generally on our budget and our reporting and all of the things we do. We get pretty high marks, too, from the UN generally, compared with other UN

agencies. In fact, they say we're pretty good as a model or an example to other agencies in the way we go about things.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Do you have answers to my other questions in terms of how long or exactly how much?

Mrs. Zeynep Cordoba (Senior External Relations and Project Officer, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East): The statistics I have with me go back over the last ten years. Canada's contribution to the regular budget since 1995 has been in the range of \$10 million to \$11 million Canadian. Then, for the emergency appeal, since 2000—that's when our emergency appeal started—Canada has been contributing in the range of \$1 million to \$2 million Canadian.

For projects, it has changed over the last ten years. This year we have \$2.4 million Canadian. In 2004 it was about \$6 million to \$7 million Canadian. In 2003, nothing. In 2002—

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: And so on.

In 2004, for example, the NIRA project in Syria was quite an important one for development there. That was a \$5 million amount.

Mrs. Zeynep Cordoba: Then, in 2000, it was \$3.2 million—

Ms. Helena Guergis: That's okay, thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Sorenson.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: I'm just wondering, if you do have the list there—and I know that Mr. Day asked about some of the other nations right around there, the Arab nations—what about Jordan? Where are they on the list?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: You mean in contributing?

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Yes.

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Jordan spends, they say, and I think it's pretty accurate, about \$400 million a year on the refugees—and not to us.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: But a lot of the refugees are right there in Jordan, right?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Yes. The biggest Palestine refugee population is in Jordan. Since they are all citizens, they have very much the choice of whether to use our services or the other services, or the government services. Many of them use the government services and go to the government schools. With King Abdullah especially, they have computers in every school, English from the first grade, and single-shift schools. So there are some advantages, and people are voting with their feet to use those services.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: So they basically don't give any through your agency.

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: No, they don't, and we wouldn't expect them to.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: And that's understandable, because it's....

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Yes, that's understandable. They have the major development project in the camps and they insist that they're the ones to do development in the camps. We've just created a camp development unit to help us improve the conditions in camps in all other areas, but not in Jordan, because they're doing that themselves, and insist on doing that themselves with their own money.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Some of the other Arab nations around, that perhaps don't give as much through the United Nations, are they putting money into other agencies? And what would be those other agencies?

For example, in Jordan the government would look after their own people, so obviously Jordan is.... But what about Egypt, and countries that aren't...you know, not the Lebanon, Jordan, Syria—

• (1625)

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Not the other ones, but the ones we actually cover.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: The border, yes. Are they giving? Do they acknowledge it, or are they helping out?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: No, they're not helping UNRWA, and some of them don't even help very much the Palestine refugees who are there and among them. Under Saddam Hussein, of course, Iraq was extremely good with the Palestinians, who are now being discriminated against because of that relationship with the former regime. These kinds of things are a problem.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: How are they being discriminated against?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Under Saddam Hussein they had free housing, access to jobs, and those sort of things, but now they're very much resented because of that. UNHCR is now having to pay for their flats and for re-housing them in different places, and they don't have jobs. That's why you find them coming and living in a no man's land between Iraq and Syria, and Iraq and Jordan, because things are so bad for them in Baghdad. But I guess things are bad generally in Baghdad.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sorenson.

Before closing, I have one question for you. In one of your remarks, you mentioned that you hoped Hamas would be allowed to run in the next Palestinian election, because if they elected some

members, for sure they would be part of the government and maybe help build a better future country over there. If they don't run, there could be chaos. Some people think the opposite and say that Hamas will never disarm, that even if they are part of a government, they will still keep some violence.

What's your view on Hamas, first, and the violence, and second, who should give them the authorization—Abu Mazen, the Palestinian Authority, or does it need to come from the Israeli government?

Ms. Karen Abu Zayd: Even the Israelis have said they'll no longer interfere, as they had said they would interfere, with their running. Now they've said no. They are interfering, in a way, in arresting at least 700 or 800 Hamas activists in the West Bank. So they're sort of preventing the candidates from being there to run in the election. That's an interference, I think.

I was telling the story of when the Secretary General came last March and asked some questions: what's going to happen, should Hamas be allowed to run, what do you think? The heads of all the UN agencies there said yes, all together, without thinking, because it seemed to us obvious to make them part of the process. Of course, it should be the PA that says yes, you can be there, or no, you can't, or whatever. But I think they'll probably be there, or we hope.

Certainly, as you know, with the different parties within Hamas, or different factions, perhaps, there's a difference between the Hamas in the West Bank, the Hamas in Gaza, and the Hamas in Syria or somewhere. The ones in Gaza are more reasonable. It's from Gaza that you hear some of them on the political side making public statements that they may have to accept a two-stage solution. This is heresy to the original Hamas, I think. I mean, that's what happens when you start thinking politically and of being part of a system.

I think you need to co-opt them. That's what you need to do.

The Chair: Thank you very much for taking the time to share your concerns. It really was a pleasure. And keep up your good work.

The meeting is adjourned.

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