

4 December 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the Pledging Conference for United Nations Relief and Works
Agency**

It is my honour to open this meeting to enable Governments to announce their pledges of voluntary contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

We meet at a time of renewed tension and conflict in the Middle East. As we know, the plight of the Palestine refugees, and the uncertainty about their future, is at the heart of that conflict.

UNRWA was established nearly 51 years ago by the General Assembly. It is almost unimaginable that any people should have remained as refugees, living in unresolved circumstances, and very much in need of international assistance, more than 50 years after the international community undertook to find a solution to their plight. In the absence of an agreed solution to the refugee issue, the commitment by the international community to the Palestine refugees must not be forgotten. That commitment finds daily expression through the vital work of UNRWA, which was one of the first humanitarian undertakings of the United Nations.

UNRWA is a lifeline for almost 4 million Palestine refugees. It provides basic schooling for nearly half a million pupils, job training for nearly 5,000 students, and basic health care for an entire population, with an emphasis on community health and mother-and-child care. The Agency also provides much-needed special-hardship assistance to the neediest refugees, and a range of social programmes for women, youth and the disabled. In recent years, UNRWA has added to these basic services a range of development programmes, focusing on job creation, micro-credit lending and income generation.

However, particularly in recent years UNRWA has been deprived of the resources it needs to carry out its work in full. The chronic underfunding of UNRWA has reached a critical stage, in view of the growing needs of the refugee community it serves, and the increasing demand for the services it provides.

In its budget for the biennium 2000-2001, the management of UNRWA, under the leadership of Commissioner-General Peter Hansen, has presented us with a very clear picture of UNRWA's requirements. For the year 2001, UNRWA's Regular Budget cash requirements are around \$311 million -- apart from in-kind contributions and project funding.

This budget needs to be fully funded if the Agency is to achieve its aim of providing the vital services to the refugees. The Agency also urgently needs to build up its working capital, which

has been eroded in order to finance deficits in the cash budget in recent years. This lack of working capital now requires the Agency to seek a minimum amount of \$25 million early in January 2001 in order to continue its operations.

UNRWA is the only United Nations programme that is a direct subsidiary of the General Assembly. The Agency carries out its work under extremely difficult circumstances. As President of the Assembly, I would like to pay tribute to the devotion with which the staff of UNRWA - almost all of them Palestine refugees themselves - perform their critical tasks. Furthermore I would like to pay tribute to the untiring efforts of Mr. Hansen and his colleagues to build on existing sources of funding for the Agency's work, and to find new ones.

Today, the Palestine refugees in Gaza and the West Bank are on the front lines of a rekindled conflict that has tragically grown in intensity over the past three months. Their lives have been disrupted anew by what is, to a large extent, a struggle to determine their future.

The refugees elsewhere, in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, also are experiencing renewed uncertainty. There is a heightened sense of vulnerability, as conflict rages and the peace process encounters new obstacles and setbacks. A solution to their plight, and a just and durable solution to the Palestine question must be found through political means in accordance with international law and relevant United Nations resolutions.

Until that happens, the United Nations flag flying over nearly 900 UNRWA institutions throughout the Middle East stands as a symbol of a commitment made by the international community more than 50 years ago to ensure the welfare of the Palestine refugees. At this moment, more than ever, we must reaffirm that commitment in deeds as much as in words by pledging to provide UNRWA with the resources it needs to carry out the task with which we have entrusted it.