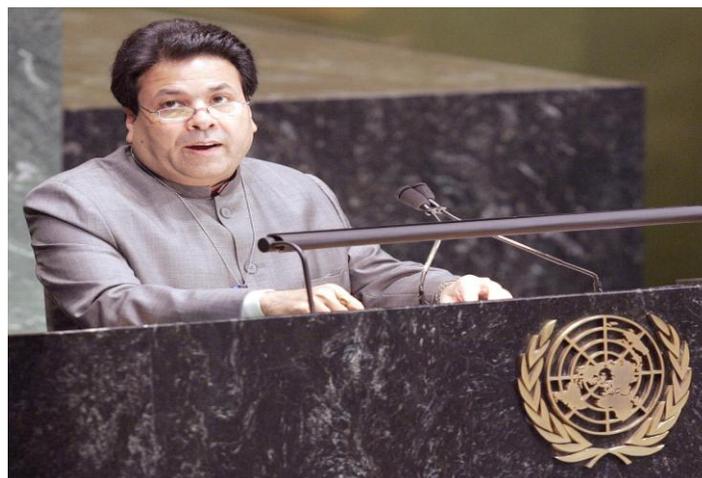




STATEMENT BY MR. RAJEEV SHUKLA, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT AND MEMBER
OF THE INDIAN DELEGATION, ON AGENDA ITEM 29 : UNITED NATIONS
RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST AT
THE 63RD SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON
OCTOBER 30, 2008



Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I express India's appreciation to the Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), for the annual report on the Agency's extremely important work over the past year in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We also thank the UNRWA Advisory Committee and the members of the working group on the Financing of UNRWA, for their efforts in support of this Agency. India reiterates its appreciation for the difficult but essential service that UNRWA has rendered over the years, making assistance of the Palestinian refugees its highest priority.

Mr. Chairman,

The report, and other reports of the UN Secretary-General under this agenda item, clearly illustrates the severe challenges UNRWA continues to face. Several of these directly affect the well-being of Palestinian refugees and the Agency's ability to discharge its humanitarian responsibilities. Such failure has potential consequences for the security and stability of an already volatile region.

The financial crisis faced by UNRWA remains a pressing challenge. The Agency's budgetary shortfall continues to grow, upon an already negative trend elaborated in last year's report. This paucity of funds is paralleled by an increase in the demands upon the Agency for assistance and support, in particular in Gaza. Following the destruction of the Nahar el-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon in May last year, UNRWA's problems have increased. As this year's report of the Working Group on financing notes, the challenge of rebuilding this camp and caring for those displaced, in the interim, will be "one of the largest challenges ever undertaken by the UNRWA". These new challenges exacerbate existing pressures of caring for refugees in overcrowded camps that are in urgent need of upgradation. Such challenges cannot be addressed by a reduced capacity to help. There is an urgent need for greater international effort to ease UNRWA's fiscal burden.

The continuation of access controls is another challenge. Restrictions on movement and the blockade of Gaza have serious consequences in an already-precarious humanitarian context. Restrictions on supplies of fuel and electricity in Gaza only increase the humanitarian challenge. The continued intra-Palestinian conflict, especially since the events of June 2007, has intensified the problem of access. Consequently, last year we witnessed the tragic sight of several refugee communities being forced to seek assistance after decades of self-reliance.

Mr. Chairman,

The insecurity bred by extreme levels of poverty among the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories is heightened by the lack of definitive progress in the peace process. The international community had expected to see much more progress over the past twelve months since the Annapolis conference last year. However, with the timeframe for a solution fast approaching, there are valid concerns that our hope of an early resolution of the Palestinian question may not be realized this year. The frustration that further delays in the peace process have caused on the ground is a dangerous sign. It increases the volatility of the situation, particularly in the context of continued expansion of Israeli settlements, in contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Road Map, as well as continued construction of the separation wall. It is essential for all parties to the dispute to make greater efforts to abide by their commitments under the Road Map, if we are to see some signs of progress in the peace process.

Mr. Chairman,

This leads us to the larger point: the only lasting solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees is a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the long-standing conflict in the Middle East. The ongoing cycle of violence and counter-violence only makes the prospects of an eventual peace more remote. It remains critical for the parties to the conflict and the international community—in particular the Quartet—to redouble their efforts to find a way to bring peace to the Middle East. Nevertheless, until that day when a mutually-acceptable peace is in position, it is incumbent upon all of us to fully support UNRWA, as the primary source of humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian refugees. For this reason, we endorse all efforts to support UNRWA by expanding its capacity to render assistance.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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