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Statement to the General Assembly (5 mn)

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Dear Parliamentarians, distinguished delegates.

First, allow me to thank the International Parliamentary Union for the invitation and the Kingdom of Bahrain for their hospitality. It is a pleasure and a privilege to address this Assembly on behalf of UNRWA, the United Nations Agency for Palestine refugees, as we wish to enhance the valued dialogue that we have with parliamentarians worldwide.

Created in 1949 by the UN General Assembly, through crises, wars and pandemics, UNRWA has tirelessly provided support to the Palestine refugees, a community now numbering nearly 6 M throughout the Middle East.

UNRWA is a quasi-governmental organization, strong of its direct education to 545,000 children in over 700 schools, 8000 students in vocation training centers, and a large network of 140 clinics where 2M refugees receive basic health support. UNRWA provides live-saving humanitarian food, cash and other assistance to nearly 1.7M people and has the largest microfinance programme in the Middle East which has distributed over 29,000 loans, creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in a region riddled by unemployment.

We operate in a region affected by conflicts and economic downturns. All our fields of operations are facing some sort of crisis. Gaza which has suffered numerous conflicts in past years, with an

economy constricted by a 15-year-old blockade and where UNRWA provides life-saving assistance including food to 1.2M people.

The West Bank which is undergoing its worse cycle of violence of the last 15 years. Syria, where the war has devastated the peaceful lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestine refugees, most of whom are currently displaced while some are returning to live in the rubbles of their former homes. Not mentioning the latest earthquake which affected over 50,000 Palestine refugees. Or Lebanon where levels of poverty, unemployment and desperation have reached unprecedented heights.

In December 2022, the vast majority of Member States of the UN General Assembly voted to extend UNRWA's mandate for another 3 years, demonstrating strong political support for the Agency and Palestine refugees. Unfortunately, however, Member States have not followed through with adequate funding thus putting at risk our services and therefore our ability to implement our mandate.

What would happen if over half a million children throughout the Middle East would suddenly lose access to education? Or if the most vulnerable, like those affected by the recent Syria Earthquake or the poorest in Gaza would stop receiving food and cash assistance?

Despite these risks and challenges, all of us should be proud of our common accomplishments. We should be proud of an organization which under your guidance and with your support, has achieved universal infant vaccination, reduced maternal mortality that exceeds global standards, gender parity in its schools since the 60s, created 670,000 jobs and much more. Through its emergency and human development programs, UNRWA is playing an active role in the economic development and the stability of the Middle East.

As I am now surrounded by members of so many parliaments, I cannot end this address without mentioning UNRWA's own young school parliamentarians, who, like you are elected by their peers. UNRWA school parliaments empower students to enjoy and exercise their rights, uphold human rights values, and contribute positively to their society and community. I encourage you to visit our fields of operation and meet these brilliant and motivated young parliamentarians.

In conclusion, let me say that Palestine refugees are tired of being refugees. They ask for a solution to their plight. And while a solution is being sought, as reiterated in numerous UN resolutions and by world leaders, Palestine refugees need to be supported and in that, parliaments around the world have an important role to play.

Thank you