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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Borg/Ms. Gatt.	(Malta)
<i>Members:</i>	Algeria.	Mr. Attaf
	China	Mr. Geng Shuang
	Ecuador	Mr. Montalvo Sosa
	France	Mrs. Broadhurst Estival
	Guyana	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett
	Japan	Mr. Uemura
	Mozambique	Mr. Fernandes
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Sangjin Kim
	Russian Federation.	Mr. Nebenzia/Mr. Polyanskiy
	Sierra Leone	Mr. Sowa
	Slovenia	Mr. Žbogar
	Switzerland	Mrs. Baeriswyl
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America.	Mr. Wood

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Expression of sympathy in memory of fallen humanitarian workers

The President: At the outset of the meeting, at the request of the delegations of the Russian Federation, Algeria and China, and on behalf of the members of the Security Council, I would like to ask everyone present to stand and join in observing a minute of silence to honour all the humanitarian workers who have lost their lives in the line of duty in Gaza helping those in need, and to express the Council's condolences and sympathy to their families.

The members of the Security Council observed a minute of silence.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: I would like to warmly welcome the Ministers and other high-level representatives here in the Security Council Chamber. Their presence today underscores the importance of the subject matter under discussion.

In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of Denmark, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite the Special Representative of the President of the Observer State of Palestine to participate in this meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

On behalf of the Council, I welcome His Excellency Mr. Ziad Abu Amr.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I also invite His Excellency Mr. Stavros Lambrinidis, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Lazzarini.

Mr. Lazzarini: This is a time of seismic change in the Middle East. At the heart of the region, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is a stabilizing force. In Gaza, the Agency is the backbone of the humanitarian operation, coordinating and providing life-saving assistance. Beyond Gaza, it has championed human development for Palestine refugees across the region for decades. Today an insidious campaign to end UNRWA's operations is under way, with serious implications for international peace and security. It is in that context that we are asking the Council to consider the existential challenges confronting the Agency.

Six months of relentless bombardment and a merciless siege have transformed Gaza beyond recognition. Homes, schools and hospitals have been reduced to rubble, under which countless bodies are lying. Children are bearing the brunt of the war. More than 17,000 have been separated from their families, left to face the horrors of Gaza alone. Children are being killed, injured and starved, deprived of any physical or psychological safety. Across Gaza, a human-made famine is tightening its grip. In the north, infants and young children have begun to die of malnutrition and dehydration. Across the border, food and clean water await. But UNRWA is being denied permission to deliver that aid and save lives. That outrage is occurring despite successive orders by the International Court of Justice to increase the flow of aid into Gaza, which can be done if there is sufficient political will. The Council has the power to make a difference.

UNRWA's mandate is supported by an overwhelming majority of Member States. Yet the Agency is under enormous strain. It is facing a campaign to push it out of the occupied Palestinian territory. In Gaza, the Government of Israel is seeking to end its activities. The Agency's requests to be allowed to deliver aid to the north are repeatedly denied. Our staff are barred from coordination meetings between Israel and humanitarian actors. Worse, UNRWA premises

and staff have been targeted since the beginning of the war, with 178 UNRWA personnel killed. More than 160 UNRWA premises, mostly used as shelters, have been damaged or destroyed, killing more than 400 people. Premises vacated by the Agency have been used for military purposes by Israeli forces, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups. Our headquarters has been occupied militarily, and allegations have emerged concerning the existence of tunnels under our premises. UNRWA personnel detained by Israeli security forces have shared harrowing accounts of mistreatment and torture in detention.

We demand an independent investigation and accountability for the blatant disregard of the protected status of humanitarian workers, operations and facilities under international law. To do anything else would set a dangerous precedent and compromise humanitarian work around the world.

The situation in the occupied West Bank is also very worrisome. Daily attacks by Israeli settlers, military incursions and the destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure are part of a well-oiled system of segregation and oppression. UNRWA's operational space is shrinking, with arbitrary measures imposed by Israel to restrict the presence and movement of its staff. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep our schools and health centres open and accessible. Legislative and administrative actions are also under way to evict UNRWA from its headquarters in East Jerusalem and prohibit its activities on Israeli territory.

Amid those challenges, serious allegations against individual UNRWA personnel in Gaza emerged in January. Horrified by the allegations, I immediately terminated the appointments of those concerned. The Secretary-General ordered an investigation through the Office of Internal Oversight Services. In parallel, an independent review group is assessing how UNRWA upholds neutrality — a core principle guiding our work.

Despite these prompt and decisive actions, a significant amount of donor funding remains suspended. This has serious operational implications and undermines the financial sustainability of the Agency. Rest assured that we remain firmly committed to implementing the recommendations of the review and to strengthening existing safeguards against neutrality breaches.

As I informed the General Assembly in March, calls for UNRWA's closure are not about adherence to humanitarian principles. Those calls are about ending

the refugee status of millions of Palestinians. They seek to change the long-standing political parameters for peace in the occupied Palestinian territory set by the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Council.

Accusations that UNRWA deliberately perpetuates refugee status are false and dishonest. The Agency exists because a political solution does not. It exists in lieu of a State that can deliver critical public services. The international community has long attempted to contain, rather than resolve, the Israel-Palestine conflict. Lip service is paid to the two-State solution each time an escalation occurs, costing lives and hope.

UNRWA was created 75 years ago as a temporary agency — a stop-gap measure pending a political answer to the question of Palestine. If the international community truly commits to a political solution, UNRWA can be true to its temporary nature by supporting a time-bound transition, delivering education, primary health care and social support. It can do so until a Palestinian Administration takes over those services, absorbing UNRWA's Palestinian personnel as civil servants.

Dismantling UNRWA will have lasting repercussions. In the short-term, it will deepen the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and accelerate the onset of famine. In the longer-term, it will jeopardize the transition from ceasefire to day after by depriving a traumatized population of essential services. It will make nearly impossible the formidable task of bringing half a million deeply distressed girls and boys back to learning. Failing to deliver on education will condemn an entire generation to despair — fuelling anger, resentment and endless cycles of violence. A political solution cannot succeed in such a scenario.

Let me conclude with three appeals.

First, I call on Council members to act in accordance with General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) and safeguard UNRWA's critical role — both now and within the framework of a transition. UNRWA has long been a custodian of the rights of Palestinian refugees. It can relinquish its central role of providing critical services and protecting human rights only when a political solution is realized. Until then, the political support of Member States must be matched by funding.

Secondly, I urge the Council to commit to a genuine political process culminating in a solution that can bring peace to Palestinians and Israelis. That process must

uphold Palestinian refugees' rights and aspirations to a just and lasting political solution to their plight.

Thirdly, we must acknowledge that a political process alone will not guarantee a sustainable peace. The wounds that run deep in this region cannot be healed without cultivating empathy and rejecting the dehumanization that is rampant, whether in political rhetoric or in the misuse of new technologies in warfare.

We must refuse to choose between empathizing with either Palestinians or Israelis, or showing compassion for either Gazans or Israeli hostages and their families. Instead, we must recognize — and reflect in our words and actions — that Palestinians and Israelis share a long and profound experience of grief and loss, that they are equally deserving of a peaceful and secure future. I urge the Council to help bring about that future through principled multilateral action and a genuine commitment to peace.

The President: I thank Mr. Lazzarini for his briefing.

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as Minister for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade of Malta.

I begin by thanking Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for his powerful briefing.

Malta firmly reiterates that UNRWA is an indispensable lifeline for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and a stabilizing force in the region. Particularly amid the current catastrophic conditions in Gaza, Malta continues to be a regular contributor to the Agency. Preserving the life-saving role and operations of UNRWA must be our primary objective.

In Gaza today, we continue to witness the failure to uphold the laws of armed conflict. Personifying that is the staggering destruction and death of more than 33,000 people in Gaza, the majority of whom are women and children. It is further manifested in the continued onerous, arbitrary and bureaucratic impediments preventing the necessary humanitarian scale-up into and throughout the Gaza Strip.

We are witnessing an entire population being brought to the brink of conflict-induced starvation, with credible reports that famine has already taken hold

in the north. We are even seeing it in the lack of respect for the humanitarian notification and deconfliction system, despite the provisions of resolution 2712 (2023). That is evident in the recent killing of the seven World Central Kitchen workers, on 1 April, and the attack on an ambulance trying to reach six-year-old Hind Rajab, on 29 January, which resulted in more casualties. There are many more such examples. More than 220 humanitarian aid workers, including more than 100 UNRWA staff, have been killed since the beginning of this conflict. Many were killed while providing urgent humanitarian assistance.

Malta welcomed the Organization's swift response — the establishment of two investigations — to the deeply concerning allegations regarding the involvement of UNRWA staff in the terror attacks of 7 October. We also welcome the commissioning of an independent review into the Agency's adherence to the principle of neutrality. We note that the interim report of that review indicated that UNRWA has in place a significant number of mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance with the humanitarian principle of neutrality. We now look forward to the outcome of both ongoing inquiries, including the group's final report, to be issued by 20 April, and call on all parties to fully cooperate with the inquiries.

Regrettably, due to the allegations, several critical donors took the decision to suspend their funding to UNRWA at a time when the people of Gaza were in greatest need. As a result, stability in the region, to which UNRWA is a major contributor, is now threatened.

We commend those who have continued or have since resumed their contributions. We appeal to others to resume the desperately needed funding and ensure that the Agency has the necessary resources to operate. Malta therefore recently made an additional financial contribution. In these difficult times, we need to avoid politicizing the work of humanitarian actors and undermining the work and legitimacy of the United Nations and humanitarian actors in Gaza.

It is also important to ensure accountability for violations of international law, including international humanitarian law. It is our responsibility to protect people, such as UNRWA staff, who risk their lives to help and protect others.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs and National Community Abroad of Algeria.

Mr. Attaf (Algeria) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I cannot but respectfully pay tribute to the 178 staff members of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) who became martyrs as a result of Israeli crimes that continue to be perpetrated against Gaza. Those were people who stretched out a helping hand to help our Palestinian brothers, who were feeling the brunt of the unjust war launched against them.

I would also like to pay tribute to Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, and to all UNRWA staff for their sacrifice, honesty and selflessness, which are characteristic of, and synonymous with the Agency. We want to express to them our deep appreciation and strong support because they represent the last glimmer of hope that the Palestinian people have clung to throughout their current grave tragedy. Mr. Lazzarini and the UNRWA staff embody the ideals and values upon which the Agency is built, and the structure of UNRWA is crumbling with the cries of our suffering and oppressed brothers in Gaza. Furthermore, Mr. Lazzarini and his staff are the best, most authentic witnesses of the modern Nakba, which the Palestinians are currently going through, following the great historical Nakba. They wave high the flag of international commitment to the Palestinian people. They are the foremost expression of solidarity with the Palestinian people, with the Organization's backing for their just cause.

Seventy-five years have gone by since UNRWA was established. The Agency is as old as the Palestinian question itself. Over the past decades, the Agency has demonstrated its extreme importance and pivotal role in supporting Palestinian refugees so as to mitigate the burden of their displacement, without any true solution to their cause on the horizon.

Today this United Nations Agency is being subjected to flagrant attack. It is being shamelessly targeted by the Israeli settlement occupation that did not hesitate to bomb more than 160 UNRWA centres. It spilled the blood of UNRWA staff and employees. It used fallacious pretexts and all manner of invalid excuses in order to reduce the Agency's funding and to put an end to its very existence.

There can be no doubt that the international community is now fully cognizant of the intentions of the occupying authority, as well as of the objectives

that it hopes to achieve through a policy that runs counter to international solidarity with UNRWA's mandate, demonstrated just a few months ago in the General Assembly.

First, UNRWA is targeted because it reflects the very characteristics of Palestinian refugees, whose needs are met by the Agency, in contrast to all other refugees the world over.

Secondly, UNRWA is targeted because it is inextricably linked to General Assembly resolution 194 (III), as well as other subsequent resolutions that enshrined the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, to their territories and to their homeland.

Thirdly, UNRWA is targeted because it is an integral part of Israel's plot to liquidate the Palestinian question, to strip the Palestinian national project of its very content and to destroy the pillars of the Palestinian State.

Under these circumstances, the international community must exhibit courage. It must protect UNRWA and facilitate its vital activities, thus helping millions of Palestinian refugees in the diaspora. We must guarantee the legal status of UNRWA by hampering Israeli attempts to transfer the Agency's functions to other bodies. Furthermore, we must establish mechanisms to guarantee sufficient sustainable funding for the Agency's activities by including it in the Organization's budget.

Algeria welcomes the growing number of international community members that have decided to reverse their decision to suspend funding to UNRWA. My country calls on other States to follow suit — to take the same level-headed stance as a way of responding to the cries for help we are hearing from thousands, in fact, millions of Palestinians who have been displaced and compelled to flee, who have been stripped of their most basic rights, such as the right to have a roof over their heads and receive relief assistance, and who have been deprived of the minimal conditions necessary for life and survival.

In that regard, following a decision by the President of the Republic, Mr. Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Algeria has announced an exceptional financial contribution of \$15 million. That money will go to UNRWA. It is an exceptional contribution in addition to Algeria's other contributions, which have been provided directly to the Palestinian Authority. We believe that it is truly our duty and responsibility to do so, as it is for other members

of the international community. We are unwaveringly convinced that UNRWA must continue its work as long as there are Palestinian refugees. In fact, the return of Palestinian refugees is an inherent right that is not subject to statute of limitations, bargaining or denial.

Furthermore, the Palestinian question is an integrated and interconnected whole that does not accept division, segmentation or fragmentation. We are totally convinced that the Israeli settlement occupation cannot continue in defiance of the entire international community. The two-State solution can in no way be held hostage by the procrastination, evasion and manipulation of the occupier. The international legitimacy cannot remain hostage within the walls of this Chamber by the occupier's illusions, ambitions and miscalculations. That cannot go on indefinitely. The international consensus must be implemented sooner rather than later by establishing a sovereign and independent Palestinian State along the 1967 borders, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital.

Mr. Uemura (Japan): I would like to pay tribute to Jordan for its initiative in proposing this meeting. I also thank Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for his briefing.

More than six months have passed since the terror attacks perpetrated by Hamas and others and the subsequent outbreak of fighting in Gaza. The humanitarian situation on the ground is literally a serious crisis. According to reports from international organizations, about half of Gaza's population — or about 1.1 million people — are expected to enter the most severe stage of famine. They are suffering from shortages of even the minimum essential goods for human life, such as safe water, food, shelter, medicine and necessities for women and children in poor sanitary conditions.

Human dignity, to which Japan attaches great importance, is under threat. There is a growing risk of destabilization in neighbouring countries that host Palestinian refugees. In response, the Security Council, under Japan's presidency, adopted resolution 2728 (2024) on 25 March.

Needless to say, UNRWA has been playing an extremely important role in providing humanitarian assistance to Gazans facing this devastating humanitarian crisis and has made many sacrifices.

Regarding allegations that UNRWA staff members were involved in the terror attack on Israel on 7 October, Japan appreciates the progress being made to strengthen UNRWA's governance, under the leadership of Secretary-General Guterres. Japan highly welcomes the interim report submitted to the Secretary-General by the independent review group on UNRWA, led by Ms. Colonna, and the action plan formulated by UNRWA Commissioner-General Lazzarini. Japan lifted its suspension of funding to UNRWA on 2 April and has already disbursed approximately \$35 million.

We will provide assistance to women and children in the Gaza Strip in order to improve sanitary conditions. We will also provide support in the form of medical services for Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

The independent review group is currently drafting its final report and recommendations, to be presented on 20 April. In consideration of the final report, Japan will continue to support UNRWA's reform efforts, in cooperation with other donors. As part of our support, Japan will contribute to the development and implementation of training to strengthen the neutrality of front-line management staff, which is one of the action items of UNRWA.

Since 7 October, Japan has made a series of humanitarian assistance contributions to the Palestinian people in excess of \$100 million. Japan calls for the release of hostages and compliance with international humanitarian law. Japan calls for serious diplomatic efforts to consider a realistic approach to improve the humanitarian situation, including through a ceasefire.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for his briefing on the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories in the context of UNRWA's activities. His assessments are extremely worrisome and should have been taken up by the Council long ago.

For the seventh month, we are seeing an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the Gaza Strip. Everyone knows the facts and the unthinkable statistics of people killed and those in need of urgent food and medical assistance, as well as of reported cases of deaths from starvation and dehydration, including among minors.

Despite the Council demands, pursuant to resolution 2728 (2024) and in violation of international humanitarian law, the fighting in the enclave is escalating, with 68 people killed in the past 24 hours alone. Under these conditions, the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population of Gaza is practically impossible. United Nations agencies are unanimous in saying that humanitarian access to the enclave is virtually non-existent. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Israel Defense Forces is blocking half of the humanitarian convoys to Gaza. Yet, according to aid agencies, aid is available — humanitarian supplies are waiting at the borders, and there are enough financial resources to organize deliveries. The only thing that must be done is to open the checkpoints and ensure the security of the convoys.

We have repeatedly warned that, in the absence of a lasting sustainable ceasefire duly monitored by military observers, humanitarian efforts are doomed. Humanitarian workers are defenceless against an army with weapons. No amount of voluntary deconfliction will help if one side is intent on continuing military hostilities. That is especially true when one of the members of the Security Council is signalling that the Council's resolutions are supposedly non-binding.

Against that backdrop, the role of UNRWA in the occupied Palestinian territories is indispensable. We call on the Council to pay tribute to the heroism of Agency staff, who carry out their humanitarian mandate in inhumane conditions, paying with their lives. So far, 178 staff members have perished — the highest number of United Nations staff to be killed during a single conflict.

Against that backdrop, attempts to label UNRWA a terrorist organization and calls to disband the Agency, which we have also heard in this Chamber, are categorically unacceptable. Indiscriminate accusations against UNRWA representatives must not be used to besmirch this large and highly important United Nations entity, which employs 13,000 people in Gaza alone. If UNRWA were suspended, it would be yet another illegal and immoral instrument of collective punishment for millions of Palestinians in need.

Since the escalation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, approximately 2 million Palestinians have been forced to leave their homes. At the same time, most internally displaced persons have found refuge in

UNRWA facilities, which, despite their status, continue to be subjected to Israeli bombardment. As recently as 12 April, a primary school in the Nuseirat refugee camp, which operates under the auspices of UNRWA, was shelled. One person was killed and nine were wounded. That points to a targeted attack on the long-term efforts and achievements of humanitarian workers to protect the civilian population. In parallel, the authorities in West Jerusalem are restricting UNRWA's activities in Gaza in every possible way. Since 24 March, humanitarian access to its northern parts, where the situation is most difficult, has been blocked. The movement of UNRWA staff in the West Bank has also been restricted. UNRWA's banking operations, as well as customs and visa clearance, have been impeded.

Against that backdrop, the decision by several key donors to suspend funding for UNRWA in the wake of allegations of its staff's cooperation with Hamas is outrageous and incomprehensible. That is despite the fact that West Jerusalem has not provided evidence against the 12 staff members it named. We strongly condemn attempts to discredit the Agency through disinformation campaigns. We believe that funding for UNRWA should be fully restored before the investigation is concluded, which should be objective and based not only on information provided by Israel, but also on that provided by Palestinians. UNRWA is the only channel for assisting Palestinians both in the occupied Palestinian territories and neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Syria until a just settlement of their status is reached as part of the solution to the Palestinian question. Clearly, amid region-wide turbulence, the needs of Palestinian refugees will only increase. In that regard, the decision by several countries to make additional financial commitments is highly commendable. We call on other States to support UNRWA on a depoliticized basis in order to ensure its sustainable and uninterrupted operation. For our part, we will also continue to provide comprehensive assistance, especially through annual voluntary contributions to the Agency, the activities of which not only have a humanitarian dimension, but also a political one, with an important stabilizing effect on the entire Middle East region.

The only way to stop the escalation of the catastrophe in Gaza is an immediate and widespread ceasefire to ensure safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to all Gazans in need and to avert the threat of a further expansion of the crisis. Resolution 2728

(2024) was clearly not enough. It is simply not being implemented. Ramadan has passed, and the question of a long-term ceasefire is once again becoming more acute. We assume that the Security Council will return to its consideration in the very near future. We once again underscore that the failure to implement binding Security Council resolutions should lead to sanctions being imposed on those in violation. We believe that the Council should consider this issue without delay.

Mr. Montalvo Sosa (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I begin my statement by thanking Commissioner-General Lazzarini for the report that he has just presented to us. Ecuador appreciates his efforts and reiterates its continued support for his work.

In January, troubling allegations were made public, according to which several United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) officials had participated in the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023, attacks that Ecuador once again condemns. In that regard, my country hopes that the ongoing investigation will make it possible to determine what happened as soon as possible and to ensure accountability for any individual responsibility. To that end, all parties must collaborate with the Office of Internal Oversight Services and provide all relevant information in a timely manner. In addition, on 20 March it was revealed that the independent review group appointed by the Secretary-General to evaluate UNRWA's work has found that the Agency has a high number of mechanisms and procedures in place to ensure compliance with the humanitarian principle of neutrality and that critical areas that still need to be addressed have also been identified. The independent review group's final report, which will be circulated in a few days' time, will have to be carefully analysed, and its recommendations will be of great importance.

A total of 178 UNRWA staff members have died as a result of the war, and, through Mr. Lazzarini, I reiterate my country's condolences to their families. UNRWA's work is vitally important in alleviating the situation of the civilian population in Gaza and other areas of the Middle East. A possible suspension of UNRWA's activities would surely also affect the work entrusted to Senior Coordinator Sigrid Kaag and the implementation of Security Council resolutions.

For that reason, in conclusion, I reiterate my call to all those who are able to do so to contribute to funding its operations, the continuity of which affects the stability of the entire region.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I thank Commissioner-General Lazzarini for his briefing.

The United States mourns the fact that at least 178 staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) have been killed in this conflict. We mourn the loss of dedicated humanitarians and valued colleagues.

This conflict has been one of the worst in recent memory in terms of the number of aid workers who have been killed. More than 240 humanitarian workers have been killed since 7 October 2023 in Gaza, many while on duty. Even more have been injured. These incidents are unacceptable. Humanitarian personnel must be protected, full stop.

We are deeply concerned that Israel has not done enough to protect humanitarian aid workers or civilians. For that reason, the draft resolution that the United States submitted last month to the Security Council demanded that "all parties to the conflict fully respect humanitarian notification and deconfliction mechanisms, and remediate any deficiencies" (*S/2024/239, para. 17*). Although Russia and China vetoed that draft resolution (see S/PV.9584), we repeat that call today. As President Biden conveyed to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on 4 April, Israel must "implement a series of specific, concrete and measurable steps to address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering and the safety of aid workers". United States policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by Israel's immediate and sustained action on those steps.

As members of the Council know, the United States paused additional funding to UNRWA as a result of the serious allegations regarding UNRWA personnel allegedly participating in the horrific 7 October attacks. The United States Congress has since prohibited additional contributions until at least March 2025. We urge UNRWA and the wider United Nations system to take all necessary steps to strengthen the neutrality of the organization and improve UNRWA's sustainability.

At the same time, we recognize UNRWA's indispensable role in distributing humanitarian assistance and maintaining continuity of care in Gaza, and we urge that UNRWA continue to be granted humanitarian access in Gaza and that onerous restrictions on its work be lifted. The United States is gravely concerned about the dire food insecurity and the very real risk of imminent famine. UNRWA is critical to averting that.

Of course, as our Jordanian and other colleagues from the region can confirm, UNRWA also plays a crucial role throughout the region in contributing to the stability of the region and supporting Palestinian refugees. From educating hundreds of thousands of students to providing primary health care and critical relief and social services, UNRWA is the bedrock of support for the most vulnerable Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank.

The United States supports this important work and emphasizes that it must continue uninterrupted. The United States has long advocated for reforms of UNRWA and emphasized the need to strengthen UNRWA's management and oversight. The final report of the independent review group on UNRWA, commissioned by the Secretary-General, and the results of the Office of Internal Oversight Services investigation will be important to guiding reform efforts.

We welcome UNRWA's statement that the review group report will be the authoritative report for future action. For further accountability, we urge the Secretary-General to provide a full and transparent plan for how he will follow up on that report. As we have conveyed, we expect the report to have clear and strong recommendations to guide UNRWA's work going forward and to prevent the prospect of staff supporting terrorism. We have been impressed with the interim work and interviews and appreciate the complexity of the issues presented. We look forward to the review group's final recommendations.

The United States will continue working with UNRWA, other donors and host countries to implement reforms of UNRWA in order for the Agency to remain operational as long as it is needed.

Mr. Žbogar (Slovenia): We want to thank Jordan for requesting this meeting on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and we want to thank the Commissioner-General for his briefing.

We recall that UNRWA is a lifeline for generations of Palestine refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. It is an Agency reflecting the historical responsibility of the collective membership of the United Nations. UNRWA is part of the social fabric of those areas of operation. It is a factor of stability. UNRWA's work is mandated by the General Assembly as the promise of a just solution of the Palestine refugee question. It needs to be respected.

Today we are discussing the critical work of drivers, social workers, nurses, teachers, sanitation workers, engineers, doctors and other life-saving assistance providers. UNRWA staff members are the unsung heroes of the war in Gaza.

The Council has held numerous discussions on the conflict in Gaza, marked by the dire human toll of the conflict, the threat of imminent famine and a near collapse of basic services. UNRWA's work has been evident at each and every one of those meetings — from providing shelter to internally displaced persons to delivering food and other essential goods. In the Council's discussions, their work is portrayed in a variety of ways. However, there is a general agreement that UNRWA has become indispensable because of its resources, experience and knowledge. Non-governmental organizations working in Gaza have made it clear that they are unable to substitute for or absorb the role of UNRWA. The Secretary-General, United Nations agencies and the United Nations coordinators dealing with the Gaza crisis have also been clear: UNRWA is the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza.

We take seriously the allegations against UNRWA employees brought forward in January. While they are concerning, we welcome the swift reaction from both the Secretary-General and the Commissioner General. An Office of Internal Oversight Services investigation into those allegations was launched. We are also looking beyond, to how to further strengthen the Agency's neutrality and transparency, and we are looking forward to the final report of the independent review of UNRWA.

Slovenia has stood by UNRWA and, consequently, by the civilians that it serves. We have maintained our financial and political support throughout this crisis. We will continue to do so. We welcome the fact that a number of donors have reversed their decisions and resumed their provision of financial support for the Agency. We urge other donors to revoke their suspension of funding, and we call on new donors, small or large, to come forward. It is simply about the survival of the largest provider of aid in Gaza. It is about the survival of civilians in Gaza.

We are concerned about the continued obstacles to UNRWA's work in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. UNRWA convoys are denied entry into Gaza and access to the north of Gaza. UNRWA faces eviction from its headquarters in Jerusalem. Those are some very concrete examples, among others. Those actions must be reversed.

Slovenia has consistently been clear, and I want to reiterate that we stand by the Secretary-General and the United Nations system in their efforts to alleviate the suffering of people in Gaza. We express our profound gratitude for the work of the United Nations and, in particular, for the work of UNRWA, which lies at the centre of those efforts. We condemn attacks on UNRWA premises. Those incidents must be duly investigated, and the persons responsible held accountable.

The situation in Gaza is unprecedented. The Council has been facing its challenges in addressing it, but it has had a united voice on a number of occasions. As the situation continues to deteriorate, Slovenia repeats its call for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages, the removal of barriers to humanitarian aid and the full implementation of resolutions 2728 (2024), 2720 (2023) and 2712 (2023). We also call for the full implementation of both orders of the International Court of Justice on provisional measures.

I want to take this opportunity to once again convey to the Commissioner-General my Government's condolences over the deaths of UNRWA staff members in the current conflict. I would emphasize that just last week, the Security Council underlined the need for accountability for all incidents involving the killing of humanitarian workers. UNRWA staff, along with all humanitarian and medical personnel working in Gaza, are the face of humanity in this conflict.

Mr. Fernandes (Mozambique): We thank Malta's presidency for convening this important briefing on the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, with particular focus on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). We also wish to express our gratitude to Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Commissioner-General of UNRWA, for his insights and for his decisive humanitarian work on the ground.

I appreciate the opportunity to address the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, in particular the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories and the vital work of UNRWA. The Gaza Strip faces a chronic humanitarian crisis, affecting the livelihoods of and access to essential services by its 2 million residents. Addressing this crisis is of the utmost urgency, and unconditional humanitarian aid remains crucial in mitigating the suffering of civilians caught in the crossfire. Ensuring

the safety and well-being of all civilians is paramount. Thus, the provision of humanitarian assistance should be unconditional and without any restrictions.

UNRWA's work extends far beyond the Gaza Strip, encompassing multiple regions in the Middle East. Its stability and predictability are crucial for the well-being of Palestinian refugees and their access to essential services. However, we are deeply concerned by the attacks on UNRWA's work, by the restrictions placed on its personnel and by its funding limitations, which significantly undermine the Agency's ability to carry out its vital humanitarian mission.

Building trust and confidence between Israel and UNRWA is essential to address the needs of the affected population. Balancing security concerns with humanitarian imperatives remains a complex challenge, but dialogue and collaboration are crucial. We therefore urge the international community to engage in a constructive dialogue and reconsider positions in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those in need during these challenging times. We further call upon all parties to comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law, and to implement the relevant Security Council resolutions on this issue.

In these challenging times, the pursuit of peace and humanitarian relief remains an imperative of the highest priority. We reiterate the urgent need for a full-scale end to hostilities in Gaza, transcending political bargaining and focusing on the well-being of civilians. Let us work towards a path of peace and prioritize humanity above all else.

In conclusion, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the Commissioner-General of UNRWA and his entire team for their invaluable insights into the Agency's crucial work, often carried out quietly and without recognition, which contributes significantly to humanitarian efforts on the ground. We honour the UNRWA workers who have lost their lives while fulfilling their noble duties, and we offer our deepest respect to their memory.

Mr. Sowa (Sierra Leone): I thank you, Madam President, for convening this meeting at the request of Jordan to discuss this very important issue. I also thank Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for his briefing, in which he outlined the status of the organization at this critical phase of its operations in Gaza and the broader Middle East.

UNRWA has been a beacon of hope for Palestinian refugees since it was established by General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 1949 until the present day. Over the years, we have reviewed numerous reports and briefings on its operations, and they all provided accounts of the organization's resilience and commitment, which have seen it adapt to the changing needs of the population it serves.

The Agency's direct relief and works programme — its provision of education, health care and social services to millions of people across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem — is testimony to its long-standing commitment to the welfare and human development of Palestinian refugees and people. However, UNRWA's ability to deliver at scale and provide adequate humanitarian assistance to civilians in the Gaza Strip and in other locations has been affected over these past months by the indiscriminate bombardment and collective punishment of the Gaza Strip since the 7 October attack on Israeli civilians by Hamas, which has unarguably resulted in unprecedented levels of suffering and humanitarian need in Gaza.

Regrettably, it has been reported that about 178 UNRWA staff have been killed and a good number of its premises damaged in the ongoing conflict. All those things are violations of international law, in particular international humanitarian law as it relates to the protection of humanitarian personnel in times of armed conflict. We express our deepest condolences to the families of all UNRWA personnel who have paid the ultimate price. We expressed solidarity with those who have been adversely impacted.

We have taken note of the allegation of the involvement of a small number of UNRWA personnel in the 7 October attacks. That has led to the suspension of funds by some major donors, even with the understanding that UNRWA is donor-driven. While we welcome the processes that have been initiated by the Secretary-General to investigate the allegations, we call on all those donors who have continued to suspend funding to reconsider that decision given the further developments and the appropriate steps being taken.

Sierra Leone acknowledges UNRWA's vital role as the mainstay of humanitarian response services to the people of Palestine. We emphasize that UNRWA cannot be replaced by any other agency or entity, as the work they do for Palestinians, not only in Gaza but across the

wider region, is immeasurable and lifesaving. In further acknowledging the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, exacerbated by the very real threat of famine and food insecurity, we call on all Member States to strengthen the operational capacity of UNRWA. We appeal for sufficient, predictable and sustained financial and other support for UNRWA and its services until a just and lasting solution to the plight of Palestine refugees is found.

In conclusion, while I reiterate Sierra Leone's support for UNRWA, I equally emphasize the need for an immediate permanent ceasefire in Gaza and respect for, and the implementation of, resolutions 2712 (2023), 2720 (2023) and 2728 (2024). That, inter alia, will allow the unhindered flow of humanitarian aid into all parts of the Gaza Strip, including the north.

Dame Barbara Woodward (United Kingdom): I start by thanking Commissioner-General Lazzarini for his briefing and for the work of all of his team.

It is 75 years since the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was mandated by the General Assembly to provide essential services to Palestinian refugees. Today, regrettably, that mandate remains as important as ever. Palestinians in Gaza are facing a devastating humanitarian crisis and an imminent risk of famine. And the region needs stability.

Against that backdrop, I wish to make three points.

First, the United Kingdom recognizes that UNRWA is critical to aid delivery in Gaza. We call on Israel to allow UNRWA and all agencies providing humanitarian relief unhindered access in Gaza, particularly in the north. UNRWA is the main provider of humanitarian relief within Gaza, and other United Nations and humanitarian actors depend on UNRWA's distribution network to get aid to those in need. The United Kingdom remains committed to increasing humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. We are calling on Israel to increase aid flows and to enable the United Nations minimum operating requirements so that humanitarian agencies can operate safely. Our Foreign Secretary has made that clear in his discussions with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz.

Secondly, I want to recognize the essential role that UNRWA plays in providing health and education services and humanitarian relief across the region, including supporting some 4 million Palestinians in

Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. That support is important for regional stability, and it is of particular importance at this critical time.

Finally, I want to reiterate that the United Kingdom is appalled by allegations that some UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attacks on Israel. We note the ongoing Office for Internal Oversight Services investigation into those allegations. We also emphasize the importance of UNRWA continuing robust management reform, including stronger independent oversight and better detection systems. And we look forward to seeing the findings and recommendations of former French Minister Catherine Colonna's independent review into UNRWA's neutrality processes and systems. As our Prime Minister said this week, we will clarify the United Kingdom's position on funding once we have reviewed these.

I want to end by recalling our minute of silence at the beginning of this meeting and by recognizing the 178 UNRWA staff tragically killed in Gaza. We pay tribute again to them and offer condolences to their families.

Mr. Geng Shuang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Jordan and the other Arab countries involved for their initiative to call for this meeting. I thank Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini for his briefing.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Gaza over six months ago, more than 34,000 innocent civilians have lost their lives. Gaza is mired in an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. At this very moment, millions are struggling from hunger, disease, pain and despair. Amid the gloom of war and death, the light of humanitarianism has never faded. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the backbone of the humanitarian response in Palestine. It has maintained its operations in Gaza over the past six months, bringing hope for survival to the suffering people in Gaza. UNRWA staff, while facing gunfire and bombardment, deliver and distribute life-saving supplies and do everything they can to provide shelter and relief to the local people. They have worked hard, shed sweat and blood, and some have made the ultimate sacrifice. So far, more than 170 UNRWA staff have been killed in the conflict. We would like to express our deepest condolences and pay our highest regard to the humanitarian workers who are sticking to their posts.

I would like to make three points.

First, UNRWA is indispensable for humanitarian assistance to Gaza. Secretary-General Guterres has highlighted clearly that no United Nations agency can replace UNRWA. To cut off the Agency's relief work is to cut off the last lifeline for the people in Gaza. In addition, UNRWA provides relief to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, among others. If UNRWA stops its operations, millions of Palestinian refugees will lose that support, and the stability of relevant countries will be impacted. China urges Israel to stop its interference with, and restrictions on, UNRWA's work and to ensure the Agency's normal operations.

Secondly, we support the United Nations in conducting an independent and impartial investigation of the allegations against UNRWA staff. However, the investigation should not have a predetermined conclusion. Nor, much less, should it be used to deny UNRWA's contribution or undermine its work. Individual cases should not overshadow the big picture of Gaza's humanitarian relief. The independent review group appointed by Secretary-General Guterres has noted unambiguously that there are a significant number of mechanisms within the Agency to ensure neutrality. In the absence of solid evidence to the contrary, China rejects malicious attacks on UNRWA and the use of this investigation as a pretext to launch unfounded accusations against the entire United Nations system. We urge Israel to immediately stop its attacks and smear campaign and call on relevant countries to resume funding to UNRWA as soon as possible.

Thirdly, the current priority is to implement resolution 2728(2024), on the immediate implementation of a ceasefire in Gaza. Providing relief under bombardment is an impossible task. The resolution demands, in no uncertain terms, a ceasefire in Gaza. Although the month of Ramadan is over, a ceasefire, regrettably, has still not materialized. We urge Israel to comply with the demands of the resolution, stop its military offensive in Gaza, abandon its offensive plans with regard to Rafah, lift its blockade of Gaza, open up all land crossings, ensure rapid, adequate and safe access for humanitarian supplies and provide necessary security guarantees for the operations of humanitarian agencies. We also urge the United States to uphold an impartial position and to make sincere efforts in that regard.

Tomorrow the Council will hold a high-level debate on the question of Palestine. We hope the international community will take that opportunity to show determination and willingness to push for Israel's full implementation of the Council resolution and an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and work towards gradual de-escalation in the region.

The Council will also vote on draft resolution S/2024/286, on the admission of Palestine as a full-fledged Member of the United Nations. We are hopeful that justice will prevail and that the Palestinian people's just cause of restoring their legitimate national rights will be realized.

China will continue to work tirelessly, alongside the international community, to promote an early end to the fighting in Gaza, ease the humanitarian catastrophe, implement the two-State solution and bring about lasting peace and security in the Middle East.

Mrs. Broadhurst Estival (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank the Commissioner-General for his briefing.

In that connection, I would like to make three points today.

First, France reiterates its call for full, massive and unimpeded humanitarian access and delivery in order to meet the immense needs of the civilian population of Gaza. In the face of this humanitarian catastrophe, all useful crossing points must be opened. It is imperative that the United Nations has the necessary access and authorization to deliver humanitarian aid in complete safety throughout the Gaza Strip, including the north of the enclave.

France pays tribute to all the humanitarian workers — from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations and non-governmental organizations — who have been killed in Gaza.

Secondly, for the past 75 years, UNRWA has played an indispensable role for the 5.9 million Palestinian refugees in the occupied Palestinian territories in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. In the Gaza Strip, the Agency is more critical than ever in providing essential humanitarian aid to the Palestinian civilian population. France has therefore supported UNRWA's humanitarian action on behalf of the civilian population of Gaza and will be making its 2024 annual contribution so as to enable the Agency to continue its vital humanitarian operations.

France reiterates the need to work towards a political two-State solution and a just, equitable, realistic and lasting solution for Palestinian refugees within the framework of a peace agreement. UNRWA plays an important role for the refugees and for the host countries as they await such a solution.

Thirdly, UNRWA must ensure absolute respect for the principle of neutrality. The allegations that some UNRWA employees took part in the terrorist attacks against Israel on 7 October are extremely serious. France reiterates its condemnation, in the strongest terms, of the terrorist attacks and sexual violence committed by Hamas and other terrorist groups on 7 October. It demands that those accusations be fully investigated and that strong measures be implemented without delay.

France welcomes the initial measures taken by the Secretary-General, in conjunction with the UNRWA Commissioner-General. We note the interim report of the independent external audit, led by Ms. Colonna, whose final conclusions will be made public on 22 April. France will be extremely vigilant in ensuring that the Agency fully implements the report's recommendations so as to ensure that UNRWA fully respects the principles of the United Nations and the humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality.

France recalls that the Council has demanded the immediate and unconditional release of hostages held by Hamas and other terrorist groups. That must happen without delay. France will also continue to work for an immediate and lasting ceasefire in order to put an end to the suffering of the civilian population of Gaza. A two-State solution is the only way to meet the legitimate aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis and to guarantee peace and security in the Middle East. The Palestinian Authority has a central role to play in that process, both in the West Bank and in Gaza.

France will continue to mobilize to that end, both in the Security Council and in the region. It has submitted to the Council a draft resolution that addresses all these aspects and encourages all members to support it.

Mrs. Baeriswyl (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): Like my colleagues, I would like to warmly thank the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, for his briefing and to commend his efforts and those of the Agency to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population in Gaza at a time when UNRWA has lost many staff members. I offer my deepest condolences to their loved ones.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is catastrophic and continues to deteriorate. Famine is imminent, and the entire population of the Gaza Strip is facing high levels of acute food insecurity. To help to meet the considerable need, Switzerland has allocated an additional \$100 million in humanitarian aid for the Middle East. We nevertheless reiterate that a political solution is necessary and that resolutions 2728 (2024), 2720 (2023) and 2712 (2023) must be implemented without delay. In particular, a ceasefire must be observed immediately. A ceasefire is essential if humanitarian actors are to be able to fully perform their vital activities. We also reiterate our call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

UNRWA is the largest humanitarian actor in Gaza. No other agency or organization could currently take over all its tasks. At the regional level and in the absence of a political solution to the conflict, UNRWA is also crucial in preventing further destabilization by providing essential services in the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

Switzerland is concerned about the serious charges brought against 12 UNRWA employees, who are suspected of having been involved in the acts of terror perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October 2023, which we have strongly condemned. Switzerland has taken note of the immediate measures taken by UNRWA, including the dismissal of those accused. We expect the investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services to shed full light on those allegations. Switzerland also stresses the importance of robust mechanisms to ensure UNRWA's neutrality and accountability, which are the subject of the independent review led by Ms. Colonna. We note that UNRWA has already launched an internal action plan to carry out certain reforms. We look forward to a swift conclusion to those processes and to the diligent implementation of the recommendations thereafter. Switzerland calls on Israel and all other States that possess relevant information to cooperate fully with the United Nations and Ms. Colonna to that end.

Suffering and mass destruction have reached a very high level in the region. That is also illustrated by the fact that 161 UNRWA facilities have been damaged or destroyed by the hostilities, killing many people seeking safety and protection. The fact that almost all schools operated by UNRWA, where children should be learning in order to build their futures, have been turned into emergency shelters for displaced persons also highlights the catastrophic situation. It

is high time for the parties to the conflict to strictly respect international law, particularly human rights and international humanitarian law. The parties must protect the civilian population and those hors de combat. All parties must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to those in need, including in the northern Gaza Strip. Every occupying Power is obliged by international humanitarian law to meet the basic needs of the population under its control. According to the order of the International Court of Justice of 28 March, Israel in particular must take all necessary and effective measures, in close cooperation with the United Nations, to ensure the provision by all interested parties of urgently required basic services and humanitarian aid.

We have said it repeatedly: we urgently need to re-establish a political horizon based on the two-State solution. That solution remains the basis for peace and stability in the region: two democratic States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders.

Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett (Guyana): I thank you, Madam President, for convening this meeting in response to the request from the delegation of Jordan. Allow me to acknowledge the presence of the Ministers and other high-level officials at today's meeting and to thank Commissioner-General Lazzarini for the valuable information provided.

At the outset, Guyana salutes Commissioner-General Lazzarini and his staff for their dedicated efforts in the most trying circumstances and to commiserate with them on the loss of 178 of their colleagues, who were killed in service to the Palestinian people.

Guyana is deeply concerned about the circumstances under which the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is forced to carry out its operations in the Gaza Strip. We have taken note that several UNRWA premises, including schools, health centres and aid distribution centres, have been directly hit by munitions used in the conflict. It is troubling that those incidents have occurred even though the Agency has complied with the requirements to provide the coordinates of all its premises to the parties to the conflict through the United Nations humanitarian notification system. The indiscriminate targeting of those premises has resulted in the killing of both UNRWA personnel and civilians who sought shelter in those facilities. Guyana

emphasizes the obligation of all parties to comply with international law, including provisions related to the inviolability of United Nations premises. In that context, we call for full accountability for the violations that have taken place since the start of the current cycle of violence on 7 October 2023. There should be no impunity for such brazen disregard for international law.

Guyana is equally concerned about the ongoing campaign to discredit and dismantle UNRWA. The Agency has been maligned, and some staff members have been accused of being involved in the attacks of 7 October 2023, without any credible evidence being provided to substantiate those accusations. Questions have also been raised about the Agency's neutrality. While it is the right of any Member State to voice concerns about the operation of any United Nations agency, Guyana underscores that there is also a concomitant responsibility to ensure that those concerns are substantiated. It is simply unacceptable to put forward accusations without providing credible supporting evidence. In the case of UNRWA, those accusations have led to very costly consequences for ordinary Palestinian civilians. Several Member States decided to cease their funding to the Agency at a time when the population in Gaza is faced with an unprecedented humanitarian crisis owing to ongoing hostilities by the Israeli Defense Forces. Those decisions were also taken against the backdrop of persistent funding shortfalls, which continue to compromise the Agency's ability to effectively carry out its mandate. While acknowledging that several countries have resumed their funding to UNRWA, Guyana calls on others, in the name of humanity, to reverse their decisions to suspend funding. We look forward to the final report in a few days from the independent review group.

Allow me to also address the claim from the Israeli side that the United Nations is unable to deal with the volume of aid that is available for distribution in Gaza. Aid distribution in a war zone is not a simple matter. It involves a number of critical parts that must all function well. For example, inspection processes must be agile. From all reports, they are slow and unpredictable. United Nations agencies like UNRWA have the capacity, but they have no control over deliberate impediments. We call again for a ceasefire and for the removal of those impediments.

UNRWA's indispensable existence for the past 75 years is a reminder that the international community has not yet delivered justice to the Palestinian people. Its

mandate is therefore important to the broader objective of achieving the two-State solution. Offering critical services to Palestinians made refugees by the Nakba of 1948 is a key part of delivering justice to them, and although more than seven decades have passed, we must never lose sight of the quest for ultimate justice in the achievement of a permanent resolution.

UNRWA has been a lifeline to the 5.9 million Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. It continues to provide critical services in education, health care, infrastructure and other areas, all aimed at ensuring that Palestinians can live with some semblance of dignity while continuing the quest to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination. There is simply no other organization that can replace or substitute the tremendous capacity of UNRWA or manage the sheer scale of its operations. It is our collective responsibility as Member States to uphold the mandate created in 1949, when UNRWA was established. I hasten to add here that this mandate was not meant to be a permanent one, neither should it have lasted this long. But any attempts to dismantle UNRWA should simultaneously align with delivering justice for the Palestinians. It is only then that UNRWA will no longer be required — when a thriving State of Palestine is created, living side by side in peace with the State of Israel. We will have an opportunity shortly to help Palestinians take that important step in that direction.

In conclusion, Guyana urges all Council members to be proactive in their efforts to keep UNRWA's doors open and to keep its operations effective and predictable.

Mr. Sangjin Kim (Republic of Korea): I too thank Commissioner-General Lazzarini for the detailed briefing on the challenges confronting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Let us go back in time, before the horrendous terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israeli citizens on 7 October of last year. At the United Nations, there was a strong consensus on the devotion and dedication of UNRWA and its personnel in assisting Palestine refugees — not only in Palestine, but also in neighbouring countries. Since the launch of the military operation by Israel in Gaza, and prior to the announcement of the allegations that some UNRWA staff members had participated in the heinous terrorist attacks, no one denied the sacrifice and the indispensable role of UNRWA in assisting Gazan

civilians in despair. As the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza deepens, with repercussions that include food and water scarcity, the role of humanitarian agencies like UNRWA is now more crucial than ever.

Let us be clear. The serious allegations notwithstanding, the devotion and sacrifice of UNRWA have not changed. With its 13,000 staff members in Gaza, 178 of whom were killed in this conflict, UNRWA is the core agency involved in international humanitarian efforts in Gaza. All humanitarian agencies delivering life-saving assistance to Gaza are highly appreciated and must be protected under international humanitarian law. But no agency other than UNRWA has comparable capacity and devotion.

Of course, we also share the concern about the allegation and appreciate the Secretary-General's swift initiation of the investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and his appointment of an independent review group to assess UNRWA's neutrality. We believe that the swift release of the interim report by OIOS will once again ensure the credibility of UNRWA, and the Republic of Korea will closely review the findings. We also hope that the final report by the independent review group will include constructive recommendations on enhancing UNRWA's neutrality.

The role of UNRWA in Gaza is irreplaceable. It is a lifeline for Palestinians. The Republic of Korea has therefore provided consistent and increased assistance to UNRWA. We welcome the announcement that major donor countries have resumed their contributions, and we will also continue to contribute to UNRWA.

The President: The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We regret that the Security Council once again today witnessed a completely shameless attempt by the United States to spread disinformation. The allegations that the Council was unable to call for the protection of humanitarian workers because Russia and China vetoed a flawed United States draft resolution (S/2024/239) are blatant lies and manipulations. That call is contained in resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023). Resolution 2728 (2024), which was adopted thanks to our veto of the American draft resolution, also refers to that call.

This is not the first time that the United States delegation is basically playing a shell game and is trying to mislead the international community. It is regrettable that American diplomacy has sunk so low that it uses such dishonourable means. However, what can one expect from a country that vetoed draft resolutions calling for an immediate ceasefire four times and that called resolution 2728 (2024) non-binding? By acting in that manner, the United States is becoming directly complicit in the killing of more than 200 humanitarian workers and almost 34,000 Palestinians in Gaza. However, this was clear to us even earlier, when Washington sought any ways to give its ally *carte blanche* to kill Palestinians with impunity.

The President: The representative of the United States has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I apologize for taking the floor, but I need to respond to the remarks made by the representative of the Russian Federation. It is indeed a fact that Russia vetoed that draft resolution (S/2024/239). No one should contest that. But to blame the United States for the situation in the region is totally unfair. However, it is typical of Russian disinformation activities, and I am not going to further that with any additional response.

The President: I now give the floor to the Special Representative of the President of the Observer State of Palestine.

Mr. Abu Amr (Palestine) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Maltese presidency for convening this important ministerial meeting, as well as to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for taking the initiative to request this meeting on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the challenges it is facing at this critical time.

Of course, we also express our sincere thanks to Algeria, the Arab member of the Security Council, for making the question of Palestine and related matters a priority on the Council's agenda. We also express our deep appreciation to the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, and to all UNRWA staff and humanitarian workers who are providing emergency relief assistance to the Palestinian people, including in the Gaza Strip. We salute them for their courage and dedication to their noble humanitarian mission, risking their lives to provide relief to our

people. We also extend our condolences to them over the loss of our brothers and their colleagues working in the humanitarian field, and we wish them safety in those critical times.

I can only begin by calling for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, for the unimpeded entry of humanitarian assistance, for the forced displacement of Palestinians from their homeland to be prevented and for the implementation of Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 2712 (2023), 2720 (2023) and 2728 (2024). We are all well aware that it is impossible to save innocent lives, provide relief to the afflicted and address the famine in Gaza while Israel continues its ground invasion and air strikes targeting civilians, homes, infrastructure, schools, shelters, hospitals, humanitarian headquarters, humanitarian workers, rescue teams and medical personnel. There can be no effective humanitarian response or provision of sufficient relief assistance to Gaza while the Israeli aggression and siege continues relentlessly in its harshest form. Nor is that possible while the threat of incursion hangs over the city of Rafah, which is now hosting nearly 1.5 million displaced inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, half of whom are children. Rafah is considered to be the gateway for the entry of humanitarian assistance into the Gaza Strip and for the evacuation of the wounded and the sick.

Firm pressure must be put on Israel, the occupying Power, so that it respects international law and international humanitarian law and stops its policy of collective punishment, starvation and the use of famine as a weapon of war.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to sisterly the Arab Republic of Egypt for its efforts to coordinate the delivery of the necessary humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip amid this humanitarian catastrophe caused by the Israeli siege and aggression. We would also like to thank all States and institutions that are helping in the evacuation of the wounded and the sick as well as providing the necessary medical care for them. We call for serious and concrete action in order to open all border crossings in the Gaza Strip and to compel Israel to fulfil its obligations as an occupying Power responsible for providing basic services to people under its occupation. We call for Israel to be held accountable in line with international law. Massacres of innocent people in Gaza have been going on for six months. Is it not high time for that killing, that destruction and displacement, to stop?

The General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 pursuant to resolution 302 (IV). That resolution made clear the reason for UNRWA's establishment and mandate and when it should be terminated, namely, when the issue of Palestinian refugees is resolved. Based on that, the General Assembly renews UNRWA's mandate periodically, despite all attempts and smear campaigns to cut this distinctive humanitarian organization off from the United Nations.

There is no alternative to UNRWA. The Agency is not a mere humanitarian project, it is a historic witness to the international community's commitment, or rather its obligation, to the Palestinian refugees who were evicted from their homes after the 1948 Nakba, following the decision on the partition of Palestine, until a just and comprehensive solution is found for their cause, in line with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). UNRWA has become part of the history of Palestinian refugees, and its role has become vital to their present and daily life. It is the only lifeline for many people that helps them to live a dignified life, especially given the current dangerous and awful situation, in which fear and tension are on the rise.

Any other alternative will have neither the Agency's standing nor the trust of the Palestinian refugees. UNRWA is the only United Nations entity that has the skills, readiness, operational capacity, long experience and expertise to carry out humanitarian tasks on a large scale, especially given what is happening in the Gaza Strip and the need to reopen schools as soon as possible to provide education and psychological and health support to children who have been deprived of such support during this school year. The Agency is the best that the United Nations can provide during those circumstances, as it combines international oversight, national capacities and skilful coordination to ensure humanitarian assistance, protection, sustainable development and preservation of rights.

The Israeli campaigns against UNRWA are not new and are not secret. For a long time, Israel has plotted against UNRWA and has targeted its headquarters, stores, shelters and staff. It has thwarted its operations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. It has launched slander campaigns and plots against UNRWA staff and against Palestinian refugees. Despite all that, UNRWA remained the best example of the international community's shared responsibility and collective work, in line with international law and political and ethical obligations to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Palestinian refugees until a just solution is found for their cause.

We are deeply grateful to Arab host countries, namely, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, for hosting Palestinian refugees for more than seven decades, for their unprecedented support to them and for sharing their resources with them and providing everything for the relief and development of refugees. We are grateful to all donor countries that for years have provided support to ensure that UNRWA can offer its vital assistance to Palestinian refugees, including countries that did not suspend their funding to UNRWA, countries that resumed their funding to the Agency and countries that doubled and accelerated their funding to UNRWA, especially during the current crisis. Their support has always given UNRWA and Palestinian refugees some dignity and hope — things that have been taken from them by the injustice, aggression and the lack of a just solution.

Once again, we appreciate the wise leadership of the Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, in supporting UNRWA and the steps he has taken by asking the Office of Internal Oversight Services to conduct an investigation into the Israeli allegations against certain UNRWA employees and to establish an independent committee to review UNRWA's operations. We await the outcome of the investigation and the committee's report. Until then, we call on States that have suspended their funding to UNRWA to reverse their decision and to resume funding. We remind everyone that the lives of millions of marginalized children, women and youth are in real danger.

The humanitarian challenges we are facing are unprecedented. They require redoubled efforts and exceptional empathy. Political, financial and operational support should be provided to UNRWA to address the growing humanitarian crisis and to face the imminent famine. No operational structure other than UNRWA can carry out such a task.

Pressure must be brought to bear on Israel so that it immediately stops hindering UNRWA's operations and mandate. It should stop targeting UNRWA's facilities and attempting to expel the Agency from occupied East Jerusalem. Israel should stop suspending UNRWA's privileges and immunity, limiting or cancelling the entry visas of its employees and obstructing their movement and that of UNRWA's humanitarian trucks. Israel is committed to respect for the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, as well as the conventions

signed with UNRWA. Any attempt to undermine those conventions is a violation of Israel's commitments, and accountability must be ensured.

It is high time to resolve the longest-lasting and largest refugee issue in history. It is high time to muster the necessary political will to end the illegal Israeli military occupation of our land and to stop the Nakba of the Palestinian people. It is high time for the Palestinian people to enjoy their inalienable humanitarian and political rights, to achieve peace and justice, which will allow our people, including the refugees, to live in freedom, dignity and safety. Until then, supporting UNRWA in its areas of operations in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, remains an integral part of international efforts to alleviate the suffering of our people. It is an integral part of the permanent responsibility of the United Nations in connection with the Palestinian question.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Erdan (Israel): From the very moment that the Arabs rejected General Assembly resolution 181 (II) in 1947 — the partition plan — and began their war to destroy Israel, the Palestinians have tried to exploit the United Nations for their goal to reverse history. Not only have the United Nations and its bodies failed to de-escalate the conflict or advancing a solution, the United Nations is directly responsible for perpetuating this conflict and ensuring that the Palestinians will continue to reject any peace plan or compromise because the political makeup of the United Nations gives them hope that they will achieve their original objective — the destruction of the State of Israel. And one of the weapons that the United Nations has crafted to extend this conflict is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the Agency that so many fund or support, is the Organization's single biggest obstacle to a solution.

After it was founded, UNRWA was quickly hijacked by the Palestinians and weaponized into an instrument of war. UNRWA's goal is not aid or real education. In practice, UNRWA is creating a sea of millions of Palestinian refugees indoctrinated to believe that Israel belongs to them. And the end goal is to use these so-called refugees and their libellous right of return, a right that does not exist, to flood Israel and destroy the Jewish State.

That is not a secret, by the way. It has been the Palestinians' plan from day one. After their failed war to destroy the Jewish State in 1948, the Arabs were then left with two options — one, to accept the result of their actions and come to terms with Israel as the Jewish State alongside an Arab State, as set out in the partition plan adopted by the United Nations or; two, to invest every possible resource so as to ensure that this conflict will not end until they get what they want, a one-State solution, that is to say, another Arab State in the Middle East instead of a Jewish one.

They chose a war of terror to eliminate the one and only Jewish State. UNRWA became part of their arsenal. They immediately hijacked and weaponized UNRWA and turned it into a fully Palestinian organization. I emphasize that just because UNRWA has a thin layer of Europeans in charge of collecting donations and garnering support, it does not change the fact that UNRWA is a Palestinian organization fully committed to the Jewish State's destruction.

And how does UNRWA do this? The Agency does it through its facilities, through the content in its textbooks and through its teachers and employees, who support terror and glorify Hitler. One of UNRWA's primary goals is to indoctrinate Palestinian children with the idea of destroying Israel through their return by brainwashing the Palestinians into believing that the war of 1948 is not over, that they are still refugees 76 years later, even though they were born in Gaza, Judea and Samaria, Jordan and Lebanon, Syria and countries around the world.

In 1949, there were approximately 500,000 Palestinians refugees. Today, according to UNRWA, there are — and correct me if I am mistaken — 5.6 million. Let me then ask the Council: what other group of refugees has a United Nations body mandated — not for their integration, not to end their refugeehood, but to ensure that it continues generation after generation? That is exactly what UNRWA does.

We hear a lot about Palestinian refugee camps — whether in Gaza, Judea and Samaria or Lebanon — but has anyone taken a moment to ask why there are Palestinian refugee camps 76 years later? How can there be a Palestinian refugee camp in Gaza or next to Ramallah? These are places with no Israeli presence and complete Palestinian control. How can one be a refugee from Palestine when one lives in a Palestinian city? Can we not see the paradox? Can we not see

their goal for the future? If the Palestinian Authority is so keen on establishing an independent State — and remember this for tomorrow — why are there still refugee camps in its territory? If a State was truly the goal of the Palestinians, then these second-, third- and even fourth-generation descendants of refugees would be living in regular Palestinian cities and not camps.

Sadly, that is not the goal of the Palestinians. Their goal is still the annihilation of Israel. And one of their weapons is educating others that Palestinian cities are not and will not be their permanent homes. After all, they are still “refugees”. Their home is in Israeli cities, such as Haifa, Tiberias, Tsfat and many others.

But the plot to destroy the Jewish State would be impossible without the help of United Nations and its destructive agency, UNRWA — the world's biggest advocate for a one-State solution, a Palestinian State from the river to the sea. Think about it. What makes the descendants of Palestinian refugees different from all other refugees? Why must there be a separate United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, while all other refugees — from Syria, from the Sudan, millions from Ukraine, from Afghanistan — are aided only by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. For them, that is enough.

Why is refugeehood hereditary for Palestinians? I urge everyone to think honestly about this. No other group of refugees can pass on their refugee status to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in perpetuity. And no other refugee remains a refugee when they receive citizenship in another country. That is not so for the Palestinians. There are Palestinians today with Jordanian, American and Swedish passports, whose great-grandparents left Israel in 1948. Yet, to this day, they remain on UNRWA's rosters as Palestinian refugees. It is absurd.

By the way, Mohamed Hadid, father of the two supermodels Bella and Gigi Hadid, currently lives in California. I think he is a billionaire. He is still a refugee, according to UNRWA. One cannot make this stuff up. Why is UNRWA's primary goal anything but settling the refugees?

This dysfunctional system has no parallel anywhere else in the world, and it is a fundamental part of the problem. When the United Nations promotes an agency that preserves refugee camps and the refugee identity nearly 80 years after the war, then all that is accomplished is the perpetuation of the conflict.

What an achievement. UNRWA continues to feed the Palestinian people a lie that the world supports — their demand of return — that as long as the original refugees, along with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, have not returned to where they once lived before they started a war in 1948, in contravention of General Assembly resolution 181 (II), then they will always be excluded from society and will forever remain branded as refugees.

In fact, by way of example, in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees face apartheid-like treatment. They suffer restricted access to public health, education and social services and face significant restrictions on their right to work and own property. Not only is it apartheid in practice, but it is also a United Nations-facilitated apartheid, because they live in United Nations camps. Without the absurd hereditary refugeehood fuelled by UNRWA today, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon would be Lebanese citizens, not a minority being discriminated against. And the more time passes, the more that problem will grow. More “refugees” means more services, more aid, more staff, a bigger budget. That is not a sustainable practice. I ask members: what they will all do in 50 years if there is still no peace? UNRWA’s budget will exceed \$3 billion. When will members start to think about diminishing the problem instead of keeping it alive and letting it grow? Sadly, they are giving aspirin to a body that is contaminated with cancerous cells.

The United Nations and its bodies were established to collaborate with law-abiding entities, to work hand in hand with Governments and non-governmental organizations. But what the United Nations is not equipped for is to collaborate with terror organizations. Hamas saw that weakness and quickly capitalized on it. Hamas was handed, on a silver platter, a United Nations agency with an immense budget and global legitimacy, and UNRWA was totally infiltrated by Hamas. Today in Gaza, UNRWA is Hamas, and Hamas is UNRWA. UNRWA has become an instrumental part of Gaza’s terror war machine. Israel has shared evidence proving that 17 per cent of UNRWA employees in Gaza are members of terror groups and that 50 per cent of UNRWA employees have a first-degree relative who is part of a terror organization. Hamas terrorists also hold key positions in UNRWA, and 18 UNRWA school principals in Gaza are active Hamas terrorists. Try to imagine the education that Gazan children are receiving,

when their principal is a genocidal jihadist. But for some members, Hamas is not a terrorist organization, so I am not sure that I will be able to convince them.

Seeing as UNRWA has been infiltrated by terrorists at all levels, it should be no surprise that so much UNRWA aid is being redirected away from civilians to terrorists. Aside from employing terrorists, UNRWA’s infrastructure is also being exploited by terrorists. A Hamas command base and data centre was recently located underneath UNRWA headquarters, and it was connected directly to UNRWA’s power supply. Terror tunnels have been found underneath UNRWA facilities — the United Nations recognized that — and more than 30 of those facilities housed weapons and terror infrastructure. Yet rather than take responsibility for the weaponization of UNRWA, Commissioner-General Lazzarini has chosen to say that he had no knowledge of Hamas’s hold on his own Agency. I am sorry, but that is blatantly false. For years, Israel has exposed terror tunnels under UNRWA schools and supplied evidence of Hamas’s exploitation of UNRWA. I told him that when we met. We implored Mr. Lazzarini and the Secretary-General to carry out a comprehensive search of all UNRWA facilities three years ago in Gaza. Yet not only did they refuse, but they also chose to bury their heads in the sand and ignore reality.

The 7 October massacre was the embodiment of the Palestinians’ so-called right of return. That is exactly how they understand it, but it does not have to be that way. There are alternatives to UNRWA, including non-governmental organizations and other United Nations agencies. Israel cannot and will not allow UNRWA to continue in Gaza as it did in the past. I repeat: there are alternatives to UNRWA, and it is up to members whether they can succeed.

Today is not 1948. Israel is not going anywhere. Israel will remain the Jewish State, and the Palestinians will never be able to turn back the clock. History will not be rewritten. While I know that, and members know that, the Palestinians tragically still do not know that. And the reason they do not know it is because members continue funding UNRWA and fuelling the deranged and perverse vision of flooding Israel with millions of descendants of Palestinian refugees. UNRWA is giving them destructive hope that Israel can be annihilated. The time has come to defund UNRWA.

The President: I now give the floor to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Jordan.

Mr. Safadi (Jordan): I thank you, Madam President, for acting on Jordan's request to hold this special meeting on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Gaza is starving. Its population of 2.3 million is facing famine. That is the doing of Israel, which is using starvation as a weapon, in violation of international law, in defiance of the collective will of the world as expressed through General Assembly and Security Council resolutions and in complete disregard for human values. The suffering is beyond words. Only one agency has the knowledge, ability and infrastructure to help ease it, and that is UNRWA, the backbone of humanitarian efforts in Gaza. Israel wants to break it — do not allow it to do so. UNRWA deserves members' support, because only UNRWA has the ability to meaningfully help starved Palestinians in Gaza and provide vital services to Palestinian refugees in its five areas of operation. UNRWA deserves members' respect for the sacrifices it has made to ensure Palestinians in Gaza do not die of hunger. A total of 178 UNRWA staff members have fallen victim to Israeli bullets or bombs, and we renew our deepest condolences to Mr. Lazzarini — our hearts go out to the victims and their families.

The little aid that Israel is allowing into Gaza is not being efficiently distributed, because Israel has prevented UNRWA from fulfilling the mandate that the United Nations gave it. The United Nations is the whole world, all countries of the world, so when the United Nations decides, it is the world that decides — it is the countries that are Members of the United Nations that decide. To attack the United Nations is to attack the entire international community, international law and the multilateral system that we all support and that the United Nations was created to preserve. Children are dying because UNRWA and other aid agencies are forbidden from helping them in Gaza. Some of those who tried have been killed in cold blood by the Israeli occupation forces. Even after the global outcry at the killing of the World Central Kitchen aid workers, Israel targeted a UNICEF team, who miraculously dodged death. There has been no independent investigation into those crimes, no effort to force an independent investigation into those cold-blooded crimes that were there for everybody to see.

The truth is another victim of Israel's aggression on Gaza. The disinformation campaign that the Israeli Government has been using against UNRWA, the lies, the distortion of history and the distortion of the present must not shape the world's view of the Agency. Instead, UNRWA's essential work, its commitment to United Nations values, its sacrifices and the dedication of its staff must do so. Israel levelled allegations against 12 of UNRWA's 13,000 staff members in Gaza. The Agency acted responsibly. The United Nations fired those staff members even before an investigation was launched. The Agency welcomed and fully cooperated with an independent investigation, which is headed by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs of France, Catherine Colonna. The United Nations also launched its own internal investigation into the allegations. UNRWA has nothing to hide. It has faced up to its responsibilities. It has committed to rectifying any wrongdoing or shortfalls, should any be found.

Nevertheless, the Israeli witch-hunt of the Agency continues. That witch-hunt started long before the allegations against the 12 members of its staff were made. The Agency has been the target of a political assassination campaign for years. Israel wants to kill UNRWA and what UNRWA represents. The purpose of the attack on UNRWA is to kill the Palestinian refugees' rights, to kill the Palestinian issue and to kill the discussion of the fact that there is an occupation that is illegal and inhumane and that must end. It will not succeed in doing so.

UNRWA must be protected now, in the same way that it was protected in the past, for UNRWA is a bright spot in the misery that Israel has forced on Palestinian refugees. It has provided hope, education and opportunity for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Approximately 5.6 million refugees look to UNRWA for that hope. They see it as a symbol that the world still cares about their plight and that the world still cares about redressing the historical injustice to which they have been subjected.

More than 300,000 students used to attend UNRWA schools in Gaza before the Israeli aggression forced those schools that it did not destroy to become overcrowded shelters for hundreds of thousands of the 1.7 million Palestinians it has displaced in Gaza. Hundreds of thousands more in the West Bank, Syria and Lebanon would be denied their right to education and medical care were it not for UNRWA. More than 100,000 boys and girls of the 2.3 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan receive their education at UNRWA schools. No other agency can do what UNRWA does.

UNRWA was born out of the Nakba of 1948, when Israel drove hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes on their ancestral land. The United Nations created it as a temporary agency to care for refugees until they could go back home. They have not done so. In 1967, more Palestinians joined them in displacement. The plight of the refugees persists. UNRWA must remain — that is the simple fact. That is the simple obligation that is legal, moral and humane. UNRWA must continue to implement its mandate until the refugee issue is resolved, in accordance with international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions, which uphold their right to return and compensation, and in the context of a comprehensive solution to the conflict. That solution will not be attained unless the cancer — the evil — that is the occupation has ended and the Palestinians are able to live in dignity and freedom in their own independent, sovereign State in their ancestral homeland.

UNRWA is indispensable. It is irreplaceable. It is more needed now than ever before, as children are literally dying of starvation and dehydration in the inferno of pain, death and suffering the Israeli war has made Gaza. The war on Gaza must stop, and it will stop. And when it does, the world will see the inhumane reality Israel has forced on Gaza and has largely kept away from the eyes of the world by banning journalists from entering the Strip and covering the destruction. Then, when that happens — when the world can actually see the amount of destruction and death and suffering that Israel has brought to Gaza — the world will recognize even more how much it needs UNRWA and how vital UNRWA's role is.

We thank all our partners who continue to help UNRWA. We urge them all to protect UNRWA now, just like they protected it in the past. Support it financially and politically, for supporting UNRWA is supporting regional stability. Saving UNRWA is saving lives, saving hope and standing on the side of justice and on the side of the right of the Palestinian people to live in dignity, in freedom, without fear, without intimidation, without deprivation and without the oppression of having no hope that their plight will end — watching their kin in Gaza being killed and in the West Bank being subjected to all manner of oppression, attacks, settler terrorism, confiscation of their land and building of settlements on their houses and farms. That has to stop. Only if we do that will the Middle East have the peace that it deserves, and only if the Palestinian people are given their rights will the Palestinians, the Israelis and all of us live in peace.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Türkiye.

Mr. Yıldız (Türkiye): At the outset, we extend our thanks to the Maltese presidency and to Jordan for convening this timely meeting. I also express appreciation to Commissioner-General Lazzarini for his briefing and commend his efforts to fulfil UNRWA's mandate under extremely challenging circumstances. He depicted the situation in the field very well and very clearly, and he also revealed how some subversive calls about UNRWA are ill intended, and unfortunately, the statements of the Israeli representative confirm that.

As we speak today, the suffering in the occupied Palestinian territories has reached unprecedented levels. The West Bank is under immense tension, with settler violence and growing Israeli atrocities against the Palestinian people. Unlawful settlements, the demolition of houses, forced evictions and land confiscations continue as daily routines. Seven thousand people have been arrested since 7 October last year for no reason. Gaza faces the most formidable human-made disaster in modern times. Unprecedented destruction and massacres are taking place before our eyes. It is tormenting and heartbreaking. The human toll far exceeds the number of declared casualties. People are starving to death. A whole generation is being lost to violence and to a vicious cycle of indignation and impoverishment. That is insulting to our humanity.

Security Council resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire and the preliminary measures ordered by the International Court of Justice have not been implemented. International law is brazenly breached. Against that painful backdrop, UNRWA shines as a beacon of hope for the Palestinian people — and indeed, for all of us. UNRWA workers and staff are selfless in distributing food, teaching and providing medical and social services, among other essential tasks, under life-threatening circumstances. Meanwhile, more than 200 United Nations personnel in Gaza have been killed by Israeli attacks. Nevertheless, the Israeli Government continues to pursue its defamatory campaign to discredit the Agency, although its allegations have not been substantiated.

UNRWA was envisioned as a temporary entity by the General Assembly when the Agency's mandate was first enforced in 1949, following the mass deportations of the Palestinians from their homeland. Therefore, UNRWA represents the right of return and dignity.

UNRWA tells us that the Palestinian question is alive and that it should be resolved fairly. UNRWA embodies the political, legal, humanitarian and moral responsibility of the international community until a just solution based on the two-State vision is realized.

Turkish support for UNRWA is solid and unwavering. We call on all Member States to ensure that UNRWA continues its critical work. As the Chair of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA and as a regular contributor to UNRWA, Türkiye will continue to make every effort to contribute to the invaluable work of the Agency.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Alwasil (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): It is my honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the Group of Arab States.

At the outset, I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the Maltese presidency for responding to the initiative of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and convening this ministerial-level meeting to support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and to discuss the challenges it is facing at this critical moment. We would also like to thank the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, and all the staff of the Agency and those working in the humanitarian field in general. We commend their heroic role. The peoples of the world appreciate the huge efforts they make to bring relief to the people of Gaza. We also commend their courage in undertaking their noble humanitarian duty, and we recognize the enormous pain that they have suffered due to the loss of their colleagues who were killed by the Israeli war machine while undertaking their heroic role in relieving the afflicted people of Gaza. We have all witnessed the blood of UNRWA's personnel mixing with that of innocent unarmed civilians as the Israeli occupation army killed more than 176 UNRWA employees since the start of the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip.

Since the launch of the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip more than six months ago, the Security Council has remained unable to protect civilians, children and women against death, hunger and disease, owing to the clear bias towards the aggressor, resulting in more than 33,000 martyrs and more than 72,000 injured, most of them women and children. The double

standards and Israel's blatant intransigence continue to harm innocent civilians through bombardment, disease and hunger. How can we remain silent in the face of a policy of starvation being adopted against the innocent people of Gaza? How could the blockade against humanitarian aid deliveries and the targeting of humanitarian agencies through bombardment and launching false accusations and allegations against them be justified?

From this Chamber, we reiterate our call for the implementation of Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 2712 (2023), 2720 (2023) and 2728 (2024). We call for an immediate ceasefire and for compelling the Israeli occupation forces to stop killing more civilians and targeting homes, infrastructure, hospitals, humanitarian headquarters and medical workers.

UNRWA was created by this Organization through General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) in 1949, and the reasons for its establishment are well known. Those reasons still apply, and the Palestinian people remain subject to systematic displacement to this very day. UNRWA, the humanitarian organization that has experienced the crisis of the Palestinian people for over seven decades, has an indispensable role because the situation of Palestinian refugees remains the same. UNRWA is the lifeline that brings hope to a suffering people that fell victim to a horrible situation due to political favouritism and the awful bias of some countries that stand by the occupier.

The Agency is not just a humanitarian organization. It has lived with the Palestinian people, through its Nakba and setbacks, moment by moment and generation after generation. It has provided a great deal of support to the people of Gaza during their recent ordeal. It has supported more than two million Palestinians facing death by bombardment, disease, hunger and thirst.

We stress once again that there is no alternative to UNRWA. It is the only United Nations agency that has such a high level of operational capabilities as well as the skills, long experience and ability to undertake both development and humanitarian tasks on a large scale. Its role is not limited to relief and humanitarian tasks — it also plays a role in other sectors such as education, health services, cultural affairs and other development sectors, which are fundamental and indispensable.

Finally, UNRWA and its personnel have faced a fierce and unjust defamation campaign over the past few months. That campaign is unprecedented in the

history of international organizations. Allegations and accusations are made without evidence and with the sole justification of eliminating UNRWA. The objective is to put an end to the only source of hope for Palestinian citizens. Pressure is also brought to bear on donor countries to stop financing UNRWA. Its headquarters, warehouses, shelters and personnel are targeted. UNRWA's operations are also obstructed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

In that regard, we thank all donor countries that did not respond to those false allegations and that did not suspend their assistance to UNRWA. Those countries have been eager, over the years, to provide the necessary support to UNRWA so that it could continue its vital support to Palestinian refugees and contribute to the stability of the region.

The Group of Arab States calls on all countries that have suspended their assistance to UNRWA to consult their conscience, as human beings, to reconsider their position and to resume financing the Agency. The lives of millions of children, women and youth require an end to that suspension. We call upon the countries that are instigating efforts against UNRWA to stop their false accusations and respect the noble role of the Agency so that it can continue to protect millions of innocent Palestinians in all its five areas of operation.

In conclusion, we reiterate the full support of the Group of Arab States to UNRWA, and we commend its important role under the stewardship of Mr. Philippe Lazzarini.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Egypt.

Mr. Mahmoud (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): We thank Malta for holding today's meeting in response to the commendable initiative of the sisterly Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. We express our sincere condolences to the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for the Agency's 178 martyrs who have fallen thus far owing to the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip, which has been ongoing for six months, in violation of international law and United Nations resolutions. UNRWA's headquarters and staff are deliberately being targeted by the Israeli army.

Philippe Lazzarini and all the noble personnel of UNRWA deserve our full appreciation and respect. They are heroes, because their courage and dedication

in difficult circumstances have accomplished admirable work, which we highly respect. Furthermore, they have accomplished all of this while being targeted by Israeli attacks that have killed their colleagues and members of their families. The slanderous efforts to smear the Agency's name will remain forever inscribed in our memories in shining letters.

Egypt calls once again for an immediate ceasefire, for the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, pursuant to the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly. Egypt also condemns Israel's continued killing of UNRWA personnel and deliberate destruction of the Agency's facilities. That is serious and unprecedented because war has been waged against a United Nations agency and will have serious repercussions for the safety of United Nations staff in other conflict zones across the world.

Egypt calls upon the Security Council to adopt a firm stance in order to force Israel to cease its criminal behaviour. Egypt also stresses that UNRWA plays a fundamental, exclusive, irreplaceable and immutable role in supporting Palestinian refugees, pursuant to 1949 General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), on the creation of the Agency. The role undertaken by UNRWA is not a favour to the Palestinian people, but rather a responsibility borne by the international community because of the tragedy faced by a people forcibly displaced from their land and deprived of their homeland and who, for decades, have sought to establish an independent State on their stolen land after decades of unjust occupation.

We are well aware of the true objectives of the tendentious campaign launched against UNRWA, which aims to liquidate the cause of Palestinian refugees, a fundamental pillar of the final-status issues, in an attempt to liquidate the other pillars and bring an end to the legitimate demands of the Palestinian people. We must all counter that oppressive campaign so that Palestinians can recover their legitimate rights.

Egypt calls on the countries that have suspended their contributions to UNRWA's budget at the most difficult and sensitive times of this century for Palestinian refugees — as more than 1.7 million Palestinians in Gaza are facing the challenges of forced displacement — to resume financing the Agency.

Egypt rejects the unconvincing justifications advanced by some of those countries to cut off Agency funding in an attempt to appease Israel and to equate

the executioner with the victim. Any individual breaches must be dealt with within the framework of applicable laws and procedures, without politicization or generalization and without attempts to dismantle the Agency or proffer justifications for liquidating it. We commend the Secretary-General for beginning the fact-finding process, and we thank donor countries for resuming their funding of UNRWA. We call upon the remaining donor countries to resume funding the Agency immediately and without conditions, and even to increase their funding given the ongoing critical humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories.

We do not exaggerate when we say that suspending Agency funding means putting more pressure on the Palestinian people in their current crisis and compounding other existing crises. Egypt also calls for taking a firm position with regard to Israel targeting UNRWA and United Nations staff in cold blood.

In conclusion, Egypt stresses that the only solution to the current crisis for UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees is to restore to the Palestinian people their fundamental right — to live in freedom and dignity within their independent State along the 4 June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Until that solution is achieved, UNRWA must be supported and protected so that it can fulfil its role.

I once again tell Mr. Lazzarini and all our dear colleagues at UNRWA that they do not face these challenges alone and that they have all our thanks and appreciation.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Aldahhak (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): We thank you, Madam President, for convening this meeting. We also thank Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for his important briefing.

My country's delegation associates itself with the statement delivered by the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the Group of Arab States, and would like to stress the following points in its national capacity.

Seventy-five years ago, the General Assembly established UNRWA to provide care and support to Palestinian refugees who had been subjected to brutal Israeli attacks and massacres, as well as terrorist acts

at the hands of the Haganah, the Stern Gang and other gangs. As a result, they were forced to flee their homes and homeland in search of a safe haven in other parts of the Palestinian territories or in neighbouring Arab countries, including my country, Syria.

Since then, the Israeli occupation authorities have continued their aggressive policies against the countries and peoples of the region, committing the most heinous crimes and massacres, including the most recent crime of genocide, which has continued for more than six months against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. They have also targeted all those who have come to their aid, including humanitarian and medical staff, as well as journalists who document the Israeli occupation crimes and the suffering of the Palestinians.

The suffering of the Palestinian people is being exacerbated by attempts to liquidate UNRWA by Israel and its allies, who falsely claim that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and cover up its crimes. The United Nations has adopted hundreds of resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but they have not been implemented due to the blatant bias and unlimited support provided to the occupation entity by successive United States Administrations and other Western colonial States.

That was demonstrated clearly once again when the United States Administration repeatedly prevented the Security Council from adopting a clear resolution calling for an immediate and permanent end to the Israeli aggression, using the veto four times to that end. Immediately following the Council's adoption of resolution 2728 (2024), the United States Administration announced that the resolution was not binding and did not entail any new commitments for any party. That is a blatant expression of selectivity and double standards when it comes to United Nations resolutions. It also provides more time for Israel to continue its genocide against the Palestinian people, as well as its aggression and its ongoing attempts to escalate the situation in the region through its repeated attacks on my country's territories and those of other Arab countries.

My country's delegation underlines the vital and indispensable role of UNRWA in assisting the Palestinian people. We condemn Israel's targeting and its deliberate and systematic killing of more than 230 employees of UNRWA and other United Nations agencies, in addition to humanitarian workers, who all lost their lives due to the brutal Israeli aggression

against Gaza. My country's delegation expresses its condolences to the Commissioner-General of UNRWA and to the families of the victims, and wishes a speedy recovery to the injured.

My country, Syria, categorically rejects any attempt to undermine the role and mandate of UNRWA in order to serve the Israeli occupation's agenda to liquidate the Palestinian question, including the right of return. Syria urges donor countries that have suspended their funding to the Agency to reverse that decision and to resume their funding as soon as possible so as to ensure adequate, sustainable and predictable financing for the Agency, which must continue to provide support to the Palestinian people in their homeland and in host countries, including Syria, which hosts hundreds of thousands of Palestinian brothers.

Syria reaffirms its support for the brotherly Palestinian people in their struggle to liberate their occupied land and to establish their independent and sovereign State, with Jerusalem as its capital. We stress the need for putting an immediate end to Israeli aggression, ensuring the delivery of urgent and adequate humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza, preventing forced displacement and guaranteeing that Israel and its allies are held accountable and do not go unpunished. Syria will continue to support Palestine's request to be granted full membership in the United Nations.

In conclusion, Syria warns of the catastrophic repercussions of the repeated Israeli acts of aggression against our territory. Such acts constitute a threat to regional and international peace and security, and we call upon the Security Council to take urgent action to put an end to them and ensure that they are not repeated.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to Mr. Lambrinidis.

Mr. Lambrinidis: The European Union remains gravely concerned about the devastating humanitarian crisis in Gaza. We reiterate our call for full respect of international humanitarian law by all parties. In particular, we would like to re-emphasize our call for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire and for safe, unimpeded and continued humanitarian access to and throughout Gaza. Humanitarian workers must never be targeted. We share our condolences to the loved ones of all humanitarian workers killed in Gaza, including staff from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other United Nations workers and international and local organization staff.

As Mr. Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, recently said, the past six months of war in Gaza are a betrayal of humanity. Addressing the imminent famine in Gaza urgently requires a comprehensive approach that combines political action, strict adherence to international humanitarian law, unimpeded sustained humanitarian access for aid delivery and commercial access, along with the restoration of essential services. Such a comprehensive approach requires coordination and leadership. The European Union stands firm in our belief that UNRWA is the backbone of any effective humanitarian response in Gaza. The role of UNRWA is irreplaceable. The Agency is a main humanitarian lifeline for the Palestinian children, women and men who are dependent on life-saving assistance.

We appreciate the steps taken by the investigation carried out by the Office of Internal Oversight Services to shed light on the serious allegations made against a few UNRWA staff, and we commend the United Nations for establishing an independent review group, led by Catherine Colonna, to assess whether the Agency is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations. From the preliminary results, we remain convinced that UNRWA is an essential part of delivering desperately needed aid to the people in Gaza. We are glad that many donors that had initially suspended their funding have resumed their support of UNRWA, based on the results of those assessments.

As a long-standing humanitarian donor, the European Union will continue to cooperate closely with the United Nations, including UNRWA and humanitarian partners in the region, in line with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. With over a million Palestinians forcibly displaced and continued hostilities, UNRWA is more needed than ever to deliver for the Palestinians in Gaza, as well as to deliver assistance and social services in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Luxembourg.

Mr. Maes (Luxembourg): I thank you, Madam President, for convening this briefing of the Security Council. I would also like to thank Commissioner-

General Philippe Lazzarini for his briefing and to express our full confidence in his leadership of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) at this challenging time.

I have the honour to speak on behalf of Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and my own country, Luxembourg.

We remain firmly committed to UNRWA's work. That commitment is rooted in our recognition of its vital activities over the past 75 years and its unique role in assisting Palestinians in Gaza, in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Today's meeting is an important opportunity to recall the critical contribution that UNRWA makes to international peace and security and to formulate strategies to address the obstacles preventing UNRWA from conducting its humanitarian and human development operations in an effective manner.

The General Assembly last renewed the vital mandate of UNRWA in December 2022 (see A/77/PV.52), affirming the necessity of the continuation of UNRWA's work. We stand in strong support of that mandate, which remains as essential as ever.

Now more than ever, we are conscious of UNRWA's work to alleviate the suffering of Palestinian refugees, for whom the Agency is a lifeline. The Agency contributes to the protection of Palestinian refugees, both through service delivery and by advocating their rights with relevant stakeholders.

We are extremely concerned about the efforts to question UNRWA's role and hamper its work. UNRWA remains the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza. The Agency is absolutely essential to ensuring that the resolutions that the Council adopted to massively scale up humanitarian aid to and within Gaza — resolutions 2712 (2023), 2720 (2023) and resolution 2728 (2024) — can be implemented. Furthermore, UNRWA is a pillar of regional stability and a beacon of hope for millions of Palestinian children, women and men. It must be maintained and deserves our continued collective support until there is a political solution.

We once again acknowledge that many of UNRWA's staff have paid the ultimate price while carrying out its life-saving work. We pay tribute to all the lives that

have been lost and we offer our sincere condolences to their families. Humanitarian workers, including UNRWA staff and those who supply them with aid, are providing life-saving assistance under intolerable conditions. These workers must be protected, in full accordance with international humanitarian law.

UNRWA and all humanitarian actors need full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access, at scale, into and throughout Gaza and the West Bank. It is essential that Israeli restrictions and arbitrary impediments impacting the work of UNRWA and other humanitarian groups are immediately lifted so as to ensure the desperately needed flow of aid.

We fully support and trust the swift responses of the Secretary-General and Commissioner-General to the grave allegations made against 12 members of UNRWA's staff, out of approximately 13,000 working in Gaza, including through the Office of Internal Oversight Services and the independent review processes. We look forward to the final outcome of those important processes, due shortly, and reiterate our call for all parties to fully cooperate. We are confident that the independent review can further strengthen UNRWA's transparency and accountability.

The fighting across Gaza must stop immediately. It is imperative that Israel and other actors refrain from further escalation. We need an immediate ceasefire and the full, safe and unhindered access of humanitarian aid. In that regard, we call for the immediate implementation of resolutions 2712 (2023), 2720 (2023) and 2728 (2024). We also call for the immediate implementation of the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice on 26 January and 28 March.

We wish to reiterate our condemnation of the brutal attacks by Hamas on 7 October and our continued calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza has taken on an unprecedented and inhumane scale. More than 33,000 people, mostly women and children, have now been killed, and a great many lives hang in the balance now. People are in dire need of the most basic life-saving provisions — food, safe drinking water, sanitation, shelter, medicine and medical supplies. People have been pushed beyond all human limits. More than 85 per cent of the population has been forced from their homes and further displaced on multiple occasions. A conflict-induced famine looms large, with 1.1 million people now facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

UNRWA's financial situation remains deeply concerning, given the continued suspension of some of UNRWA's largest donors. At a time of a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions in Gaza, UNRWA — as the Agency with the largest footprint and expertise, by far — needs predictable and sustainable financing. This ongoing suspension of funding will cost lives and will put UNRWA's role in regional stability in jeopardy.

That is why we reinforced our support for UNRWA. We, as a group of countries, have provided \$100 million to UNRWA in 2024, so far. We call on existing donors and possible new donors to consider stepping up their support to UNRWA.

We commend the European Commission for the swift allocation of €50 million to the Agency, and we expect that further funds planned for this year will be contributed without unnecessary delay.

We close by reiterating our firm conviction that the only solution to this crisis remains the implementation of the two-State solution. We therefore support all efforts, including in the Security Council, to restore a political horizon, leading to a political process under the auspices of the United Nations.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Lebanon.

Mr. Hachem (Lebanon) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's meeting.

My country's delegation associates itself with the statement delivered by the representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on behalf of the Group of Arab States.

We would like to thank Mr. Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for his briefing, which demonstrates the magnitude of the humanitarian tragedy besetting Gaza's population and the Agency's important role as the backbone of humanitarian action, which is indispensable both in the Gaza Strip and in other places that host refugees.

We reiterate that the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza has been provoked by Israel, which seeks to destroy basic living conditions in the Strip. Israel is preventing and obstructing the delivery of relief and humanitarian supplies to civilians throughout the Gaza Strip and is preventing United Nations agencies,

specifically UNRWA, from delivering and distributing aid, especially in northern Gaza. Israel is also repeatedly and deliberately targeting dozens of UNRWA facilities protected under international law. As a result, hundreds of refugees have been killed and thousands of civilians have been injured. An unprecedented 178 UNRWA staff members have become martyrs.

Israel is attempting to divert attention away from its flagrant violations of international law in Gaza by launching systematic and politicized campaigns to discredit UNRWA and tarnish its reputation. As a result, some States have frozen or suspended their funding to the Agency, thus destabilizing UNRWA financially and dangerously leading it to the brink of a precipice.

Israel's fallacious claims have prompted a number of States to suspend their funding. Yet, many of them have reversed their decision. In that regard, we urge the remaining States to follow suit and resume Agency funding because the suspension of funds has a direct impact on Palestinians in a war-torn Gaza suffering from famine and epidemics and on all Palestinian refugees in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, who depend on UNRWA for basic services, such as education, hospitalization and subsistence aid.

The extreme right-wing Israeli Government is attempting to dismantle UNRWA in order to publicly kill the two-State solution. That Government is also expanding settlements, tightening the noose on Palestinians and making their daily lives unbearable. The international community, therefore, must not help Israel in its destructive endeavours. Instead, the international community must ensure that UNRWA is adequately funded so that it can implement its mandate until a sustainable solution to the question of Palestine is reached, an independent State of Palestine is established and the right of return is settled. We must not create parallel entities to UNRWA nor transfer the Agency's powers to such entities.

We reiterate our demand for an immediate ceasefire, the unimpeded entry of sufficient relief assistance and an end to the forced displacement plot that evokes the Nakba tragedy of 1948.

In conclusion, we stress that investing in UNRWA is in our common interests because the Agency is helping to build a better future for the Palestinian people. The alternative is despair, which will only fuel the vicious cycle of violence.

We pay tribute to UNRWA and its staff and commend the role it has played over the years, as well as the great efforts and sacrifices it has made for more than 5 million Palestinian refugees. We reiterate that the international community is duty-bound to fund the Agency. It is the least that we can do for the Palestinians.

Since 1948 to date, Lebanon has been hosting its Palestinian brothers and bearing the burden of hosting refugees on a humanitarian basis, as a moral duty and a show of fraternal solidarity, in support of their right to a Palestinian State. Lebanon has been fundamentally supporting the rights of the Palestinian people. The Lebanese people have agreed on two firm issues, namely, the rejection of resettlement in all its forms and the sacred right of return of Palestinian refugees to the land of Palestine. In order for everyone to enjoy safety and security, we must return to the United Nations resolutions and to a just and comprehensive peace. Palestine must be recognized as an independent State along the borders of 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Only then we can dispense with UNRWA.

Today I heard the boring statement of a clown representative who wanted to challenge members' intelligence, twisting history and deforming facts. He accused Lebanon of pursuing a policy of racial discrimination against Palestinian refugees. We recall that Lebanon opened its doors to its Palestinian brothers, who were fleeing grave massacres committed by Israeli gangs in Deir Yassin, Haifa, Al-Tantura and other Palestinian villages and cities, which resulted in the killing of thousands of Palestinians. The killed have had enough. Unfortunately, the killer is never satisfied.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Denmark.

Ms. Lassen (Denmark): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the five Nordic countries — Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and my own country, Denmark.

Let me start by thanking Commissioner-General Lazzarini for his detailed and concerning briefing.

The Nordic countries are deeply concerned about the immense suffering of civilians and loss of life in Gaza, as well as the harrowing risk of famine caused by the insufficient entry of aid into Gaza since Hamas's deplorable attack on 7 October. We also deplore the number of humanitarian workers killed.

The Nordic countries, collectively, are among the largest donors to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), with contributions in 2023 amounting to almost \$130 million. All five Nordic countries have moved ahead with contributions for 2024.

Yet financing of humanitarian aid cannot stand alone and means little if the conditions are not in place for such aid to reach the affected populations. Administrative procedures, including screening processes, must be swift so that the volume needed can enter as quickly as possible and for UNRWA to be able to undertake critical services and life-saving support.

Full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access into and throughout the Gaza Strip via all routes is essential to provide the civilian population with life-saving assistance and basic services at scale. Moreover, humanitarian workers must be protected in accordance with international humanitarian law.

It is important that UNRWA continue its work to restore trust in the Organization. Following recent serious allegations directed towards some workers of the Agency, we welcome the prompt follow-up action initiated by the Secretary-General and the UNRWA Commissioner General.

As we await the release of the findings of the independent review and the review of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, we expect such findings to lead to an UNRWA that is robust and well equipped to respond to the needs of the civilian population, in close coordination with relevant United Nations agencies and other partners.

It has been said several times here today — the services that UNRWA and other United Nations agencies provide in Gaza and across the region are essential. At a time of escalation in regional tensions, we are counting on the Council to remain engaged across all possible avenues in order to ensure that essential services and the required volumes of aid reach all civilians in need of assistance, including in all areas of Gaza.

We call for the immediate implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions and for all parties to support neutral, impartial and independent United Nations-led humanitarian action in Gaza and beyond.

The meeting rose at 6.10 p.m.