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Speech by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the high-level conference Engaging youth—Palestine Refugees in the changing Middle East¹

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It's a great privilege to be here and have the opportunity to meet with some of the young Palestine refugee representatives. It's not only a chance for us to meet together, but also for the Palestine young representatives to meet with each other. I don't under estimate the sense of optimism in this room, but am aware of how difficult this occasion is as they come together for one of the very few occasions where this is possible.

It's a pleasure for me to be here also because in this week we have a number of events which demonstrate the priority the European Union is giving to the Middle East Region. Today we have the stakeholder's conference and later in the week we have the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee and the Quartet Envoy's meeting, and all of this linked to the Foreign Affairs Council which will meet on Friday. The region is very much a key part of the policy that we have, a key priority for me from the outset of my time in office and perhaps even more so since what we call the Arab Spring events.

We witnessed with humility and admiration what so many people in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya did when they raised their voices to put an end to regimes in a revolution that was an inspiration to all of us. We watch today the quest for dignity now tragically unfolding in Syria, a country where UNRWA plays such an important part. And we are all appalled as the bloodshed continues. We witness the fighting, the crimes against humanity and the over 8-9000 people who have been killed, so many children and young people who have been caught up and murdered. We always take the opportunity to reiterate our call for the violence to stop and for unhindered access to humanitarian aid.

¹ Check Against Delivery.

P R E S S

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And I will if I may pay tribute to Kofi Annan who on behalf of the United Nations and the Arab League is doing his best to try ensure that the regime engages with him and offers a chance for the violence to stop. And I will through you, Secretary General of the Arab League, send again a message to Kofi Annan on behalf of all of us, a support for his work and for your work. We'll continue to work with everyone gathered here, with the Arab League, with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, with the United Nations, to continue to increase the pressure on the regime and support for Kofi Annan's work, to find a political solution.

One of the things that have struck me in the course of this last year and a half has been the role of the young people in Syria and in the Arab Spring. It's been absolutely crucial and if I might I would also particularly put the emphasis on the role of young women, many of whom I've had the privilege to meet and to work with. Young people have been in the front line of change, they've been courageous in having their voices heard and they continue to speak out. As the young people who have joined us today, they want freedom, they want opportunities, they want jobs, they want education, they want a future, they want a country. They want a place where they can live in peace and security, where they can grow and develop, and have their own families, a future and a place that belongs to them. I will argue that the young people sitting here are the true members of this conference. We are privileged to be in their presence and have their inspiration.

Over the coming two days we will listen to the voices of the future leaders of their communities and the future leaders of a Palestinian state. When I was last in Gaza I had the privilege of meeting with the a group of young people: Yasmeen who is here with us today, but I also met with Ali, and Motaz, Smaher, Sahar and they said a number of things to me in the course of that meeting and I'm going to quote from what they said to me at that time.

"We can't wait, we need to take the future in our own hands and to do so working together".

"We need to see the world and the world needs to see us because we are the same as other young people around the world, we have the same concerns, we have the same dreams".

"Even if I live in Gaza, which is a prison, I will continue to love and explain its beauty and the energy and hopes of all the young people around me".

"We don't complain, we can't complain – we need to spark hope and passion about Gaza and its community".

"Freedom will come through education and knowledge, the internet is our window on the world. We need to create curiosity and knowledge about our rights".

I argue that those quotes speak for themselves and we can't fail them. They do not look for excuses. We should not look for excuses either. When I was in Gaza, when I visited Palestine and the West Bank too, I saw the role that young people are playing in their communities and as I've already said on a number of occasions, especially the role of the young women, because the fate of women's rights in a sense dictates the fate of the future of the Arab Spring. Women who've been central to the changes that are taking place and will remain central. It's not just a political or moral issue, it's also an economic issue. The engagement of all people in the future is crucial.

Let me just say a little bit too about what the European Union believes is so important about UNRWA and part of what's important is sitting next to me because it's been my great privilege to work with you, Filippo Grandi, and with your team and I have not only found it inspirational, I've also enjoyed it enormously. You and I have discussed on many occasions the need to continue with the support.

It's not a coincidence that the European Union is the biggest and the most loyal donor. Our donor activity started in 1971 and in the last 11 years we provided over € 1.3 billion in support of UNRWA's work - along with contributions from EU Member States, the EU overall contributions in 2010 and 2011 accounted for almost 40% of the total support. It is a big effort in difficult financial circumstances.

And I believe it is because it matters so much. I am not giving you figures so that you feel a sense of success from the EU, but so you would feel a sense of commitment from the European Union. Our support goes to where it matters most: health, schools, humanitarian needs, and shelter. The ultimate goal however is for Palestinians to be masters of their own fate, in their own state.

Our goal, consistently spelt out over time, is supporting the creation of a Palestinian state that will not need to depend on donor support, will stand in its own right and will exist in peace and security side by side with all its neighbours. As PM Fayyad always tells me and we will talk about it at the AHLC meeting on Wednesday here in Brussels: Palestine should be given the opportunity to compete without help from donors. The talent is there, the will is there, what is needed is the opportunity and the right political decision.

For that reason – we leave no stone unturned and we will do everything possible to try and meet circumstances for the completion of the Middle East Peace Process. We know too that the Palestinian refugees face additional challenges; they leave in countries which even after so many years they cannot consider home. This is why UNRWA's work is so special: it has gone beyond the provision of universal needs and helped them establish a sense of identity that otherwise is lost to the world, an identity which people here are absolutely proud of. And that comes about through many things that UNRWA does.

In Syria, through the Palestine Refugee youth exclusion, which enhances the economic and social prospects, and supporting vocational education through the 'Engaging Youth programme'.

In Lebanon, through the Palestinian students being able to benefit from EU-supported university scholarships.

In Jordan, addressing the social needs of refugees including support to improve the living conditions.

In Gaza, where we have seen children account for more than half of the 1.5 million population, where we have supported UNRWA's summer games for the past few years. In 2011, 250,000 children in Gaza, including 16,000 children with special needs, participated in educational and recreational activities across six weeks.

I wonder how many of you knew that the children of Gaza now proudly hold four Guinness world records: the most people playing parachute games; the largest handprint painting; the most footballs dribbled simultaneously; the most kites flown simultaneously!. I have one Gaza kite in my office. Given the opportunity, the children of Gaza can achieve whatever they want. This is what I say to PM Netanyahu everytime I meet with him.

In the West Bank too we have the opportunities for young people to learn about the EU and its culture and to value and benefit from the relationship between us.

So I would say this, that over the coming years, the EU will continue providing support to UNRWA's General Fund as the Agency makes progress in its reform process. We believe that UNRWA is essential to the development and well-being of all the Palestine refugees and we believe that it needs strong support, financial support from all the parties that are able to do that and I would make that message very clear to everyone that is present here that I see your participation today also as a recognition of the need to continue and offer financial support to UNRWA into the future.

We are gathered here because we have recognised the potential of the youth of Palestine. Against all the odds, they continue to learn, to work, to dream and aspire to a better future. And the days when we remember young people who have been killed in all sorts of terrible circumstances - the Belgian children having lost their lives in a terrible tragedy and when we think of what happened in Toulouse today, when we remember what happened in Norway a year ago, when we know what is happening in Syria, when we see what is happening in Gaza and Sderot and in different parts of the world - we remember young people and children who lose their lives. Here are young people who are asking not to be leaders of the future, but to be taken seriously as leaders of today. And it is to them that we should look and to them we should listen and it is to them that I pay tribute.

For further information about the event :

<http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=1294>

Audiovisual coverage of the event:

<http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/ebs/schedule.cfm>
