



UNRWA HUMAN RIGHTS GRADUATION GAZA,
JUNE 16, 2009

Director of UNRWA Operations John Ging, thank you for inviting me to Gaza. Distinguished guests, children of Gaza, I am grateful for your warm reception.

I first visited Gaza 36 years ago and returned during the 1980s and later for the very successful Palestinian elections. Although under occupation, this community was relatively peaceful and prosperous. Now, the aftermath of bombs, missiles, tanks, bulldozers and the continuing economic siege have brought death, destruction, pain, and suffering to the people here. Tragically, the international community largely ignores the cries for help, while the citizens of Gaza are treated more like animals than human beings.

Last week, a group of Israelis and Americans tried to cross into Gaza through Erez, bringing toys and children's playground equipment - slides, swings, kites, and magic castles for your children. They were stopped at the gate and prevented from coming. I understand even paper and crayons are treated as "security hazards" and not permitted to enter Gaza. I sought an explanation for this policy in Israel, but did not receive a satisfactory answer – because there is none.

The responsibility for this terrible human rights crime lies in Jerusalem, Cairo, Washington, and throughout the international community. This abuse must cease; the crimes must be investigated; the walls must be brought down, and the basic right of freedom must come to you.

Almost one half of Gaza's 1.5 million people are children, whose lives are being shaped by poverty, hunger, violence, and despair. More than 50,000 families had their homes destroyed or damaged in January, and parents are in mourning for the 313 innocent children who were killed.

The situation in Gaza is grim, but all hope is not lost. Amidst adversity, you continue to possess both dignity and determination to work towards a brighter tomorrow. That is why educating children is so important.

I have come to Gaza to help the world know what important work you are doing. UNRWA is here to ensure that the 200,000 children in its schools can develop their talent, express their dynamism, and help create the path to a better future.

The human rights curriculum is teaching children about their rights and also about their responsibilities. UNRWA is teaching about the universal declaration of human rights and the struggle for these rights all over the world, Gaza's children are learning

that as you seek justice for yourselves, you must be sure that your behavior provides justice for others.

They are learning that it is wrong to fire rockets that may kill Israeli children. They are learning that arbitrary detention and the summary execution of political opponents is not acceptable. They are learning that the rule of law must be honored here in Gaza.

I would like to congratulate both UNRWA and the children who have completed the human rights curriculum with distinction. They are tomorrow's leaders.

In addition to the tragedy of occupation, the lack of unity among Palestinians is causing a deteriorating atmosphere here in Gaza, in Ramallah, and throughout the West Bank.

Palestinians want more than just to survive. They hope to lead the Arab world, to be a bridge between modern political life and traditions that date back to the biblical era. The nation you will create must be pluralistic and democratic - the new Palestine that your intellectuals have dreamt about. Palestine must combine the best of the east and the west. The Palestinian state, like the land, must be blessed for all people. Jerusalem must be shared with everyone who loves it – Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

With our new leaders in Washington, my country will move into the forefront of this birth of a new Palestine. We were all reminded of this renewed hope and commitment by president Obama's recent speech in Cairo.

President Obama's resolve to resume the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process based on the principle of two states for two peoples must be welcomed. This vision of two sovereign nations living as neighbors is not a mere convenient phrase. It is the basis for a lasting peace for this entire region, including Syria and Lebanon.

We all know that a necessary step is the ending of the siege of Gaza – the starving of 1-1/2 million people of the necessities of life. Never before in history has a large community been savaged by bombs and missiles and then deprived of the means to repair itself. The issue of who controls Gaza is not an obstacle. As the world bank has pointed out, funds can be channeled through a number of independent mechanisms and effective implementing agencies.

Although funds are available, not a sack of cement nor a piece of lumber has been permitted to enter the closed gates from Israel and Egypt. I have seen with my own eyes that progress is negligible.

My country and our friends in Europe must do all that is necessary to persuade Israel and Egypt to allow basic materials into Gaza. At the same time, there must be no more rockets and mortar shells falling on Israeli citizens.

I met this week with the parents of corporal Gilad Shalit, and have with me a letter that I hope can be delivered to their son. I have also met with many Palestinians who plead for the freedom of their 11,700 loved ones imprisoned by the Israelis, including

400 women and children. Many of them have been imprisoned for many years, held without trial, with no access to their families or to legal counsel. Rational negotiations and a comprehensive peace can end this suffering on both sides.

I know it is difficult now, surrounded by terrible destruction, to see a future of independence and dignity in a Palestinian state, but this goal can and must be achieved. I know too that it is hard for you to accept Israel and live in peace with those who have caused your suffering. However, Palestinian statehood cannot come at the expense of Israel's security, just as Israel's security can not come at the expense of Palestinian statehood.

In his speech in Cairo, president Obama said that Hamas has support among Palestinians, but they also have responsibilities. To play a full role in fulfilling Palestinian aspirations, to unify the Palestinian people, Hamas must put an end to violence, accept existing peace agreements, and recognize Israel's right to exist." I have urged Hamas leaders to accept these conditions, and they have made statements and taken actions that suggest they are ready to join the peace process and move toward the creation of an independent and just Palestinian state.

Khaled Mashaal has assured me that Hamas will accept a final status agreement negotiated by the Palestinian authority and Israel if the Palestinian people approve it in a referendum. Hamas has offered a reciprocal ceasefire with Israel throughout the west bank and Gaza. Unfortunately, neither the Israeli leaders nor Hamas accept the terms of the Oslo agreement of 1993, but the Arab peace initiative is being considered now by all sides.

I have personally witnessed free and fair elections in Palestine when Yasir Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas were elected president and when legislative members were chosen for your parliament. I hope to return next January for a similar event that will unite all Palestinians as you seek a proud and peaceful future.

Ladies and gentlemen, children of Gaza, thank you for inviting me and for sharing this happy occasion with me. Congratulations for your achievements.