



European Union/UNRWA press release
21 March 2011
Jerusalem

The European Union and UNRWA highlight partnership at village of Al-Walaja

During a special visit to the village of Al-Walaja, EU Representative, Mr Christian Berger, and UNRWA's Commissioner-General, Filippo Grandi, signed an agreement between the EU and UNRWA worth EUR 40million: funds that will contribute towards the UN agency's human development work, such as education, health and social protection. The ceremony took place at the village's school and was an occasion for the local community to get together and children to engage in recreational activities.

Walking around the village today, the EU and UNRWA officials met residents and spoke to UN field workers about the impact of the Barrier on the life of the community. They witnessed first hand how Al-Walaja has been affected and visited UNRWA's job creation project, which aims to mitigate the negative effects of the Barrier on the life and economy of the village.

Speaking at the UNRWA school later on, Grandi reflected on what they had seen.

"I am dismayed but sadly not surprised by what we have seen today in Walaja. Unfortunately, a series of discriminatory practices by Israel has ensured that life for this beautiful and vibrant community has become a living nightmare.

"At a time when the "Arab street" is looking at the treatment by Israel of the Palestinians as a benchmark of the international community's commitment to justice in the Middle East, we would do well to reflect on the plight of the villagers of Al Walaja and the Palestinians as a whole, and learn salutary lessons about the urgent need to address their historic grievances.

"It is also more important than ever that we have signed this agreement with the EU today. The EU as a whole is our biggest overall donor, and provide us with the vital funds needed to sustain our work. That includes our attempts to protect the rights of West Bank communities threatened with displacement, such as al-Walaja.

"You can see today the great work that we doing in our schools to enable Palestinian refugee communities while all the odds are stacked against them. I want to take this opportunity to thank Mr Berger for their unflinching support of our human development work here and throughout the region."

Speaking on behalf of the EU, Mr Christian Berger said that "today's event serves two purposes: to highlight the very real hardships faced by Al Walaja and other communities affected by the route of the Barrier and reaffirm the European Union's commitment to help them address those hardships". "By providing this financial support to UNRWA, with whom the EU has a long-lasting partnership, we can bring immediate relief to many of the most vulnerable families. I had the opportunity to see for myself today the important work that UNRWA is doing here and I commend them for their commitment to make a difference in Palestine refugees' livelihoods." "The EU is active in Al Walaja also with other community development projects designed to strengthen service delivery and help residents to pursue their rights and services", Berger added.



Background information:

About UNRWA

UNRWA – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – provides assistance, protection and advocacy for some 4.8 million registered Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the occupied Palestinian territory, pending a solution to their plight. The Agency's services encompass education, health care, social safety-net, camp infrastructure and improvement, community support, microfinance and emergency response, including in times of armed conflict.

UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from UN member states.

About the EU

The EU's principal objective in delivering support to Palestine refugees is to contribute to the just resolution of the refugee issue as part of a comprehensive settlement of final status issues. In doing so, the EU ensures that the essential humanitarian and development needs of the Palestine refugees are met. It delivers most of such assistance through its partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The EU has been UNRWA's largest donor since 1971. The bulk of EU financial support is devoted to UNRWA's core funding enabling it to provide essential education, health, and social relief services to Palestine refugees.

About Walaja and the Barrier

The village of Walaja, 10km south of Jerusalem in the West Bank, is one of many communities in the West Bank affected by the route of the Israeli Barrier. With construction around the village having begun, residents face the threat of destroyed livelihoods, increased poverty and dependency on humanitarian aid. Some residents face the prospect of their homes soon being totally encircled.

To date, just over 60 per cent of the planned 709km West Bank Barrier has been constructed by Israel. The presence of the Barrier has had a devastating economic, social and psychological effect on communities in the West Bank, and is one of the main triggers of further displacement for already vulnerable refugees. In 2005, the International Court of Justice concluded in an advisory opinion that the route of the Barrier was illegal under international law.

Further reading [links]

For more info on Al-Walaja:

Read an op-ed by Filippo Grandi on the situation in Walaja

Read the story of Omar, a Walaja resident

Contacts:

For more information on UNRWA: Chris Gunness, +97 2(0)54 240 2659 c.gunness@unrwa.org

For more information on the EU's assistance to oPt: Antonia Zafeiri, +972 (0)54 802 4915 antonia.zafeiri@ec.europa.eu

Shadi Othman, 0599673958, shadi.othman@ec.europa.eu