

Address to the Economic and Social Council of the
League of Arab States

By

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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary-General, your Excellencies,

I am extremely grateful to be invited to address this gathering and to have the opportunity to share with you the work of the World Food Programme, especially our partnerships with your governments to reach the poor and hungry in the Arab World.

I know all of you are preoccupied with Lebanon and the violence there. There were no winners in the Lebanon crisis. The credibility of the UN and its aid efforts was sometimes called into question. What some people fail to understand is that the UN is far from just a political entity. In fact, the World Food Programme and our sister aid agencies like UNICEF and UNHCR have no political agenda at all. We do not meddle in politics, more often we reach out to its victims. We were in Beirut, Syria and the south to reach to help families devastated by the war - no more, no less.

Sadly, conflicts and disasters around the world go unabated. Tensions in the Middle East have once again reached a crisis point, with a fragile ceasefire in place in Lebanon and continuing hostilities in the Gaza Strip. The World Food Programme is active in both these places in service of a cause that all of us believe in - humanitarianism. The humanitarian imperative demands that, irrespective of politics or religion, it is unacceptable to allow people to suffer from hunger and deprivation.

That is the basis on which we carry out our work, whether in troubled pockets of the Middle East or anywhere else across the globe. We are hopeful that your governments and the League of Arab States, with whom we have signed an agreement in 2004, will help us cope better with humanitarian needs and to confront the even greater challenge of chronic hunger that afflicts 850 million people worldwide.

In the year 2000, the United Nations set itself eight development goals for the new millennium, the first of which was to halve the proportion of poor

and hungry people in the world by 2015. While great strides have been made towards reducing poverty, the goal of reducing hunger still eludes us. I fear that one of the obstacles is a perception of the United Nations as little more than a political talking shop - an amorphous body full of good intentions and worthy resolutions - but incapable of bringing about significant change. This perception, however, ignores the work and many successes of the UN humanitarian agencies, of which the World Food Programme is the largest.

Like the Arab League, the World Food Programme works within the context of humanitarian as well development assistance. Our mission is as simple as it is complex. It is simple in that we provide basic food like wheat flour, pulses, oil, sugar to about 100 million people in need every year, be they drought victims, refugees, or hungry children. Yet it is also complex because we have to deliver well over 4 million tons of food to some of the most remote places on earth. Here in this region, we provide relief assistance in close partnership with governments and non-governmental organizations in countries like Somalia, Mauritania, and Djibouti, which face periodic crisis as a result of natural or man-made disasters. On the development side, WFP gives priority to helping least developed countries like Yemen to meet commitments to bring the poorest to the economic mainstream and make available opportunities for a better future.

At the same time, we have been assisting middle-income countries whose economies are rapidly growing, like Egypt, Syria and Jordan since the 1960s. Today, we work with them to build their national capacities to enable them to self fund and sustain various development projects. Egypt and Syria have already started contributing to their own WFP-assisted development projects and they are contributing to WFP operations in other parts of the world. We have also built a strong partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia whose generous donations made positive impact on our programmes in well over 15 countries in east and west Africa and in Asia. The United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Libya, Qatar and Oman have also made substantial contributions to various WFP operations around the world.

Relief work has indeed been a WFP priority in this region in the last month. I would like to tell you a little about the work of the World Food Programme in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory. As a developed, prosperous country, Lebanon had no need of food aid before this latest conflict erupted in July. WFP did not even have an office in Lebanon, having closed down all operations in the country 10 years ago. But the war swiftly brought about the destruction of much of Lebanon's infrastructure and caused economic paralysis as commercial activity ceased and hundreds of thousands of people fled their homes, suddenly finding themselves in need of aid. Within a week, WFP had an assessment team in place and started operations a few days later. As the lead UN agency for logistics, WFP was responsible for moving all humanitarian supplies - including food, shelter materials, medical supplies, water, fuel and sanitary goods - for the entire UN family and much of the NGO community. Despite the tremendous challenges of working under fire, the system of "concurrence", whereby we informed all parties involved in advance of our intended movements, allowed our convoys to move only when we received the go-ahead. While this inevitably led to delays and restrictions on access, by the time the cessation of hostilities came into effect on 14 August, we had succeeded in delivering 1,330 metric tons of food to some 260,000 people, as well as hundreds of tons of non-food aid for other agencies. Since the ceasefire, our access has improved and we have now reached a total of 714,000 people in Lebanon and Syria. We were able to do that largely thanks to the generous and swift response of the donor community. I would like here to express my special thanks to Saudi Arabia, the European Commission, Germany, the United States, France and Canada who collectively contributed the bulk of the resources for our operation in Lebanon. I would like to also thank Australia, Norway, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Spain, Japan, Luxembourg, and Singapore for reaching out and making valuable contributions to Lebanon. The generosity and support that Lebanon received a few days ago at the Stockholm Donors Conference addresses the needs of the early recovery period. Humanitarian needs as people try to

rebuild their livelihoods should, not be, however, ignored. WFP is actively re-assessing food aid needs in partnership with the government and our greatest hope is that the ceasefire holds and the blockades are lifted, that normal commercial activities could resume and that we can wind up operations in Lebanon as soon as possible.

I wish I could express the same hopes for the occupied Palestinian territory, where WFP has been delivering food aid to the non-refugee population since 1993. Unfortunately, there is as yet no light appearing at the end of the tunnel. Indeed, with the cutting off of international funding to the Palestinian Authority since January and the escalation of the crisis in Gaza in particular, WFP has had to increase the number of its beneficiaries from 480,000 to 600,000. We are particularly concerned about the situation in Gaza, where the economy is reaching rock bottom. Activities that were once the backbone of Gaza's economy and food system, such as agriculture and fishing, are collapsing and risk losing all viability. Farmers who are forced to purchase power and water to maintain their crops are passing on production costs to customers whose purchasing power is at an all time low. For more and more people, WFP is the only remaining safety net. And at the same time, our ability to support them is critically undermined by a shortage of funds. Of the 100 million dollars we need for our current two-year operation, we have received just under 50 percent - 45 million dollars. Saudi Arabia already reached out to assist WFP's operations for the second time in two years with a very welcome donation. Palestinian families, however, have suffered too long and I appeal to you to join us in helping them now, as so many of you have done for decades.

I would like to say that the shortage of funds we face in Palestine was an exception, but unfortunately this is far from the case. As far as funding is concerned, we have huge problems for many of our operations. Take Sudan, our biggest operation at present. In the Darfur region of western Sudan, we are facing the prospect of having to cut back rations for three million people for the second time this year, simply because we don't have the

funds to keep them on the daily minimum requirement of 2,100 kilocalories. On the positive side, I would like to welcome the contribution of US\$6.2 million from the Sudanese Government for our emergency operation there. And I should also thank the authorities in south Sudan for their donation of US\$30 million for road repairs and mine clearance on major transport routes in Sudan - a crucial step in restoring normality to the south after more than two decades of civil war.

As I am sure you are aware, WFP has no secured funding base - we rely entirely on voluntary donations. For that reason, we are always on the lookout for new partners, whether governments or the private sector - an area that has expanded enormously over the past few years. I have felt strongly for some years that we need to build more partnerships in the Arab world - and this was the message I carried when I visited Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in September 2004. Since then I have been back in this region on a number of occasions and I have been heartened by the response. When I met you, Mr Moussa, in May during the World Economic Forum meeting in Sharm El Sheikh, you were kind enough to offer to help WFP engage more Arab states as donors. It seems you have already had considerable success: This year, contributions to WFP from Arab League member states have already reached US\$62 million. This is tremendous support and we are extremely grateful. But much more work needs to be done to build strategic partnerships. Our annual budget currently runs at about US\$3 billion, and our aim is to persuade the Arab world to provide us with 10 percent of that.

I would like to pay tribute to the individuals from the Arab world, who have given us their support and exercised their influence to promote our cause. Her Royal Highness Princess Haya Bint al Hussein has visited our projects in Malawi and Ethiopia and most recently Syria, as a WFP Goodwill Ambassador. Special Ambassador Abdulaziz Arrukban from Saudi Arabia has done a great deal to encourage partnerships with WFP; Egyptian Actor

Mahmoud Yassin is an Ambassador against Hunger and has visited our operations; Lebanese singer Assi Helani has lent his voice to our cause.

In conclusion, let me once again express my gratitude to the League of Arab States for giving me this opportunity to speak here today and to appeal to all of you as representatives of your individual governments to help us raise awareness of WFP activities and place ourselves as a visible player in the region's humanitarian arena. I will be meeting a number of you bilaterally to discuss our operations and possible partnerships in greater detail and would welcome the chance of many more such meetings in future.

In April this year, WFP attended a regional conference on children held in Dubai. I'd like to tell you about one of the speakers at the conference. Her name is Waleeda. She is 14 years old and comes from a small village by the Red Sea in Yemen. While other speakers talked about using information technology in schools and satellite TV channels, Waleeda spoke about how people in her village have no electricity or running water; how children have to work to support their families and miss out on school; and how many children in her village now have the chance to go to school, thanks to WFP's Food for Education project. Waleed dreams of becoming a nurse. I would like to think that we are helping her achieve that dream.

I think the lesson of that story is that we all need to bridge our perceived differences and instead focus on the people we all claim to serve - the poor and the hungry. I am well aware that more needs to be done from our side. Despite the fact that we have been assisting people in Arab countries for decades, many humanitarian workers do not know enough about the deeply rooted culture of charity in this region and the imperatives that drive it. Many people and international institutions are not aware of the immense generosity and culture of giving that is so characteristic of the people here. And we must enrich and strengthen our partnerships with Arab humanitarian groups. Together, we can do more and we must. In the words of the Prophet

Mohammed, you cannot go to bed with a full stomach, when your brother and neighbour are hungry.

Thank you.