UNRWA and the European Union Instrument for Stability

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has provided basic services such as education, relief and health care to Palestine refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for over 60 years. Without faltering in its mission of furthering the human development of the some 5 million Palestine refugees across the region, and despite chronic financial constraints, UNRWA is now responding to the critical needs of Palestine refugees affected by the conflict in Syria.

The current regional crisis is one of the gravest challenges the Agency has faced since it was established to assist Palestine refugees after their original dispossession and dispersion throughout the region in 1948. UNRWA estimates that 420,000 of the 529,000 Palestine refugees registered in Syria are in need of relief assistance. About half of the registered population is displaced within the country, while an estimated 70,000 Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) have fled to Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza, Egypt and other countries.

Thanks to the European Union (EU) Instrument for Stability (IFS) funding of EUR 7.5 million (US$ 10.2 million), UNRWA has been able to more effectively provide critical relief, adapt services such as education to the crisis conditions, maintain its microfinance programme and provide for greater staff security in response to the conflict.

Emergency Shelter Assistance in Lebanon

Often arriving in Lebanon with little more than the bags they could carry across the border, the most vulnerable PRS families are in desperate need of shelter. UNRWA has used EU cash assistance for shelter to help more than 12,000 PRS families (over 57,000 individuals); the amount of assistance depends on the size of the family.

During the first half of 2013, EU-funded assistance was distributed in three separate rounds. In June 2013, during the third round, UNRWA ran a needs assessment and profiled PRS needs in health, protection, education, food and housing to help inform future targeted-funding requests.
Access to Education for PRS Students

UNRWA and the EU worked closely on the parameters of ‘education in emergencies’, both for Palestine refugee students in Syria and for those pupils who fled to Lebanon and Jordan. UNRWA is adjusting its programmes to give as many of them as possible the opportunity to keep up with their coursework despite the conflict. Measures include: access to ‘secure’ classrooms in safe areas; double-shift schooling; provision of self-learning materials, further supported by televised lessons available on the UNRWA satellite and YouTube channels; and important psychosocial support through the appointment of school counsellors and training for teachers.

EU IfS funding has also supported summer learning classes, the delivery of Back-to-School kits for students entering school in September and, in Syria, an SMS notification system to inform parents of school openings and closures.

UNRWA has been working with the ministries of education in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, and with community-based organizations and NGOs, to provide access to education to as many PRS students as possible. The strategy is showing promising results. Of the approximately 67,000 UNRWA students in Syria in September 2012, 41,000 are currently enrolled in schools in Syria, 6,690 in Lebanon and 927 in Jordan. The UNRWA self-learning programme is currently being reviewed by UNICEF and the Syrian Ministry of Education as a possible model to extend to all students in Syria.

Microfinance Loans

UNRWA continues to deliver inclusive microfinance services to both Palestine refugees and Syrian citizens, supporting their economic resilience. The EU IfS fund, started in October 2012, has enabled the programme to reach more people by expanding to new areas where it is feasible to operate. Three new lending offices were opened in Tartous, Latakia and Sweida, and lending continues in central Damascus. However, due to the conflict, three offices in neighbouring areas of Damascus – Sit Zeynab, Douma and Yarmouk – were closed, as was one in Aleppo.

Considering the prevailing circumstances, the programme’s performance has been remarkable. From January to September 2013, UNRWA granted 1,865 loans, worth SYP 71.29 million (US$ 412,853), of which 35 per cent went to women. The portfolio-at-risk by more than 30 days late was just 0.81 per cent. As a result of the conflict, the Agency had to write off 8,534 loans, valued at SYP 137 million (US$ 793,584), but has closed 13 per cent of these and collected SYP 23 million (US$ 132,865), or 17 per cent, from the bad debts – a noticeable level of recovery. The collections and repayments ensure the continuation of the capital of the programme for new clients, and UNRWA expects to finance over 1,000 loans per month by end of 2013.

UNRWA commissioned and recently published a periodic economic review, the first Syria Socioeconomic Monitoring Report. The Agency also completed its Survey Report on the Impact of the Crisis on Microfinance Clients and a study on client poverty.

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for palestine refugees in the near east

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Security and Service Delivery

UNRWA has the largest UN operational footprint in Syria, with 3,800 personnel and close to 200 facilities. Staff and assets are routinely exposed to conflict-related risks. Eight UNRWA area staff have tragically died since 2011 as a result of the conflict. Fourteen have been injured, and a further 17 have been detained or kidnapped or are missing. The Agency has also lost 21 vehicles, and at least 40 of its buildings have incurred damage from shelling or small-arms fire.

IFS funding is allowing UNRWA to strengthen the security of its personnel and operations. Actions include upgrading the physical perimeter of UNRWA facilities by installing hydraulic vehicle anti-ram barriers; installing GPS vehicle-tracking devices; procuring protective and communications equipment; and recruiting additional staff.