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Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Situation of Palestine Refugees from War-Torn Syrian Arab Republic

Background

As violence continued with fervour and unpredictability since March 2011, the Palestinian refugee community has been grappling with dire conditions.

According to UNRWA statistics, 95% of Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic are food insecure and are in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance in order to survive. Almost 280,000 are internally displaced, and an estimated 43,000 are trapped in hard-to-reach or inaccessible locations. At the same time, 120,000 have been forced out of Syria seeking safer shelter.¹

Situation of the Palestinians of Syria

The continuing conflict affecting the Syrian Arab Republic has given birth to movements of mass-exodus among the Palestinian refugee community.

U.N. figures kept record of the internal displacement of 7.6 million persons while 4.6 million refugees have sought shelter abroad.² At the same time, deals struck between the different warring actors brought hostilities to a standstill in such beleaguered areas as Darayya, Al Muadamiya, Khan Al Sheih, and Qudsaya.

Palestinians and Syrians alike have been made to endure a horrendous situation in light of the socio-economic crises and deadly offensives rocking the Syrian Arab Republic territories.

The early signs of the tragedy faced by the Palestinian refugee community have started to see the day following the mass-exodus of 1948, known as the *Nakba* (catastrophe).

UNRWA statistics released by the end of January 2012 suggested that 119,000 Palestinian refugees have sought shelter across Damascus and its suburbs and that 18,858 others have been housed in Deraa. Nearly 22,000 more refugees are sheltered in central, coastal, and northern Syrian areas, outside Palestinian refugee camps.

◆Economic and Health Indicators

Palestinian families in Syria have been enduring extreme poverty due to the ongoing economic crises affecting the Syrian Arab Republic territories.

The dramatic plunge in the value of the Syrian Arab Republic pound compared to the jump made by the U.S. dollar led to a sharp decline in the refugees' purchasing power.

A statistics-based study conducted by Firil Center for Studies - Berlin (FCFS) covering the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic between 2010 and 2016 reached the following findings:³

*86,7% live below the poverty line as a result of the conflict

*Syria stands as 2016's worst economic performers due to the swift hike in the individual cost of living, particularly among those who have lost their jobs as a result of the security mayhem and bankruptcy faced by several companies. Others have been unable to secure food, heating kit, and transportation fees after they have gone homeless and have, thus, been forced to rent a room or a small house to take provisional cover in.

*The continued plummeting of the Syrian pound's exchange rate, which dropped by 91,66%, compared to an exchange rate of 600 SYP/USD has added insult to injury. The average household income needed per every single month is estimated at 240,000 SYP in order for a family to slightly rise above the poverty line.

¹UNRWA, "Syria Emergency Appeal for 2017", <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/syria-emergency-appeal-2017>

²Amnesty, "Amnesty International Report Syria 2015/2016," <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/report-syria/>

³Firil, "Syria between 2010 and 2016," <http://firil.net/?p=2088>

*There are no exact figures on the number of doctors who have been displaced from Syria. Yet, preliminary data indicate that 28% to 34% of doctors registered with the Health Ministry fled the country. In a number of villages there exist no doctors or paramedical staff to evacuate or treat the wounded and diseased civilians.

*Over 61% of local hospitals and medical centers have either been totally or partially damaged. 59 hospitals and 378 health centers suspended their services. 418 ambulances were either destroyed or stolen in the rampant warfare.

◆Human Rights Indicators⁴

Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (AGPS) documented the death of 3,414 Palestinian refugees due to war-related incidents in Syria and on the migration road to Europe since the start of the Syrian conflict until December 2016.

•Use of barrel bombs and direct onslaughts on civilians:

Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have come under heavy shelling by the different warring parties. Upon more than one occasion, the Deraa Camp for Palestinian refugees has been targeted with gas cylinders, barrel bombs, and surface-to-surface missiles.

At the same time, hit-and-run offensives have reached a highpoint in Yarmouk Camp between the opposition groups (namely ISIS and Al-Nusra Front) in an attempt to hold sway over the shelter, and also between the Syrian Government army and their partners and the armed militias in the camp.

•Blockade

Hundreds of refugees have been trapped in Yarmouk Camp due to the blockade enforced by the Syrian government troops since July 2013. As a result, civilians and humanitarian envoys have been denied access out of and into the camp, causing an acute dearth in much-needed food items and medicines. The situation has gone far worse due to the chronic power and water blackouts rocking the shelter.

AGPS has recorded the death of at least 192 Palestinians due to undernourishment and medical neglect in the besieged camp.

•Forced deportation and displacement

Palestinian refugees have been denied access to their shelters via government-run checkpoints, despite the retreat of armed groups. Residents of Al Sbeina Camp have been tragically affected by the ban. However, the government forces allowed a number of pro-Syrian Government residents of Al Husseiniya Camp to return to their homes, under strict conditions.

The last quarter of 2016 witnessed the deportation of nearly 250 Palestinian families from Khan Al Sheih Camp to the northern Syrian province of Idlib following a reconciliation deal struck between the opposition groups and the Syrian Government forces.

•Abductions and enforced disappearance

AGPS kept record of the incarceration of 1,150 Palestinian refugees in Syrian government penitentiaries, among whom 80 female refugees. At the same time, 301 Palestinian refugees have gone missing while 450 others were tortured to death in those very lock-ups, amid increasing concerns over the mysterious fates endured by the detainees and victims of enforced disappearance.

•Torture and violence against women and girls

Palestinian women in Syria have not been safe from abductions, arrests, physical torture, and murder. According to AGPS data, 455 Palestinian women, amounting to 13% of the recorded death toll, were pronounced dead since the outbreak of the Syrian hostilities until December 2016.

Facts on the ground prove that the violations perpetrated against women have reached climactic heights and that the number of female victims of torture and abuse is far higher than the unearthed figures. Such cases remain however underreported due to reasons wavering between fear of retaliation, embarrassment, social prestige, fear of punishment and distrust in law enforcement.

Situation of Palestine Refugees displaced outside of the Syrian Arab Republic

⁴ AGPS, <http://www.actionpal.org.uk/en/>

The situation endured by the Palestinians from Syria has been no less tragic in the new asylum destinations, most notably Lebanon and Jordan.

Palestinian refugees have been grappling with the lack of security and protection along with a precarious legal status. They have also been deprived of the right to access social services and facilities. Besides, survival for most of those seeking refuge overseas have largely hinged on UNRWA aids in order to cover such basic needs as food, shelter, education, and health care.⁵

◆Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon

UNRWA statistics released by the end of January 2016 estimated that 31,850 Palestinians from Syria have sought refuge in Lebanon, 55% among whom reportedly housed in refugee camps and 45% others are taking cover outside Palestinian camps.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have often launched cries for help over the lack of humanitarian and relief assistance along with the severe restrictions imposed on their access to the market labor.

A survey on the socioeconomic status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon launched by UNRWA and the American University in Beirut (AUB) revealed that unemployment is of concern at 52.5 % for Palestinian refugees from Syria. 63% are unable to meet even their most essential food requirements while 60.6% live in a perpetual fear of deportation. 67.8% are concerned about their family's safety and 57.1% feel extremely insecure.

Palestinian refugees have also faced intricate difficulties with respect to their access to education. Palestinians from Syria have fewer chances to enroll at Lebanon schools compared to other refugee communities due to restrictions and steep education fees which far outpace the refugees' budgets.⁶

◆Palestinians from Syria in Jordan

UNRWA estimated that 18,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have fled to Jordan, 41% among whom identified as children below 18 years of age. For 30% of Palestinian families in Jordan, women have reportedly been the sole breadwinners. The majority of Palestinian refugees in Jordan live in communities with host families, mostly around Amman, Irbid, and Al Zarqa.⁷ The number is very likely to be much higher as several refugees entered Jordan using Syrian identity documents and posing themselves as Syrian nationals due to the bans slapped by the Jordanian authorities.

◆Palestine refugees in Egypt, Turkey, and Europe

Nearly 4,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria are sheltered in Egypt. 4,000 to 6,000 have sought refuge in Turkey, according to unofficial statistics. Nearly 80,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria reached Europe after they embarked on life-threatening journeys seeking a safer shelter. Dozens of others desperately attempted their journey through the sea or in the heart of the desert as they rummaged around for new asylums to hide their children into.

⁵ UNRWA, "2016 Syria Emergency Appeal" <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/2016-syria-emergency-appeal>

⁶ UNRWA, AUB, "AUB and UNRWA launch survey on the socioeconomic status of Palestine refugees in Lebanon" <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/aub-and-unrwa-launch-survey-socioeconomic-status-palestine-refugees-lebanon>

⁷ UNRWA, "2016 Syria Emergency Appeal" <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/2016-syria-emergency-appeal>