

Karen Koning Abuzayd im Gespräch mit Viola Raheb

Palästinensische Flüchtlinge nach dem Gaza-Abzug der Israelis

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Karen Koning AbuZayd – UN Assistant Secretary General, Commissioner-General UNWRA

In August 2000, Karen AbuZayd became an Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, appointed to the post of Deputy Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. On 1 April 2005, she became the Acting Commissioner-General and the UN Secretary General appointed her to the post of Commissioner-General on 28 June 2005. From her base in Gaza, she helps to oversee the education, health, social services and micro-enterprise programs for 4.1 million Palestinian refugees. Since September 2000, her work has concentrated on providing emergency assistance to, and generating employment for, the victims of the current crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory.

With Headquarters in Gaza and Amman, UNRWA provides education, health, and relief and social services to Palestine refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. With some 25,000 employees, mainly locally recruited teachers and health workers, UNRWA is the largest United Nations Agency in terms of staff. The Agency has a regular cash budget of \$339 million for 2005. Before joining UNRWA, Karen worked for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for 19 years. She began her humanitarian career in Sudan in 1981, dealing with Ugandan, Chadian and Ethiopian refugees fleeing from war and famine in their own countries. From Sudan she moved to Namibia in 1989 to help coordinate the return of apartheid era refugees, a successful repatriation operation which led to elections and independence. A year later the Liberian civil war erupted and Karen moved to Sierra Leone to head the UNHCR office in Freetown, initiating a new emergency response, that of settling 100,000 Liberians in 600 villages along the Liberian/Sierra Leone border. From 1991-93 in UNHCR's Geneva Headquarters, Karen directed the South African repatriation operation and the Kenya-Somali cross-border operation. She left Geneva to go to Sarajevo as Chief of Mission for two years during the Bosnian war. Four million displaced and war-affected people were kept alive by UNHCR's airlift and convoy activities, while thousands more were protected from ethnic cleansing by a UNHCR presence. Karen's last four years in UNHCR were spent as Chef de Cabinet to High Commissioner Sadako Ogata and as Regional Representative for the United States and Caribbean, where she focused on funding, public information and the legal issues of asylum-seekers. Before joining UNHCR, Karen lectured in Political Science and Islamic Studies at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda and at Juba University in southern Sudan.

She earned her B.Sc. at DePauw University in Indiana and her M.A. in Islamic Studies at McGill University in Canada. She is married to a Sudanese professor and has two children.

Viola Raheb – Theologian, Educational Scientist

Viola Raheb was born as daughter of Palestinian Christians on October 2, 1969 in Bethlehem, where she grew up and attended the Evangelical Lutheran school (graduation in 1987). She studied in Germany (Theology and Educational Sciences at the Ruprecht-Karl-University in Heidelberg) and achieved her M. A. in 1995. 1995-1998: Activities: International Center of Bethlehem (Head of the Public Relations Dept.), 1995-1998: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and Palestine (Deputy Director), 1995-1998: Education for Awareness and Involvement (Program Coordinator later on Program Director), 1998-2002: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan (Director). Publications (e.g.): *Zwischen nationaler Identität und Geschlechterkampf* (in: Naher Osten – Ferner Frieden? Israel und Palästina. Probleme des Friedens. Politische Schriftenreihe 1996/4, *Schlusswort einer christlichen Palästinenserin* (in: Deutsch-Palästinensische Gesellschaft e.V., ed., Themenheft *Palästinensische Frauen, Bildung als Herausforderung* (in: Palästina verstehen 40/1998), *Leben mit der Angst* (in: Israel 1998). Viola Raheb is married to the Austro-Palestinian musician Marwan Abado, has a son and lives in Vienna.

Gertraud Auer

Being together in the living room is a very special moment, a very special invitation. Indeed, tonight we have very special guests here. Ms. Karen Koning Abuzayd who is the Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency since June 2005. From her base in Gaza she helps to oversee the education, health and social services and micro-enterprised program for millions of Palestinian refugees. Before joining UNRWA Karen worked for the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for 19 years in many countries like Sudan, Namibia, Sierra Leone, and in the head quarter of UNHCR in Geneva. From Geneva she went to Sarajevo where she was the chief of mission for two years during the Bosnian war. Her last years at the UNHCR she was chef du cabinet to the High Commissioner Sadako Gata, and the regional representative for the United States and the Caribbean. She lectured political sciences and Islamic studies in African and North American universities, and she is married to a Sudanese professor and has two children. Let me thank you very much to be our guest tonight and to debate with Viola Raheb who is the other very special guest and a good friend of the house.

Viola is a Palestinian Christian born in Bethlehem. She studied in Germany theology and educational sciences. After her graduation she went back to Bethlehem where she headed the public relations department of the international center of Bethlehem, and she was director of the Lutheran Church in Jordan and Palestine, and program director of education for awareness and involvement. She writes and publishes in German. Her books are available in our bookshops. The last one was *Geboren zu Bethlehem*. Viola is married in Vienna. She lives in Austria since three and a half years. She has a small son, Ranad. She just came back from Bethlehem where she stayed for a month.

The title of our evening tonight is the situation of Palestinian refugees after the Gaza disengagement. I open the floor to Karen.

Karen Koning Abuzayd

I thought I would say a few words about UNRWA. We are an organisation that takes care of over four million refugees in five fields. Gaza and the Westbank, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon. We do this by providing basic services, education, health, social services, and a micro-finance program through 25.000 local staff. So it is quite an unusual UN Agency because we do our own implementation and provide basic services. In situations like the last five years of the Intifada we also do emergency programs, and provide food for those who need it, and job creation programs, and other services that are related to the emergency. We have only 113 international staff. So again quite unusual in the UN system that our staff is basically local Palestinians and refugees themselves. There is often a misperception - misunderstanding of what Palestine refugees are. Only 6% of the refugee population of the four million are, what we call Special Hardship Cases needing food or cash or welfare services. Everyone else is self-sufficient. We have 58 camps in those five fields, only one third of the refugees live in the camps. Two thirds of the refugees live outside camps. They are again self-sufficient, go out of the camps if they can.

Just to say a little bit about the different fields before I go into disengagement. In Gaza two thirds of the population are refugees, in Jordan which has the largest number of our refugees, almost two million of the four million are living in Jordan, most of them are citizens. So it is quite a different dynamic in Jordan. In Syria the refugees are treated extremely well. There are 400.000 of them in a population of 18 million people. They are treated like citizens although they don't have citizenship. They are people who have access to jobs, and access to education and so on. We have a very good relationship with the Syrian government which treats the refugees well and works with us on providing better services to them. In the past it has only been Lebanon where we had a problem with the refugees. However in the last few months we have had finally some good news in Lebanon with respect to the refugees. We are now working with the government on how to let refugees work. There were 73 occupations banned to a Palestine refugee in Lebanon. The only things they could do were manual labor, agricultural labor. Now this will open up. It will still be difficult. We have not seen any concrete action, but at least public pronouncements are being made. It is a change in attitude. Just last month the Prime Minister called our director of the field office there to say they want to improve living conditions in the camps. In the last decades there has been a ban on any building materials. Nails, paint, anything, was not allowed to go in the camps. But now they have agreed that we must do something about it. They asked for our plans in improving the camps, and that is what we have now been exchanging with them. This is very good news.

What is preoccupying our minds is the whole disengagement from Gaza and from a little bit of the Westbank. The disengagement went much quicker and smoother than any of us thought. We were prepared for a worst case scenario. We had stockpiled a lot of goods in case there were really complete closures, in case they were major encursions by the Israeli Defence Forces during the disengagement. None of this happened. It went quickly. It went so quickly that nobody was really prepared for when the Israelis just picked up and left from the Southern border as a more or less

calculated move. And we had those few days of this great freedom of the people able to get out of Gaza and go into Egypt. It was quite wonderful that people could actually feel free, could actually move, could get out. The Egyptians were coming in. So we had Egyptian tourists coming all the way to Gaza city. It was an exciting couple of days. That is under control now.

After that, however, nothing happened for well over six weeks. And the situation was actually worse than before the disengagement because the borders were completely closed. Rafah, the Southern border to Egypt, was completely closed. People were not able to go out. It was open only for a couple of hours, for humanitarian cases. But otherwise closed. No workers, none at all in October went into Israel to work. And before that there had been a few hundred going, sometimes even a few thousand. People were beginning to get very worried and to believe that their skepticism about the disengagement was going to be realised until this agreement was brokered by Wolfenson, Rice and Solana to actually bring forward the agreements that we know have to be made. Because the main thing that has to happen, and the thing we are all working on with the Wolfenson team, is to show the Palestinians in Gaza at least that there are benefits to the disengagement, that the economy will get started, that something will happen after the five years of the Intifada where there is 60% of unemployment, and 60% live below the poverty line. We now know that the Rafah border was opened thanks to European monitors, a third party, and a few hundred people have actually been moving each day both ways. This has made people a little more optimistic, a little more cheerful. A few thousand people were being allowed into Israel to work as well.

Those are all good things, but they are not sufficient. Because all the other issues that are part of this agreement, that haven't started to happen yet. For example the seaport and the airport. For us, we don't understand why there should be any problem with constructing the seaport, which was beginning to be constructed just before the Intifada started. And then the little bit subconstruction that had been done was bombed twice during the Intifada. So the donors pulled out and nothing happened. But this is going to take at least two to three years to complete. So there is no danger in getting it started because we won't be able to use it for two or three years anyway. So the decisions on security and how it will be run can be postponed. But meanwhile you would have a major infrastructure project going and create a lot of jobs which would be extremely important. The airport is another thing we would like to see repaired, because it too was bombed twice during the Intifada, fixed once, bombed again, and now needs some serious repairs, but could be put in order in a few months if there were willingness to do that.

On top of that are the other things that have been agreed and we hope will get started. For example the link between Westbank and Gaza. This is extremely important, that this occupied Palestinian territory is one territory. There is no continuity between them, but at least there has to be some kind of link. The agreement that has been arranged is that by the middle of December there will be bus convoys between Westbank and Gaza so that people can at least move. This will be very important, if it works. We are waiting to see that. By the middle of January we hope to have truck convoys moving. All of these we are waiting to see. We hope they will work. There is a lot of ifs around them, and a lot of things that could go wrong, and things that could make them stop once they started.

The other very important issue is that the commercial crossings are kept open and are made to work better. The plan is for 150 trucks to move in and out of Karni daily- which is the only major commercial crossing - by the end of December. That is quite a lot of traffic. We have been lucky to have 20 to 30 trucks a day throughout the Intifada. However, the whole system of checking them might not be ready by then. But we will see. The importance of all this is related to the settlement greenhouses that were bought from the Israelis in order to keep them going. This was puzzling for us. Because there are thousands of greenhouses outside the former settlements in Gaza, producing

fruits, and vegetables, and flowers. These were things that were going to rot, went nowhere, because they could not get in or out. But we hope now with the commercial links established between the former settlements and Israel that the produce can leave the strip. In the past the Israeli settlers gained millions from this, and it can be the same source of income for the Palestinians. The greenhouses within the settlements have been rehabilitated and working with many of the same workers. They are ready to harvest already. So from September when the disengagement took place the Palestinians took hold of these things and have made them work again. This will be a very viable economic endeavour for the Palestinians within Gaza.

Our real worry is about the Westbank. The disengagement from the Westbank was from four small settlements in the Northern Westbank. The Israeli defence forces are still there, and still patrolling the area. So there is no real benefit from those areas yet to the Westbankers. Developments in the West Bank are still quite negative. You still have the wall growing and the expansion of the settlements. In fact, the land that is being taken over by the expansion of settlements since the disengagement is greater than the land that has been disengaged from in Gaza. This is extremely worrying.

The Wolfenson program focuses on improving the economy of Gaza and somewhat in the Westbank. Although people need to get back to work and take care of their families, they also want to keep in mind the peace process. They want to get back to the negotiation table. They want peace to come. So this we have to keep in mind while working on the economic side. Economic improvements should make things better for doing some of the political agreements that may have to be made. And that is the question of the elections that are expected in both the Palestinian territory and also in Israel. Some of the problems we are having within the oPt right now, particularly in Gaza with the difficulties with law and order, the factional fighting within the security forces, is something that will probably go on at least until the elections are held. We also have to wait and see what the elections in Israel are going to bring. But anything could happen between now and those elections. So we hope those take place as soon as possible, so that we can move on from these two major events that need to take place before the next steps can be taken.

UNRWA is quite involved and has been given a lead in the Westbank and Gaza under the Wolfenson disengagement plan on microfinance activities, on job creation, and on the reconstruction of the houses that were demolished during the Intifada. This is because we have been doing these things and have some expertise in them. We have a solid microfinance program that we could easily double, in Gaza particularly, and also the Westbank. The job creation program that we have been doing under the emergency for the last five years has been quite large in terms of those receiving the three months contracts. What we want to start are two kinds of programs. One would be an apprenticeship program to put to work new graduates or graduates that have been graduating from the universities since the beginning of the Intifada, and haven't yet been able to work, and another program for the unemployed who have not had a job throughout the Intifada. They will get a year long job in a universities, an NGOs, or the municipalities so that they either acquire skills or are reintegrated into the institutions in Gaza and the Westbank. These are some of the things that we hope to do. We have actually gotten some money from the Arab countries, the Gulf countries, and Saudi Arabia and also from Japan to rebuild almost all of the houses that were destroyed during the Intifada. These plans discussed very closely with the Palestinian Authority.

I like to stop there. If you have questions about particularly UNRWA and its role, because some of the challenges that have arisen as a result of this engagement, are questions that are very much based on perhaps not understanding on who is a refugee and what UNRWA does. We are increasingly asked now following the disengagement and the Palestinians being in charge of Gaza, why are there still refugees, why is UNRWA still needed? This is very much related to the relevant

UN resolutions, to the peace process itself, to the refugees question being a final status issue. And until there is a peace process there will be refugees. And while there are refugees there will be UNRWA to provide the basic services to them.

Viola Raheb

Thank you so much. I would like to start the discussion and invite you to join. I sense from your input that you are very optimistic on the disengagement as being a space of movement within a prison. But I think, also from your position within UNRWA, it would be important for us to hear how you assess the disengagement plan in terms of the exclusive authority Israel still carries in terms of air space, water, and the movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza. And what does that mean in terms of viewing a solution on the known ground? At the same time we could just tackle the issue of the Westbank. I think the disengagement plan brings also a trap for the Palestinians, being also a reason for more settlements to be built, more settler bypass roads to be built, more land to be confiscated, and will lead actually to the cantonalisation of the Westbank which is already taking place. Having just come back from Bethlehem, and having spent five weeks in Bethlehem not being able to move outside a two kilometer radius is something that for a Viennese or somebody who lives in Vienna is totally abnormal.

Karen Koning Abuzayd

I had a series of meetings today with various government officials and sometimes got the same reaction implying that I am optimistic. Which means I should maybe change some ways how I describe things. Because if I sounded optimistic I am not. I usually start by saying, I would like to talk about our hopes and our fears, and what the disengagement provided for us. And this is very much a UN perspective. We do feel that in the last couple of years things haven't even gotten worse. They have just been stagnant. At least this is a change. And we have to take advantage of it. I hope that I made it very clear that this whole question of access and freedom of movement hasn't changed anything. Again one of the challenges is the misperception that now there is no more occupation because now there is a border open. And that is why I emphasise this whole idea of the occupied Palestinian territory. For example, the fishermen are still being controlled how far out they can go to do their fishing. This is not freedom. It is maybe freedom within a prison that has a little door open for some people right now.

On the Westbank the Negotiations Support Unit of the Palestinian Authority and OCCHA have made an extremely useful powerpoint demonstrations of what is happening on the Westbank, and to show how much it is taking more and more of the land. It is not even a cantonisation, it is a swiss-cheeseisation of the Westbank. In this powerpoint they first show all the settlements, then all the roads for the settlements, then the tunnels, then all the road blocks, the sandbars, etc. And pretty soon there is almost nothing left of the Westbank except the major towns. And then there is the whole question of what we call the seamzone, which is the area between the wall and the green line. And whenever we make a presentation and make a complaint to the Israelis we say, if the wall were built on the green line we would not have anything to say about it. It is a very ugly thing, and it is a very shameful thing. But if you want to be separated, go ahead and separate, but separate yourself on what is more or less the acknowledged border. Don't take more of the land. We follow the construction of the barrier very carefully, because of the thousands of refugees who are stuck between it, and because of the Jerusalem envelope which has excluded our refugee camp which used to be within the Jerusalem boundaries and now is outside. What it has done to the people who can't reach their land, who can't reach their clinics, who can't reach their schools, and the exceedingly difficult time it has made for families to even live together now. One of them works in Ramallah, one of them works in the Westbank, and they are just not able to go between these two places any longer. We have to watch and see what happens to them.

Raheb

I think there is something worrying about the whole discussion on disengagement. At least this is how I read it as a Palestinian. Because the disengagement plan is a document that does not name occupation even one time. We are no longer talking about occupation. It seems this word has somehow disappeared from the lexicon of the Middle East conflict. And I think you can see it in the media and how the media is presenting the situation at the moment. Today I was reading an article in the Austrian press on the Middle East. It was very striking to see the first sentence which said, retaliation for the retaliation stroke. Vergeltung für den Vergeltungsanschlag. The terminology that is being used is really very weird, that is again taking this conflict out of the context of international law. But I will not talk more, but give you the opportunity to share with us your input of your questions not only on the disengagement plan but also on the question of the refugees which is one of the most difficult issues of the negotiation issues still open, also on the work of UNRWA.

Question

We occasionally hear about Israelis and Palestinians who work together, who have projects together. We hear about some activities that happen in villages. Those of us who are always looking out for the positive optimistic news focus on this. I would like to know more about it.

Question

I would like to know about the secrets of the Gaza economy. How does it work in an economy with 60% of unemployment, the level of poverty very high, and no borders, no export of goods? How can they survive for twenty years? What is the secret about that? What is the role of UNRWA in avoiding the implosion of the situation inside Gaza? The situation must be so dense and so full of anger, and furious people, and nothing is moving for the last ten years. What is the role of keeping down this implosion on the side of UNRWA?

Question

I have several questions. I would be interested in the financing. Who is behind the financing of the big projects? About corruption. I always hear about incredible corruption in the Palestinian Authority. How much do you know about it? Is it true? About Lebanon. Why is Lebanon the difficult child among the countries which took Palestinian refugees? I understand that it has to do with the civil war. But I would like to know why in the last fifteen years?

Koning Abuzayd

On the first question I don't have a whole lot to say. Partly because I have been there only five years. It is not long enough to have seen very much of this collaborative work because the Intifada started six weeks after I got there, and it has been very difficult for groups to get together. Even those who wanted to had to be very careful. It is a very sensitive issue during this time to work together with Israelis and Palestinians. We tried to do some things through UNRWA and encourage women to women work, or children to children. And there is a little bit of that that goes on through the Peres Peace Center. But otherwise it has not been a very fruitful ground for those sorts of activities right now. It might have more chance now. We will see what happens. What is happening even on the Israeli side with the disengagement. These are unilateral moves. These have been done without the consultation of the Palestinians or discussing with the Palestinians how to go about these things. We still have a long way to go on those things.

The Gaza economy. When I am talking about poverty and unemployment, it refers to the last five years. But before that there were certainly hopeful signs from the time of Oslo, and the Palestinian Authority coming in. There was a lot of interest from Palestinians in the diaspora and the international community in building up the economy. It was not working so well. And that was part of what precipitated the Intifada, too. People began to get very frustrated and not see the benefits of

Oslo. So the secret in the role of UNRWA has been very much keeping those people going. A 120.000 Palestinians worked in Israel more or less as day wage labourers before the Intifada. So the minute the Intifada started nobody had a job anymore, many families were no longer supported. Two weeks after the Intifada started we realized people's coverage were bare. They couldn't bring the money home to buy the food for that day. So went immediately into a big food distribution program. And that is what we are still doing. We are feeding a 130.000 families in Gaza, and 90.000 in the Westbank. The World Food Program is doing the non-refugees in both places. So that is what is keeping people going. It is however a very minimalist food package. And then these small things I mentioned, giving people three months of work to give them some extra cash, and supporting them in various other ways. There is no economy. And, of course, even the small things that still went on, the small factories, the tire factories, the clothes factories, many of these have been destroyed during the Intifada. Things that can be redone, and remade, and can work again. Because the Palestinians are all highly educated, and even better educated maybe during this Intifada. Because there has been no work, so everybody keeps going to school. And all these factories can be reconstituted and can work, and the whole agricultural thing can be redone, too. We just have to be able to move goods and people. There are possibilities. We are also working on all the kinds of things that can work without freedom of movement like more IT education. Who knows whether these things will all work. Will there be enough donor interest, donor confidence, bringing the resources that we need? We hope these things can happen.

Who is financing the big projects? The biggest projects like the big housing projects which will put a lot of people to work and will allow a lot of people to have more decent housing are financed by the Arabs, mainly the Saudis and the Emirates. These are the ones that are giving us the largest amount of money. This is quite important to say, because we are always hearing from many of our donors, why don't you get more money from the Arabs. Some of the Arabs give more to UNRWA than they would have to give if they were giving an assessed contribution to the United Nations. Although they are rich because there is such a small population, their economies are smaller than most of the European economies. So we don't have a lot of complaints about the richer Arabs. They do their part. Otherwise in terms of major funding of UNRWA and our projects generally it is the same ten big donors that fund all the humanitarian agencies. Start with the EC, then the Americans, then the UK, and the Swedes, then the Norwegians, mainly the European donors plus Canada, Australia, Spain, Japan. These are our major donors.

The corruption in the PA is one of the reasons of what you see in the municipal elections that have taken place in the Westbank and Gaza. The people see the opposition, the alternative, Hamas particularly, as people who come from these villages. They are respected, they are honest, they are disciplined. They are not seen to be as corrupt as perhaps some of the old guard the Palestinian Authority. And that is why we have to see what happens in these elections? The list of candidates that come from the PA, from Fatah, from the PLO, are the younger candidates, the younger groups, the reforming groups, who are there waiting to take the place of some of the others. Yes, it is there. I don't know enough the volume to say whether it is any worse than in many other similar countries. Because there is a lot of very dedicated people who are working in the PA as well. As we know the Minister of Finance has put a lot of things in order. Things have been put in order in very much a serious way in terms of who is employed, and who is paid, and how much they get paid. He has formed a new political party for the reformist to run for elections, to have a political base. He came in from outside, from the UN system, from the IMF. And now we hope that he will bring along with him the people who will determine how things will be run in the future. Even if you think of the peak of the Hamas support in Gaza according to the surveys that are done, it has been 30%. It is much lower now, around 20%. Fatah, PLO 30%. And we still have 40% out there, people who probably care, a potential for the reforming parties. And those are the ones that we also want to see strengthened.

Lebanon. The Palestinians are mostly from Muslim communities. So they are not particularly welcomed there. They are certainly not welcomed to integrate there. And because they have been in this nasty closed camps and full of the factionalism that you could see throughout the Palestinians, the quarrelling among themselves, there is a lot of violence in the camps. It is just not a welcome population. The role of President Abbas has been quite important in his relations with the Lebanese government, as, I think, has the UNRWA Director who has been there for a year now, and has been very insistent to do something for the refugees. If we can get these things together, and give the Palestinians in these camps some chance to work instead of sitting in the camps doing nothing and quarrelling among themselves, then they have a good more possibility. I don't think in Lebanon when there is a final peace settlement one day, you are going to get Palestinians staying in Lebanon. That will be the place that Palestinians will have to move out of one day. In Syria and Jordan they probably have a choice whether they want to stay or to go. But Lebanon will maintain its position in that respect.

Raheb

I'd like to comment on a question. It is very interesting to remember that the first Israeli-Palestinian joint working groups were established during the first Intifada in 1987, at a time when it was forbidden actually to even sit with the other, and at a time when the political leadership of both sides was not yet at the point of recognising the other as a partner or whatever you would like to call it. Then this whole process of the grassroots movement was hijacked by politicians, mainly by Rabin and Arafat. And therefore it was the politicians who got the Nobel Prize and not the people who were working on the ground. That is why I call it hijacking because they stood for something which they never actually stood for during their whole political period. During Oslo, during the first few years, this joint work flourished and it became an industry. I always make fun of it. I was running the Lutheran school system at a time when you could make any silly proposal. For example I was always saying if you would bring Israelis and Palestinians to hold a fashion show on the latest bikini mode you would get funding for it. Because it was an industry, it became an industry. And then when the second Intifada started, both parties damned any cooperation with the other. And so it actually became a political question. Because if you were meeting with the other, then you actually became a traitor to your own side. So the groups which remained working are very few, are working under very difficult conditions, and are only those who have faith in what they are doing. Other than that it is not functioning. So there are still very few group meetings doing joint things. Actually we had a conference two years ago in these rooms, organised by Naomi Lassar and Gertraud Auer, where Israeli and Palestinian psychologists and psychotherapists met to discuss the issue of the children and how to deal with them.

I would like to take Naomis question a bit further on the issue of corruption. Arafat built the PA with the sense of clan mentality, which is understandable out of his history and out of the things you have to start with. Now Abu Mazen is trying to make a change. I think you can see it already in Gaza, in how they try to mobilise young blood to join Fatah in order to be able to face an explosion with the increase of fundamentalists within Gaza especially.

Koning Abuzayd

Just a clan based society, of course, is very much the Gazan society. So it is very difficult to overcome. And that is where the quarrels are now between families and families that are engaged in criminal activities. With the coming of democracy and the opening up you often get this kind of chaos.

Question

How would you describe your relations with the Israeli government?

Question

UNRWA was accused a couple of times by Israel of aiding militance of fighters. I am wondering if there is some pressure on UNRWA to terminate the contacts with some people because they are affiliated with Hamas or Fatah?

Question

Is there any vision of UNRWA about ending this mission? It is a relief mission for thirty years. You have the biggest budget in the UN. And usually relief work is to be ended because refugees are going back. What would be the political scenario or vision of UNRWA to end their own mission?

Question

You said that the Arabs are giving a lot of money for the big projects. I just would like to know since when. I would say that the target for the election in Gaza is not that easy. Because I do think that Hamas has much more power in Gaza and around the whole region, and the jihad too. These are two very powerful groups.

Koning Abuzayd

The Israeli relations. Relations right now are pretty good. The Israelis have always said that they don't have a problem with UNRWA and that they support UNRWA. They know that we bring some stability to the region. And they also know that especially as an occupying power we do their job for them. If we weren't there, they would have to provide these services, it would be their obligation. We are criticised on the other side for that, for substituting for them and for giving them an excuse not to have to do these things. Our personal relations are fine. We have a lot of on the ground relations. And that is still true on the Westbank. It is no longer necessary in Gaza. We have to work together quite a lot because of all these access problems. Although they are out of Gaza now, that is the major thing we can do, we can drive up and down the whole of this very small Gaza strip without any road blocks or checkpoints. But we still have a problem getting out, and getting our staff out, especially our local staff to go to training, to go to meetings. We meet with them regularly. We are in daily contact with them.

Questions have been raised about UNRWA possibly aiding Hamas. They are not true, of course. The main challenge to us from the Israelis was the one where they said that we were carrying missiles in our ambulances. And it turned out, and it was very clear, and they had to admit it that this wasn't a missile, this was a stretcher. We have agreed with them that we won't bring this up any more. Because it is very embarrassing to them. Again aside from these occasional things they trust us very much. And we are very confident in defending our staff and what our staff do, that they are not engaged in these kinds of activities. In the whole five years of the Intifada – we have 12.000 staff in Westbank and Gaza alone – only 23 of our staff have been indicted. Most of these refer to administrative reasons. They have never been convicted. We wish there were none, but 23 is a very small number out of the 12.000.

In terms of ending our mission. There has to be a peace settlement. The refugees issue is itself as a final status issue. The refugees will need to be given a choice of what he or she wants to do, because that is the basic principle of all refugee work. And that will be decided by the political actors in the peace settlement. And then what will they choose? That is what we don't know. There is no way to find that out now because anyone you ask now will say, I want to return, I want to return to my original home. That is what they say. We know that if we get as far as Taba got on the refugee issue, there will be few thousands that might be allowed to return to their original homes, and others will have to make another sort of choice. But that is something that we just have to wait and see.

UNRWA is always acting with a view to handing over one day to host authorities, to whoever is going to take over from us. And that is one reason we want to harmonise the services that we provide, so that they are the same as what the local authorities do for non-refugees. And that will increase the integration.

Arab money. The Palestinian Authority had money from the Arabs for years. It is the Arabs who, of course, keep the Palestinian Authority salaries going, especially nowadays. The Arab League in 1982 passed a resolution to say that they should pay 7 % of the UNRWA budget. They have never paid more than about 2% of the UNRWA budget, because of course that is a lot when only a few of the Arab countries are the ones that pay. It is more the infrastructure projects that they are interested in. They have spent a lot of money on big housing projects. That is what they continue to do now through UNRWA. We keep banking on that.

I didn't say the pre-election period was easy. I said the opposite. I think nothing will happen in the pre-election period. We can't look for achievements there because we have to wait for the elections. First of all Islamic Jihad is not so powerful and is now the one carrying out the suicide bombings. It has never agreed to have this period of calm and ceasefire, whatever you want to call it. The Hamas has agreed to that. Jihad did not. So they are the ones behind these things that are still causing enormous problems. My field officers, people who are on the ground, are very much convinced that the belief that Hamas provides an enormous amount of a social network and a social security network is much exaggerated. They are very good with kindergardens, with summer camps, and with helping people whose houses have been destroyed. What we see from all the surveys that are done is that the peak of Hamas support went up to about 30% doing the Intifada, as the population grew more and more conservative and aligned themselves with some of the Hamas ideas. But now it is down to about 20%. It is declining. I am not worried at all about Hamas winning any election. They are not interested in taking over the government. They want somebody else to do that for now. They will try to make a show of strength as much as they can.

Question

What is the vision of the whole thing? How can we come to a conclusion that anyone can agree to? What is the best possible result for the Israelis, and what is the best possible result for the Palestinians? Where do they overlap?

Question

You are the main player of the United Nations in Gaza. What are your main goals on the NGO side? What is the important side of Islamic relief? What is the role of different private initiatives?

Koning Abuzayd

How it can end or when it could end? I wish we could say. A real problem among the people who said they began to be so discouraged. More people have begun to think about leaving the OPT which is something new, especially from Gaza. What we say is the UN roadmap where there should be two states living side by side in peace with agreed upon borders. It is the only way to go. I know there are others who are looking at a one state solution which creates different kinds of problems.

Question

What is the economic concept of Palestine? It will be hard to get to markets. It would be like a part of Austria saying we are on our own now.

Koning Abuzayd

If there is one territory with Gaza and the Westbank together surrounded by Arab states with which they can trade and with the European trade that has already been established I would be like any

other small state. We do have a highly literate population, highly educated population, and very hard working people. So they have a chance. If the borders are open and they can move their goods and their ideas, they have a lot better chance than a lot of other small states around the world. Now they are under occupation. They cannot move. They cannot do anything. They cannot get out. They cannot move their goods. Everything is controlled by the Israelis.

Question

They cannot send their goods back and forth?

Koning Abuzayd

To where? You can't even send it within the Westbank. Viola called it cantonisation. I said it is worse than that. There are roadblocks, enclosures. You can't even get from one town to another. You are not even allowed to go. You have to have permits to go from one part of the Westbank to another. If you have a Westbank ID you can't drive into Jerusalem. You are really constrained to say the least.

Raheb

Let me comment on your input before I give Ms. Koning Abuzyd the final word for the evening. It is very easy when we are looking on the conflict to reflect on issues of vision and the future. I think the people on the ground are so much heavily burdened with daily life, basic issues, that the question of what will happen in the negotiations just is not there. I was in Bethlehem for five weeks. Nobody talked about negotiations, final status, what will happen to Jerusalem, what about the right of return. These issues are no longer at the heart of the daily discussions of people because they are struggling so much with the issue of staying alive. And I don't think one can imagine what that means when one lives in Vienna. At the moment I feel somehow schizophrenic, being a citizen in Vienna for the last three and a half years. Going back now to my home country, even with an Austrian passport which I carry now, which was immediately declared invalid at Tel Aviv airport because of my Palestinian origin. All of a sudden you become a Palestinian because you originated from there. And then I could not move out of Bethlehem for a radius of two kilometres. Whenever you drive by car, after two to three kilometres you end at a wall of eight meters high where not even the view is given. You have an unemployment rate which in Bethlehem is at the moment at 80% because there are no tourists. So people are struggling to live. It is unbelievable that people could survive years with such a high unemployment rate. People are so much afraid about their future, the future of their children. They are so much worried of their daily life basics, whether they get water or they cannot get water, whether the streets are open or they are not open, whether the children reach the school or not. So the issue of the vision for the future is no longer at the center. This is something we need to remember. When we talk about the conflict we usually believe we are talking about a highly diplomatic matter and we forget that it is threatening the life of people day by day, 24 hours. It is frustrating. But believe me you can live not knowing where you are going to. I think it is not a Palestinian-Israeli issue. I am not sure if other states are knowing where are they heading to, and still they are living and hindering others to live. I will give the last words to Ms. Koning Abuzayd.

Koning Abuzayd

There is not a lot to do with NGOs since we do most of our implementation on our own. Those who work in the OPT as much as we do, but in the department side is UNDP. OCHA does a lot of the publicity work. But there are a number of NGOs that work more – they do work in the refugee camps – with the non-refugees, particularly on the Westbank side, less so in Gaza, especially since the Intifada. It has not been very safe on the most part.

We do have to keep in mind the political side and to try to get the people back to the negotiating table. People would sometimes go beyond their daily struggle to say that beyond the economy we have to somehow think about the future for our children. Whatever pressures can be put upon the two sides to see one another as partners and begin to talk to one another again, these are important things.

Raheb

Thank you so much.