

Press release

18 December 2011

British Development Secretary visits Gaza and announces support to help address education emergency and promote trade

The UK today announced it would help to tackle the desperate need for school places for refugees in Gaza with support for 24,000 children to attend school. Half of these will be girls.

British support, through the Palestinian Authority – United Nations Trust Fund, will allow the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to construct twelve new schools.

International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell visited Gaza for the first time to see for himself the work that UNRWA is already doing to address the education problems in Gaza.

Access to education has been severely limited by ongoing movement and access restrictions in Gaza. Between 2007 – 2010, the refugee student population grew by nearly 10%, while all construction, including schools, was suspended.

Currently, UNRWA provides education for nearly 212,000 refugee children in Gaza. 1,410 students are educated in shipping containers and around 8,000 students rotate their learning periods between classrooms and the school courtyard. 95% of UNRWA schools are running at double capacity and 40,000 refugee children have no school place.

On his visit, the Development Secretary also met with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, as well as with Israeli Minister Benny Begin to discuss the ongoing political situation and the need for increased access and movement of goods and people into and out of Gaza.

Andrew Mitchell said:

“Gaza is currently facing an education emergency, with over 40,000 refugee children unable to go to UNRWA schools. Education is a fundamental cornerstone of development, allowing people to lift themselves out of poverty. With more than 50% of Gaza's population aged under 18, improving access to education is essential.

“Today, I have seen for myself the vital work that UNRWA, supported by Britain, is doing to address the problems in Gaza. I have met children whose lives will be vastly improved by access to even the most basic education, and the teachers whose dedication means their pupils have the chance of a brighter future.”

Prime Minister Fayyad said:

“The Palestinian Authority is committed to ensuring that all Palestinian children have access to quality education. There is an urgent need to improve educational facilities in Gaza and we welcome the UK's support for these much-needed new schools.

“This support will be channelled through the Palestinian Authority and United Nations joint Trust Fund, which the PA established with the UN in 2010 as part of our commitment to supporting statebuilding and development throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, with the first priority being early recovery and reconstruction in Gaza.”

Whilst in Gaza, Andrew Mitchell also visited the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery and laid a wreath.

Notes to editors

1. The UK will provide the support through a Palestinian Authority (PA)-UN Trust Fund. The implementing agency for construction will be UNRWA who will also operate the schools.
2. In 2010 the PA and the UN established the joint PA/UN Trust Fund to support state building and development in the OPTs including early recovery and reconstruction in Gaza. Given the importance of education and the high needs in Gaza, the PA and the UN have prioritised the construction of UNRWA schools in Gaza.
3. The Trust Fund is governed by a Management committee, co-chaired by the PA and the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC). The committee also includes the World Bank, five contributing donors, two UN Heads of Agencies on a rotating basis, designated by the RC/HC.
4. The UNRWA education project will ensure improved access to UN human rights-based education for vulnerable refugee students.

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