

# Even the head of UNRWA admits it should not exist

## ANALYSIS ADI SCHWARTZ



► NOT MANY people in the West are familiar with the acronym UNRWA. But they should be: first, because

Europeans and Americans pay billions of pounds of taxpayers' money to sustain this UN agency; and second, because of UNRWA's negative role in one of the core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict — namely, the Palestinian refugees problem.

I had the chance to raise some of the most troubling aspects of UNRWA with its head of operations in Gaza, John Ging. In a series of meetings and through email correspondence, we discussed first and foremost its mere existence. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was established by the General Assembly in 1949. For some reason, the UN decided that the Palestinians would be the only ethnic group to have a special agency — and all the rest, tens of millions of refugees around the world, are taken care of by another agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

While UNHCR's main task is to resettle refugees — and its success is measured accordingly — UNRWA is dealing solely with welfare and education. While in all other cases the number of refugees diminishes with time, the number of Palestinian refugees has grown sevenfold from 700,000 in 1949 to 4.8 million today.

One reason for that is the unique way in which UNRWA defines a Palestinian refugee. Throughout the world, a refugee who receives a new citizenship in another country is no longer considered a refugee. Palestinian refugees, however, enjoy UNRWA's services even after receiving new citizenship (as is the case with two million Palestinians in Jordan). In addition, UNRWA widened the definition of a refugee to include descendants of refugees, so that every newborn baby — forever — is considered to be a refugee.

Commendably, Mr Ging admitted that UNRWA "shouldn't exist after so many years", adding that he perfectly understands the Israeli negative view of his agency. But he fell short of addressing the most important issue.

The Gaza Strip, where Mr Ging is positioned, is under Palestinian rule. By not resettling the refugees, I argued, UNRWA is not assuming a neutral role but hampering any chance of agreement, since every reasonable person

understands that Israel will never be able to accept millions of refugees. Still, when I asked Mr Ging if he ever approached Hamas to initiate resettlement projects, he said: "Why would I do that? This is not our mandate."

UNRWA — the representative of the family of nations — is thus serving the most radical stream of thought in Palestinian and Arab circles, where the view that any peaceful solution should be avoided unless all refugees realize their "right of return" is promoted.

Tragically, it is not Iran or Hizbollah who sponsor UNRWA, but Western governments, even though the outcome is hardly in their interest. The UK alone has donated UNRWA £218 million in the past decade, and more if you take into account its contribution through the EC's overall donation (an additional £805 million). And in 2009, the UK contributed to UNRWA's budget 50 per cent more than Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE, Qatar and Oman together.

All this money did not serve the goal of achieving a solution. In fact, the Palestinian refugees problem is being perpetuated and even made worse. Isn't it time for a change?

*Adi Schwartz is an independent investigative journalist based in Tel Aviv. The full interview with Mr Ging is at [www.adischwartz.com/blog](http://www.adischwartz.com/blog)*

## Dead Sea may hold secrets on climate

BY NATHAN JEFFAY

► SCIENTISTS ARE drilling half a kilometre in to the bed of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the globe, in the hope of discovering some secrets of the universe.

The £1.5 million project began last week and will continue until late December. It is sponsored by a German-based organisation called the International Continental Drilling Program, which conducts drilling around the world, and has the blessing of the Israeli government, the Palestinian Authority and the Jordanian authorities.

The rationale for using the Dead Sea as a drilling site is that it is a drainage basin for a large part of the Middle East, meaning that over millions of years, water has drained there bringing sediment.

Each layer of sediment provides valuable geological information about the time when it settled, and scientists hope that by drilling in to the earth they will be able to learn about occurrences in the past that have shaped human history, such as droughts, floods and earthquakes.

"We're looking to obtain a seasonal record of climate change going back at least a million years," said project manager Michael Lazar, a lecturer in marine geophysics at the University of Haifa. "This will help us make predictions about climate."

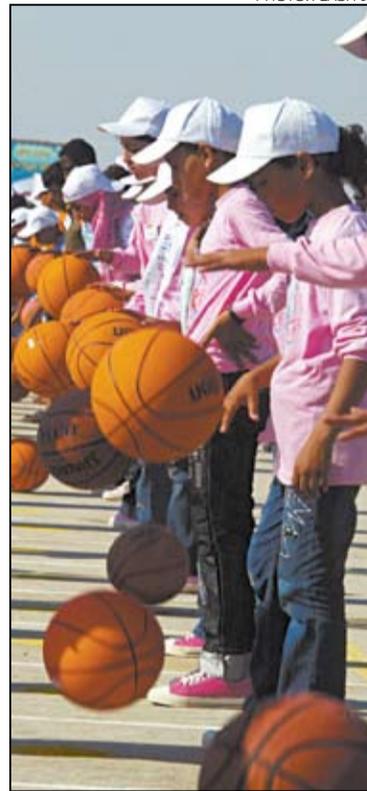


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**How useful: an attempt to break the record for basketball bouncing in Rafah, organised by UNRWA**