



UNRWA

PRESS RELEASE

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New shelters for Rafah's homeless

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees today handed over 97 new shelters to refugee families in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip whose shelters have been destroyed by Israeli forces during the intifadah.

The 97 new shelters, which will house 100 families or 573 individuals, are the concrete expression of UNRWA's pledge to re-house all those refugees whose shelters have been destroyed in the intifadah and who have no alternative accommodation. According to the Agency's figures, by 31 August 2002 a total of 529 shelters, home to over 4,000 people, had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair in the Gaza Strip since the start of the conflict in September 2000.

Homeless families waiting for their new shelters have already been provided with emergency assistance from UNRWA, in the form of tents, blankets, mattresses, mats, kitchen utensils and food parcels. The Agency has also distributed emergency grants to cover some relocation expenses. The construction project itself has also served to alleviate some of the hardships being felt in the Gaza Strip. It provided 270,000 man-days of temporary employment for labourers, builders and tradesmen in a part of Gaza with exceptionally high unemployment.

The new homes opened today in the Tel Es-Sultan area of Rafah were funded by donations from Belgium, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), the Islamic Development Bank and Norway. The land was provided by the Palestinian National Authority. The total cost of the project, including infrastructure work, was approx \$3.5 million.

Work on re-housing Rafah's homeless refugees was subject to long delays because of both the restrictions on movement imposed by the Israel Defence Forces within Gaza and the difficulty of importing building materials to the Strip. The Abu Houli-Gush Qatif checkpoint, which controls access to southern Gaza, was either fully or partially closed for 200 days during a 300-day period. The Karni commercial crossing-point into Gaza has been closed completely for weeks on end, while at other times there has been a ban on importing sewage and water pipes.

A further 340 replacement shelters, to be built throughout Gaza, are currently at the design or contracts stage.

The Agency is able to plan for their construction thanks to generous contributions of a number of donors including the United States of America and the Arab Popular Committee in Syria.

Mr Peter Hansen, UNRWA's Commissioner-General, said at the handover of the new homes that their opening was a moment of cheer in an increasingly desperate humanitarian situation. "These new shelters make a solid statement of the commitment of UNRWA and the international community to the welfare of the refugees. The provision of human shelter has been a fundamental component of UNRWA's mandate since its foundation. But it speaks greatly of the tragedy of the Palestine refugees that after 52 years we still find ourselves called upon to counteract the impact of conflict in so basic a manner."
