

Curriculum Vitae
UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd

In July 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed the Deputy Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Karen AbuZayd, as the new Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees In the Near East (UNRWA). Ms. AbuZayd, a national of the United States, succeeded Peter Hansen of Denmark.

In August 2000, Ms. AbuZayd was appointed to the post of Deputy Commissioner-General of UNRWA. On 1 April 2005, she became the Acting Commissioner-General. From her base in Gaza, she helped to oversee the education, health, social services and microenterprise programmes 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 West Bank and Gaza.

Before joining UNRWA, Ms. AbuZayd worked for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for 19 years. She began her humanitarian career in the Sudan in 1981, dealing with Ugandan, Chadian and Ethiopian refugees fleeing from war and famine in their own countries. From the 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 she 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 to 1993 In UNHCR's Geneva headquarters, Ms. AbuZayd directed the South African repatriation operation and the Kenyan-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. Her last four years in the UNHCR were spent as Chef de Cabinet to High Commissioner Sadako Ogata and as Regional Representative for the United States and the Caribbean, where she focused on funding, public information and the legal issues of asylum-seekers.

Before joining the UNHCR, Ms. AbuZayd 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.