

18 March 2009

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
at the Closing Session of the Interactive Thematic Dialogue on Access to Education in
Emergency, Post-Crisis and Transition Situations Caused by Man-Made Conflicts or
Natural Disasters**

I wish to thank once again, for gracing this forum,
His Excellency Mr. Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi,
Her Highness Sheikha Mozad bint Nasser Al-Minad,
Excellencies,
United Nations Colleagues,
Representatives of Civil Society,
Dear Sisters and Brothers,

As we come to the close of this interactive dialogue on access to education in emergency situations, I want to thank all of you for deepening our understanding of the complexities of this issue. I especially thank our expert panelists for drawing our attention to the concrete actions that we – particularly the United Nations and Member States -- can undertake to ensure that education continues for the millions young people whose lives are being disrupted by violence or natural disasters.

You have advanced the dialogue to identify the steps to protect our schools and ensure that they remain safe and nurturing environments even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. You have provided us with the legislative strategies to combat the impunity of attacks on schools, students and teachers that has risen steadily in recent years.

Today's dynamic panels have highlighted the urgent concern that Member States, the United Nations system and our NGO partners in humanitarian assistance have not made education a priority in their response to complex emergencies. Clearly the international community, including the General Assembly, needs to develop a more coherent, rights-based response to these challenges. We are grateful to the human rights experts, education specialists and practitioners as well as representatives of a range of governments for providing us with new information and the arguments. You have spoken and we have heard. We will press for clearer resolutions, legislation and policies to close this glaring gap in our policies and operations.

From my perspective as president of the General Assembly, I am most concerned about the recommendations that have been made by representatives of Member States and those that affect the policies of our Member States. As pointed out by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, fully 90 per cent of the countries where natural disasters and violent conflicts take place have

governments that are unable to respond adequately to the humanitarian needs of their citizens, much less to maintain the safe havens of schools.

Government disaster relief policies must integrate education into our humanitarian response and into the broader educational framework as well. This requires cooperation and partnerships at all levels. I welcome the recommendation that more regional consultations are needed and encourage Member States to explore this option with UN Regional Commissions, perhaps led by or with the participation of education ministers. I have no doubt that such meetings will facilitate the development of better response and monitoring mechanisms at local, national and global levels. They can also contribute in a significant ways to improved data collection and analysis.

We must monitor peace agreements to ensure that they too consider the integration and protection of schools and the educational infrastructure. Our planning must keep in mind that the restoration of the education system and poverty reduction must go hand in hand. And always, we need more reliable data on the conditions that are faced before, during and after crisis situations if we are to devise more effective response mechanisms relating to education.

As is so often the case, we have been reminded that the legal basis for the protection of the right to education is a part of much of our human rights legislation – from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the second Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education. But in the face of rising incidents of violence and human disasters caused by natural phenomena, these lofty goals fall victim to a culture of neglect, or even worse, impunity. Our collective failure to stop impunity serves as a license for the perpetrators.

Finally, I am heartened by government speakers who have called upon governments to take on greater responsibilities. I agree with the recommendation that we must urge all those involved, including UN bodies and agencies as well as civil society organizations, to develop clear policies that call on State Parties to protect schools and make them safe havens, especially in the most difficult situations. I support the call that States should criminalize attacks on schools as war crimes in accordance with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and prosecute offenders accordingly. This must be done as a matter of course, routinely and systematically.

Our work is ever more urgent. As was pointed out earlier today, while violent conflicts are more lethal, the increasing frequency of natural phenomena affect seven times more people than violent conflicts. This is a trend that we must live with and we should apply all our tenacity and creativity to develop sound responses, ones that are feasible and that work in the worst of conditions.

And lastly, I hope as we end today's session, we all feel strong and more prepared in our commitment to better protect our learners, their teachers and all those involved in the delivery of their right to education. I believe that we have made some progress towards these important goals today and thank you all for your ongoing dedication and your steadfastness in defending the right to education, under any circumstances.

Thank you.