

18 March 2009

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

Your Excellency Mr. Pierre Nkurunziza,  
Your Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned,  
Excellencies,  
Madame Deputy Secretary-General,  
United Nations Colleagues,  
Representatives of Civil Society,  
Dear Sisters and Brothers,

In my inaugural address to the General Assembly last September, I dedicated my presidency of the sixty-third session to the poor and oppressed of the world. Some people wondered how this would be expressed in the work of the Assembly. Today's dialogue on the right to education for children is one concrete answer to this question. I am pleased we are taking up the right of education of these young people whose lives have been disrupted by violent conflict and the calamities of natural disasters. These are precisely the people I was referring to and who should be the priority of the work of the United Nations.

I wish to thank the Member States that supported this initiative, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Norway and Qatar, and all of you gathered here for joining us today to address this fundamental right that is being denied to an estimated 75 million children worldwide. We will explore the reasons why the world community, including many UN humanitarian policy makers, have failed to make this right central to the assistance provided to communities disrupted by violence and disasters. I think that most of us here believe that children need schools in the same way they need food and water and medical care. Yet today only six development partners include education as part of their humanitarian policy. Let us, as a body, as Member States and specialized agencies look for ways to integrate this simple conviction into the complex policies of our humanitarian assistance operations.

Before we begin, allow me to thank Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned for her dedicated work in pressing the world community to address this issue in a global and also in a very local way. As you may know, she has been working tirelessly to restore as quickly as possible the scores of UN-sponsored schools that were damaged during the horrific invasion of the Palestinian territory of Gaza two months ago. She has made the case and the government of Qatar has been instrumental in raising the funds to rebuild the secure, nurturing learning environment that children and young people so desperately need.

Her Highness's international efforts to defend, promote and support the right to education, including and most particularly, in situations of armed conflict, underscore a deep-felt conviction that children and young people born into, or thrust into, situations of adversity have the right to a future with dignity and purpose. Education is the gateway to the full exercise of all other human rights. I share Sheikha Mozah's conviction that, even in the most dire of situations, access to education and safe learning environments creates oases of normalcy that help learners and their communities to heal, recover and grow despite the trauma of violence and disaster around them.

The issues we are addressing today and the recommendations that will flow from this interactive dialogue must be translated into concrete policies and programmes that will make the difference for tens of millions of children and young people around the world. Too often, we as the international community, have failed in our obligation to protect these vulnerable groups. We should not compound this wrong by denying them a way out of their plight. Sustained access to and continuity of quality education offers them 'a way out'. And it is their right.

Gaza is but one of many conflicts and disasters that are disrupting and, in some cases, ending the educations of an estimated 75 million children world wide.

Today we will hear from children and from teachers, as well a policy makers, about their particular experiences and 'lessons learned' through trial and error, action and reflection. We will hear from a teacher working in Haiti in the wake of the devastation caused by recurring hurricanes; youth in Nepal who galvanized their communities in the midst of insurgency to create schools as 'zones of peace'; and staff working in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and Latin America.

I think that the diversity of participants in this meeting – from education specialists and practitioners, to government officials from Haiti, Afghanistan, Nepal and Burundi -- will help us raise the profile of the right to education. More importantly, let us identify specific ways to strengthen the policy and operational work of the UN, of Governments and NGO by better integrating the right to education into any humanitarian response.

Let us find ways to assure that we are feeding young minds, as well as bodies; creating safe havens for learners, as well as their larger communities. Let us give these girls and boys, youth and women the opportunity to contribute in the recovery and the future of their societies. Let us give them hope by learning to overcome what, in the midst of chaos, must seem to be insurmountable challenges. This is a real opportunity to transform poverty and oppression into opportunity and integration. I am sure that this very special gathering will add real value to this debate.

Thank you.