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Sixty-third General Assembly
Thematic Dialogue on Access
to Education (AM & FM)

WAYS MUST BE FOUND TO FEED YOUNG MINDS, CREATE SAFE HAVENS FOR LEARNERS, PRESIDENT

OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY SAYS DURING DEBATE ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Protecting Right to Education Has Fallen Victim to Culture of Neglect; States Are Urged to Make Schools Safe Havens, Criminalize Attacks against Them

"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," the President of the General Assembly, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, said at the opening of the Assembly's day-long thematic dialogue on access to education for people caught in conflicts and disasters.

"Let us give these girls and boys, youth and women the opportunity to contribute in the recovery and the future of their societies," he said. "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."

With the fundamental right to education denied to an estimated 75 million children worldwide, nearly half of them in conflict-torn countries, today's three interactive panels explored why the world community needed to act now. They considered the means of making education work and looked at ways to move forward. The participants underscored the need to include education as an important part of the humanitarian response to conflicts and natural disasters and stressed the international community's collective obligation to fulfil the right to education for all. The final panel addressed the measures the international community could take to end impunity, guarantee greater protection of students and teachers, and ensure quality education in emergencies.

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That call for action was echoed by today's keynote speaker, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Mssned, Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), who stressed the need to activate existing international conventions and establish a practical global mechanism to prohibit attacks on the right to education.

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Despite all the frustrations and disappointments deepened by the war in Gaza, she was committed to the right of quality education for everyone, she said. That right was the perfect path to bridge the gap between different cultures and to reconcile various civilizations. Without such a right, values of liberty, justice and equality would be meaningless.

"Can we, as an international community, understand what it means to have students deliberately denied their basic right to education by setting up checkpoints, preventing them from reaching their schools and universities?" she asked. Withholding electric power was a form of "premeditated denial" of students' right to work in laboratories and use information technology. The loss of a society's elite group of writers and academics at the hand of cold-blooded killers was a loss that could not be compensated. Bombing educational institutions bearing the United Nations flag was another danger sign.

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Panel I

The first panel discussion on the topic of “Education in Emergencies – Why We Need to Act Now” comprised three panellists: Pierre Nkurunziza, President of Burundi; Vernor Munoz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education; and Wildenes Etienne, a teacher from a Haitian school run by the non-governmental organization Catholic Relief Services. The discussion was moderated by Kevin Cahill, Chief Adviser for Humanitarian Affairs, Office of the President of the General Assembly.

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Panel II

Dedicated to the theme “How to Make Education Work – Investing in Learners, Investing in Success”, the second panel of the day was moderated by HILDE F. JOHNSON, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF.

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Looking at emergencies as “windows of opportunity” could help the international community understand “success”, she said. ... In the current Gaza emergency, education cluster members were working with early childhood providers to ensure that young learners received quality preschool education.

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MAIWAND RAHYABA, youth representative from Afghanistan, ...

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Among the daunting challenges of providing education in the aftermath of conflicts or under foreign occupation, speakers cited the situations in Gaza and the occupied Syrian Golan, among others. Also considered were the effects of the current economic crisis, which could negatively impact the “already meagre” funding for education.

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Panel III

The third panel discussion focused on “Shared Accountability: Ways to Move Forward”, and involved four panellists: Claude Heller, Mexico’s Permanent Representative and Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict; Lothar Krappmann, Member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child; Brendan O’Malley, author of the UNESCO study *Education Under Attack*; and Sradda Thapa, youth representative from Nepal. The discussion was moderated by Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

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Mr. O’MALLEY said the report *Education under Attack* had been the result of the first global study on such attacks. The study found that there had been an alarming series of such attacks across the world within the past three years, in places such as Afghanistan, Thailand, Colombia, Iraq and Gaza. The concept of schools as sanctuaries or zones of peace was not respected in those places, which led to hundreds of schools being closed for weeks or even years at a time. When students and teachers returned, lingering fear inhibited learning. He pushed for more recognition and respect for the Dakar pledge on “Education for All” in law and practice, which he said implied additional monitoring by Governments. Such attacks were technically war crimes, and the United Nations should take a lead in expanding the definition of that war crime to encompass not just attacks on buildings, but also attacks on students and staff.

He said an effective deterrent to such attacks required punishment. Cases should be referred to the International Criminal Court for investigation and prosecution. States should require a zero-tolerance policy on school attacks as a precondition for economic aid, military aid and trade deals with parties to conflict. National laws should confirm international laws protecting the right to education, and countries must find ways to turn education into a “force for peace”, for example, by developing a curriculum that developed respect for both narrower community values and the wider set of national values. Education attacks must be given its rightful place on the “Education for All” agenda and in the global monitoring report. He suggested that the Secretary-General commission a symbol that could be used to signify schools as sanctuaries of peace, similar to the way in which the Red Cross used its symbol for medical aid.

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