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Item 72 of the provisional agenda

SITUATION OF IRAQI REFUGEE STUDENTS IN THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

SUMMARY

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 177th session of the Executive Board at the request of the Syrian Arab Republic.

An explanatory note together with a proposed decision are set out below.

Decision proposed: paragraph 6.

EXPLANATORY NOTE

1. In early spring 2003, the region witnessed a mass movement of refugees from Iraq to neighbouring countries. The Syrian Arab Republic was the prime destination of this movement and this prompted the Syrian Government and people to mobilize in order to provide shelter to their Iraqi brothers, of all categories without distinction, who had been forced to leave their homes, villages and cities as they fled the disaster. The Syrian Arab Republic has offered and is continuing to offer these refugees all possible assistance, as dictated by its fraternal and neighbourly links, despite its very limited material resources.

2. As a result of the disarray caused by the war, and the insecurity and lack of stability, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers has risen in the Syrian Arab Republic owing to the good treatment that they have been given there: freedom of movement, because Syrian law does not require Arab brothers to have entry visas.

3. According to estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of asylum-seekers in the Syrian Arab Republic exceeded 2.5 million in 2007. This very large and growing number has had a very adverse impact on Syrian society in all fields, above all on the services provided by the Syrian Government to its citizens: the prices of real estate, foodstuffs and basic products have risen markedly, as have the various government subsidies for bread, fuel and other items. These too have all had a negative impact on the social and economic infrastructure.

4. In considering the impact of this phenomenon on the educational field alone, the following may be noted:

- there has been a general increase in enrolments in public schools in places where Iraqi refugees are found, in particular in Damascus and the surrounding area;
- such increases have had an adverse effect on the quality of education and knowledge and on the state of health of pupils and teachers.

Outline of the educational situation

- Iraqi pupils enjoy free basic and secondary education, as do Syrian citizens. They are exempt from the payment of school fees.
- Higher education in public universities is practically free (enrolment fees are around \$20).
- Educational institutions need financial resources for classrooms and for electricity, heating, sanitation and maintenance costs.
- The increase in pupil numbers has accelerated the deterioration of buildings and school facilities; there has thus been a rise in maintenance costs in view of the need to provide chairs, textbooks and teaching materials.
- The number of children enrolled has doubled in schools where there are Iraqi refugees. The number of pupils per class is between 40 and 50.
- Such a degree of saturation risks depriving these children of schooling and increasing the drop-out rate, which has been estimated to be more than 80%, or 200,000 Iraqi pupils.
- The number of Iraqi pupils enrolled in public schools in 2007 is approximately 33,000; the number has grown because parents enrol children in order to obtain long-term residence permits in the Syrian Arab Republic.
- The annual cost per pupil is \$280.

- The number of Iraqi students in higher education at the end of 2007 was 4,000.

Educational needs

- Expansion of existing schools.
- Construction of around 100 schools to accommodate the pupils and to reduce the drop-out rate in primary, secondary and technical education; such work has been costed at \$28,913,580.
- New budgets for supervisory staff (teachers and administrators).
- Provision of chairs, textbooks, teaching tools and school laboratories, costed at \$31,620,000.

5. In the light of this information, we believe that UNESCO, the organization most directly concerned in such situations, should react and launch initiatives in order to assist the education sector in the Syrian Arab Republic and should urge the international community to support the efforts of the Syrian Arab Republic to meet the refugees' many needs.

Proposed decision

6. Following the inclusion of this item in the provisional agenda of the 177th session of the Executive Board at the request of the Syrian Arab Republic, the draft decision below is submitted also by the following Members of the Executive Board: Algeria, Egypt and Yemen.

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) concerning education and teaching to be achieved by 2015,
2. Expressing its concern over the high and growing numbers of Iraqi students in the Syrian Arab Republic as a result of the situation in Iraq and over the financial, social and structural consequences arising therefrom, which no State can bear on its own without adversely affecting its economic, social and educational planning capacities,
3. Commending the efforts of the Syrian Arab Republic to alleviate the suffering of Iraqi students by endeavouring to integrate them into its schools and universities and by meeting their basic needs,
4. Requests the Director-General:
 - (a) to dispatch a mission to examine and assess the situation of these students in order to meet their needs in cooperation and coordination with the educational authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic concerned;
 - (b) to submit a report containing recommendations and practical measures aimed at mobilizing the international community to provide the necessary urgent assistance to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in support of its efforts to meet the needs of the Iraqi students for the current academic year;
5. Decides to include this item in the agenda of its 179th session, and requests the Director-General to submit to it an interim report on this matter.