Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien
Opening remarks at launch of Qatar Initiative to support education and vocational training for Syrian refugees

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As delivered

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the State of Qatar for hosting this meeting today and launching the initiative to support education and vocational training of Syrian refugees. Nothing could be more important or have a greater impact on Syria’s future than investing in the education of its children and youths.

Syria was once highly respected for its well-attended, high quality education system. In 2011 nearly all children in Syria attended school, but now just half do – both inside Syria and among refugee populations – making it one of the lowest attendance rates in the world.

These are real people, with real loves, and real needs. We were all children once too and we need to look back on our youth, think of the educations that we have received, and the benefits that we have accrued from that.

As conflict continues in Syria the Syrian people continue to face an onslaught of unspeakable violence. We have all seen in recent months the harrowing images of bombs and mortars raining down on schools, medical facilities, public markets and internally displaced settlements across the country.

The reports have indeed been endless: barrel bombs, hellfire cannons, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, napalm, suicide bombs, mortars and rockets, snipers, rape, illegal detention, torture, child recruitment, medieval sieges of entire cities. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, and well over a million injured.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a family from Syria who had to move away from their home because it was too close to a school. Image that as a parent, that schools are now dangerous places.
Educational facilities have been relentlessly attacked, with parents too afraid to send their children to school.

Approximately half of the population has been displaced, 6.5 million of them inside the country, in addition to the half a million Palestinian refugees having previously taken refuge in Syria. Almost 5 million refugees have fled the country – half of them children - and much of the remaining population – some 13.5 million people – are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

Children are the most affected by the fighting in Syria. Many are forced to fight an adult war, they are dropping out of school, girls are marrying early and boys mandated into labour. In the earlier years of the conflict, most of the children recruited by armed forces and groups were boys between the ages of 15 and 17, and they were used primarily in support roles away from the front lines. However, since 2014, all parties to the conflict have recruited children at much younger ages – some as young as seven – and often without parental consent. Particularly vulnerable are the thousands of separated children or unaccompanied minors who are stranded in Syria or who have fled across borders.

Instead of school books and learning opportunities, these children are receiving military training. They are participating in combat or taking up life-threatening roles at the battle-front, including carrying and maintaining weapons, manning checkpoints, and treating and evacuating war wounded.

Today, nearly 7 million children from Syria live in poverty, their lives shaped by violence, fear and constant displacement.

I was at the Jordanian border recently, visiting with families at the Bern camp and I was struck by the large number of unaccompanied children that I met there.

For the millions of displaced children and youths education is not an add-on, it is a lifeline. Education and vocational training can protect them from harm; lower their risk of abduction, forced recruitment, sexual exploitation and abuse, while returning to them a sense of normalcy and instilling some hope for the future.

Funding and capacity shortages translate into missed opportunities for children. In the first half of this year we reached just one quarter of the 4.6 million children targeted with quality education.

But it is brilliant that at least this one quarter of these children have been reached and I commend all those in this room who have been so critical in achieving that. I specifically thank specifically the leaders of the QUEST education initiative for their efforts in this area.
Syrian refugee children are likely to remain refugees for 20 years on average – if we do not do a better job of educating them, an entire generation of children will miss out on education with socio-economic implications for decades to come.

We do not want to be here many years from now and say that we failed this generation. We cannot even imagine failing a second one.

Closing the education funding gap will help restore children’s dignity and strengthen their psychological wellbeing. Let us each help realize this important initiative to enable all Syrian refugee children to access education by turning our funding pledges into firm commitments.

I want to thank you in advance, and I am sure the children who benefit from this programme will want to thank you in the future.

The future of millions of Syrian children, both inside the country and living in neighbouring countries, depends on it.

Thank you.