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Million-name petition and Nobel calls for Malala

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President Asif Ali Zardari during a meeting with former Prime Minister of UK and United Nations' Special Envoy on Global Education Gordon Brown at the presidency in Islamabad on Friday. – Photo by APP

ISLAMABAD: More than a million people have signed a global petition supporting shot Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai, UN envoy Gordon Brown said Friday, amid calls for her to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The 15-year-old who narrowly escaped death when she was shot in the head by Taliban militants a month ago for the “crime” of promoting girls’ right to go to school has touched millions across the globe.

A separate online petition calling for her to be put forward for the Nobel has attracted nearly 90,000 signatures and campaigners urged British Prime Minister David Cameron to recommend her for the award.

The Taliban hitman’s bullet grazed Malala’s brain and she is now recovering in hospital in Britain, from where she said she was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support.

“She wants me to tell everyone how grateful she is and is amazed that men, women and children from across the world are interested in her well-being,” her father Ziauddin Yousafzai said on her behalf.

“We deeply feel the heart-touching good wishes of the people across the world of all caste, colour and creed,” he said in a statement issued by the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, where Malala is being treated.

Saturday has been designated “Malala Day” by the UN, with demonstrations and vigils expected around the world to show support for her and call for girls’ education.

Some 32 million girls worldwide are denied access to education, according to UN figures, while in Pakistan more than five million children do not go to school.

Brown, the UN’s envoy for global education, presented Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari with the million-strong global petition and a second petition also with a million signatures from Pakistanis demanding free education for all.

At a meeting in Islamabad attended by President Zardari, Brown said the international community was ready to support Pakistan in its efforts to tackle poverty and ensure all children could go to school.

“Malala and her family believe that there are many, many more courageous and brave girls and families in your country who want to stand up for the right of every child, in particular girls, to have the education that they deserve,” he said.

The former British prime minister is visiting Pakistan to begin work on a plan to help the country get all of its out-of-school children into the classroom by 2015.

Education in Pakistan is under attack from Islamist militants opposed to secular schooling but also suffers from chronic underfunding — the country spends less than 2.5 per cent of GNP on education, according to UN children’s agency UNICEF.

The official literacy rate is 58 per cent, with less than half of women able to read and write, yet in 2011-12 the government’s spending on defence was more than 10 times greater than education.

Brown said the international community was ready to support Pakistan, but the country must help itself by spending more on education.

“It’s not good enough to spend only two per cent of your national income on education when you’re wanting to be a successful education economy in the future,” he told AFP.

Brown said the UN would work with Pakistan to draw up a costed plan with a timetable for implementation by April.

The Pakistani Taliban said they shot Malala, who rose to fame with a blog for the BBC Urdu website recounting life under the Islamists’ rule in Swat, for her “pioneering role” in calling for girls’ education.

There are fears Malala will be attacked again if she returns to Pakistan when she recovers and Brown said work needed to be done to improve security.

“We’ve got to do more, we’ve got to make people feel their security is better guaranteed in future but in the end what will dictate this is the determination of the people themselves to say no matter what a small minority says, we are a democracy and we will stand up for rights,” he said.

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