Malala fund for girls’ education launched

PARIS, Dec 10: President Asif Ali Zardari on Monday announced a 10-million-dollar donation for a global war chest to educate all girls by 2015 set up in the name of Malala Yousufzai.

The “Malala Fund for Girls’ Right to Education” aims at raising billions of dollars to ensure that all girls go to school by 2015 in line with the United Nations Millennium goals.

“A young determined daughter of my country was attacked by the forces of darkness,” Mr Zardari said at the high-profile “Stand Up For Malala” event at the Unesco headquarters in Paris.

“We are facing two forces in the country: Malala represents the forces of peace and we are fighting with the forces of darkness, hatred and violence,” he said.

The ceremony drew French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, former British premier Gordon Brown, the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, and the former presidents of Finland and Chile.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the EU’s top diplomat Catherine Ashton sent special video-taped messages of support.

Federal Minister for Education Waqas Akram signed an agreement to this effect with Unesco head Irina Bokova.

Malala, who is recovering in a British hospital after being brutally attacked on her school bus on Oct 9, will herself join the campaign when she is better. Her father Ziauddin Yousufzai has been appointed to help in what Mr Brown dubbed a new “Malala Plan” to get all girls into school around the world by the end of 2015.

President Zardari slammed fundamentalists for giving the religion a bad name. “The first word of the Holy Quran is ‘Iqra’ which is read,” he said, attacking the “fringe minority of darkness, hatred, of conflict”.

“What extremists fear is a girl with a book in her hand,” he said.

The UN estimates that 61 million children do not go to school and girls account for two-thirds of this number.

Mr Brown said the initiative, which he hoped would attract “billions of dollars of public subscriptions”, also aimed at stopping social evils such as child marriage and violence against girls.

The former British premier

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said he wanted Malala’s birthday, July 12th, to be designated a day of action each year when children around the world are invited to march, demonstrate, petition and pray for education to be delivered worldwide.

Secretary Clinton highlighted the pressing need for universal education, saying: “Closing the education gap is a powerful prescription for economic growth.”

Ms Ashton said the EU on Monday had collected this year’s Nobel Peace Prize, adding that the estimated 630,000-euro ($1.2m) prize money would be donated to help children affected by war.

ASSURANCE: President Zardari assured the international community that Pakistan was committed to providing equal rights for education to boys and girls and urged the world community to extend support and cooperation for promoting education.

Addressing the ceremony, he said Pakistan had taken a giant leap forward in the quest for education and knowledge. All political parties and provinces came together to make fundamental changes in the Constitution regarding education for all and it had been declared a fundamental right for every one and the state’s responsibility.

The president said this change in the Constitution would have transformational effects in defeating the forces of extremist mindset opposing education for girls.

He said Malala stood for her right to education, not only for herself but for a bright and progressive future of her country.

Mr Zardari said Malala’s recovery was a symbol of resilience of the Pakistani nation. “Malala’s survival teaches us that extremism can only be fought through our collective commitment.”

The president said he had no doubt that the resolve to provide education to all, particularly to millions of out-of-school girls, was the best strategy to defeat the forces of violence. — Agencies