Pakistan among top countries in world hosting large refugee population

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has been hosting Afghan refugees for three decades now, with currently some 1.7 million registered Afghans living in urban and rural areas of Pakistan, including women and children. Pakistan is among the top countries in the world hosting such a large refugee population.

To meet the basic needs, Pakistan has been facilitating provision of education services to some Afghan refugees for years. Regardless of efforts, illiteracy rate is very high among Afghan refugee children. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in collaboration with United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in lieu with signed memorandum of understanding (MoU) organised a national conference to raise awareness and highlighted issues to promote the right to education of Afghan refugee children in Pakistan, on Thursday.

The aim of the conference was to raise awareness and highlight concerns to encourage stakeholders to achieve the ‘Education for All (EFA)’ goals by including Afghan refugee children through policy and capacity reform, especially in refugee hosting areas, such as FAITA, KP and Balochistan.

UNESCO Country Representative Dr Kozue Kay Nagata said, “We have an objective to assure that education is accessible specially to the marginalised. We are geared to set up foundation for the future joint interventions with a common interest of ensuring education reaches Afghan refugee children as we believe all children has right to education and there is no doubt about it.”

On the need to educate the societies without discriminating them due to their status she urged the stakeholders saying, “Let’s be practical, we need to face it without being superficial but it is a highly sensitive issue, which cannot be solved unless we consider the fundamental issue of tackling the education for all in a particle manner, especially by including the marginalised groups like refugees in policy reform.”

Addressing the participants, country director of the UNHCR, Neil Wright, elaborated the situation of the education among Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Wright said, “The quality of the education, including quality of the facilities and teachers among refugees show clearly that there is a long way to go. About 3.7 million has gone back in last 10 years. Out of this refugees population, 50 percent are aged 14 whereas 70 percent are aged 18 years old. Only 55,000 or five percent of the 1.74 million PoR card holders have completed primary education, there is only 20 percent enrollment in primary school amongst school-aged Afghan refugee children.”

Wright added while concluding, “vast majority of these children were born in Pakistan and they feel that Pakistan is their country.”

He said, “It’s just not for the individual but for society, in my personal view education is a personal and social insurance, meaning if you educate young kids regardless of their background you have less to pay for their social security.”

He further added, “It’s not a favour to these refugee kids, It’s just for all of us, because if we educated them we have to pay less taxes to pay, less to
spend on social security and peace and harmony. There is no peace or security without education."

In Pakistan 200,000 children in privately managed schools study and follow Afghan curriculum.