Pakistan schools 193,000 Afghan children

By Ikram Junaidi

ISLAMABAD, March 29: At the moment 43 per cent of Pakistani children ageing 5 to 11 years are out of schools while the country generously spends its educational resources on 193,000 children of Afghan refugees.

It was disclosed in a conference here that Pakistan hosts 1.7 million registered Afghan refugees out of which 386,000 children are of school-going age and nearly 50 per cent of them have been studying in the schools not only indirectly using our educational budget which has never crossed 2 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) but also affecting the teacher-student ratio.

Speakers during the national conference to raise awareness and highlight issues to promote the “Right to Education of Afghan Refugee Children in Pakistan” held by United Nation’s Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in cooperation with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), on Thursday.

Country Representative of Unesco Dr Kome Kay Nagata, Country Director Neil Wright, Economist Dr Iesha Malikzada, District Officer Platine Balochistan Rashied Tareen, Executive District Officer Peshawar Gohar Ali Khan and other eminent educationists from provincial ministries participated in the conference.

Dr Iesha said that Pakistan has severe financial and educational problems but still it is among the top countries in the world hosting such large refugee population over three decades.

Pakistan has national and international commitments and according to those all the children over 6 years of age should be admitted into educational institutions. She said: “Because of financial problems most of male children can not continue their studies even after primary level and females discontinue it because of cultural, security and other issues.

“Although, at different forums educationists stress that 4 per cent of the GDP should be spent on education but they don’t know that we don’t have potential to spend so much amount on education and even some of the amount which is allocated for the education lapses. We have to construct new schools and train teachers to become capable of absorbing more money in education sector,” she said.

Rashied Tareen said that refugees are a federal subject but there are almost 28,000 Afghan children who are studying in the public sector of Balochistan and another 50,000 have been studying in the schools of international and national donors.

The UNHCR assists those children till class 8 (Middle Standard) and after that they got education from the institutes run by the government of Pakistan.

He said: “There should be political will not only in Afghan refugees but also their government and it should help Pakistan, not only by creating opportunities of education but also creating peace in Afghanistan because only that’s how refugees will go back to their native country. At the moment there are one million unregistered Afghan refugees in Pakistan.”

Gohar Khan said there are 9,000 schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and in almost every classroom Afghan children are getting education along with Pakistani students.

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

Stressing 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 practical manner specially by including the marginalised groups like refugees in policy reform.”

Addressing the participants, Neil Wright said: “The quality of education including quality of the facilities and that of teachers among refugees clearly shows that there is a long way to go.

As many as 1.74 million Afghan refugees are still living in country, hosted generously by government, and 3.7 million have gone back in last 10 years. Out of this refugee population 50 per cent are of the age of 14 whereas 70 per cent are of 18. Only 55,000 (5%) of the 1.74 million have completed primary education, there is only 20% enrollment in primary school amongst school-aged Afghan refugee children in Balochistan.”