

Children's schooling under threat from deepening poverty, warns UN official



Members of the Secretariat of the first-ever Global Model United Nations Conference

5 August 2009 – Poverty is the biggest threat to the educational development of children around the world, a senior United Nations official today warned hundreds of students gathered for the start of the first ever Global Model UN (**GMUN**) conference.

"Poverty, like conflict, today continues to deprive young people of the opportunity and right to be educated," UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyoko Akasaka told over 500 student delegates meeting at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

Some "72 million children are out of school, denied the right to education," despite passing the mid-way point for reaching the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**), a series of targets set by world leaders – including the slashing of poverty and the achievement of universal primary education – by 2015, noted Mr. Akasaka.

He said that any progress in the eradication of hunger had been reversed largely due to last year's hike in food and fuel prices, and that an estimated 55 to 90 million more people were forced into extreme poverty in 2009 – a forecast calculated before the current economic crisis took hold.

With more than 1 billion people around the world trapped in poverty, many nations in Africa and Asia are not on track to achieve the MDGs, said Mr. Akasaka. "The global financial and economic crises are hitting the poorest and the most vulnerable hardest of all.

"Poverty is the number one enemy of children," Mr. Akasaka stressed in his address to the students, who represent 120 of the 192 UN Member States. "Poverty is the number one enemy of a decent society. We must stand up and fight against poverty."

The Under-Secretary-General said that the challenges faced in achieving the MDGs are "great, daunting and humbling," and that it would take enormous multilateral efforts to solve them.

"That is why governments are taking collective action to address them, including through the United Nations, the world's only truly universal organization," he said.

"Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has repeatedly urged nations not to lose sight of the Goals," said Mr. Akasaka, highlighting the Secretary-General's call "to accelerate progress towards the MDGs and to strengthen the global partnership for development."

Mr. Akasaka said that civil society also plays a critical role in these efforts and young people are making important contributions around the world to the achievement of the MDGs.

"Many campaigns that raise awareness and focus on reaching specific Millennium Development Goals have been initiated by young people. At a time when young people are often the ones hardest hit by poverty, there is no one better to speak on behalf of youth people than the young themselves."

Mr. Akasaka reminded delegates that efforts to achieve the MDGs are closely connected to those combating global warming. "Climate change is the challenge of our – and your – generation," he said. "In tackling the climate challenge, we will find solutions for economic recovery, food security for the poor, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals."

Encouraging delegates to join the UN campaign pressing governments to "seal the deal" on a "fair, balanced and effective agreement on climate change" when they meet at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December, Mr. Akasaka said that as "pioneers of GMUN, you are living history and you will become legends. We would not be here without the help of so many."

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told delegates that he participated in a UN-style debate as a teenager, so "you never know where this Conference might lead," in a video **message** to the conference.

"You could end up as Secretary-General of the United Nations, or maybe your country's ambassador to the United Nations," said Mr. Ban, adding that whatever "path you choose, you will be called on to lead. The world faces serious challenges, and every citizen must do his or her part to address them."

Delegates at the inaugural three-day GMUN conference, organized by the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) with partial funding from Switzerland, were chosen from regional model UN programmes.

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