



Educational programme “Away from home and fear”

Remarks by Mr. Damtew Dessalegne, UNHCR Representative in Cyprus

1. It is a great pleasure that we are launching today together with the Child Commissioner and the Ministry of Education and Culture the programme “Away from home and fear”. UNHCR as the global humanitarian organisation dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees is pleased to be part of this initiative. An initiative that aims at the smooth integration of refugee children in their school environment, so that they can also exercise in a meaningful manner a basic human right that unfortunately remains out of reach for many refugee children.
2. War and human rights violations drive away from their home countries an increasing number of people, 50% of which are under the age of 18. This is dismaying and what’s even more disturbing is that for many refugees education remains out of reach. School aged children are supposed to get 200 days of school a year. A UNHCR report on education published recently showed that 3.5 million school-age refugees had 0 days of school in 2016.
3. At the same time a considerable number of refugee children, together with their families or alone, manage to reach countries where access to education is possible. It is a fact that schools all over the world, including Cyprus, are welcoming into their classrooms an increasing number of refugee children. The schools are facing the challenging task of ensuring a meaningful education for refugee children and give them the opportunity to thrive together with their local classmates.
4. The case for education is clear. Participation and accomplishment in education increases opportunities for self-reliance and provides a sense of purpose, normalcy and continuity in otherwise unsettled environments. Educated children and youth stand a greater chance of becoming adults who can contribute meaningfully in the development and prosperity of the country that has welcomed them.
5. In Cyprus, a lot of progress has been observed in the refugee education policies. Indeed, the policy framework for the integration of students with a migratory background that was approved in 2016 by the Ministry of Education and Culture is in the right direction, and its main priority areas are in line with international and regional standards.
6. Yet, despite the considerable efforts of the Ministry of Education and concerned schools, there are continuing difficulties with the integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children into their new school environment. Such issues identified include conflicts between children, absenteeism, language barriers, adapting to the new learning process, the relationship between the parents and school community, and racism.

7. We believe that the programme that is being launched today will help tackle some of these issues. This programme provides a meaningful platform for discussing the challenges that are being faced today in schools for the following reasons: It brings together teachers, students and parents – from the local, refugee and migrants community; and most importantly the school communities are encouraged to take ownership of their own issues of concern and develop a plan of action on how to best address their challenges.
8. We hope that by bringing communities together, this programme will also serve as a useful tool for fostering empathy for refugees by promoting the universal values of humanitarianism, solidarity and protection of the most vulnerable, yet resilient, group of people in the world. Today, xenophobic tendencies threaten the centuries-old tradition of granting asylum. As a result, protecting refugees also involves explaining to the public exactly who refugees are and what they have been through. It is essential that people understand that refugees are not a threat to them, but are themselves threatened.
9. Let me conclude by wishing you all a productive day. We are looking forward to the results of a constructive dialogue in this important matter.