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Towards inclusive education for the disabled

AJK government donates Rs500,000 to PDF

By Shahina Maqbool

ISLAMABAD: The Pakistan Disabled Foundation's (PDF) movement for the promotion of child-friendly and inclusive education received a boost here Thursday when the government of Azad Kashmir placed all available resources, including a cash donation of Rs500,000, at the organization's disposal to patronise its interventions in AJK.

Addressing the inaugural session of a three-day conference on special education, Azad Kashmir Prime Minister Sardar Ateeq Khan said the government of AJK, in collaboration with Unesco and Unicef, would soon come up with a scheme for inclusion of disabled children in the educational institutions of AJK, which has a literacy rate of 65 per cent. AJK has a disabled population of approximately 60,000, including those who are suffering from various disabilities in the aftermath of the October 8 earthquake.

The AJK premier assured PDF that any discrepancies in the job quota for disabled persons would be removed. He entrusted the organisation with the responsibility of preparing a database to ascertain the exact nature and incidence of disabilities in AJK and assured provision of additional resources for the task.

He also announced that arrangements would be made for the development of a website of PDF. "We will patronise PDF in AJK in every possible manner," he said, hoping that the resultant reforms would create an environment where the diversity, creativity and freedom of expression of all children, regardless of their ability or disability, would be respected.

Explaining the objectives of the three-day event, PDF's chairman Shahid

Ahmed Memon said the conference has been convened to develop a strategy for the removal of hurdles impeding the inclusion of disabled persons, with the focus being on those suffering from visual impairment.

PDF is all set to launch its services for disabled persons in AJK and a proposal to this effect has already been sent to the ERRA Committee and the AJK government. Luckily, one of the community members of AJK, Safeer Ahmed, who is himself visually impaired, announced to donate 300 square yards of land to PDF to enable it to start its projects in AJK.

Earlier in his keynote address, Terje Watterdal, senior partner of International Development Partners-Norway, very appropriately defined inclusion as meaning dignity and respect for each man and woman, all of whom have been created by God in the best of moulds.

He said regardless of the intention, the use of terms like 'special people' create stigma which leads to further marginalisation and exclusion of disabled persons. He explained that in inclusive societies, people are allowed to build on their strengths rather than weaknesses, and abilities rather than disabilities.

Watterdal emphasised that a disability is created by social barriers, attitudes and lack of respect by fellow citizens. Speaking in the context of inclusive education, Watterdal said an inclusive school is a child-friendly and child-seeking institution that adapts to the specific needs of children and allows them to learn at their own pace and time. He referred to the development of a Unesco toolkit, which will serve as a powerful tool in transforming schools for inclusive education.

Watterdal recommended the need to reform the currently existing system of teacher training so that teachers too can brace for change. One of the highlights of the conference was the surprise presentation of a Pride of Performance Award to Shakila Yasmin, a visually challenged voluntary worker who has been rendering invaluable services for PDF.