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# We Need to Help the Millions of Child Refugees

By Gordon Brown

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As the third anniversary of the start of Syria's civil war approaches, there is a race against time to deliver a groundbreaking education project to the conflict's hardest-hit victims — hundreds of thousands of child refugees.

A shocking 3 million Syrian children have now been displaced. More than 1 million of them have fled Syria and are languishing in camps in neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. These children are now suffering a third winter away from their homes, schools and friends. Many are separated from their families, and thousands more join the ranks of displaced persons every day in what is becoming the largest humanitarian catastrophe of our time.

Syria is losing a generation
of children who are forced
to work or forced

into marriages.

But a pathbreaking initiative in Lebanon, involving teachers, aid agencies and education charities has opened a small window of hope. Amid the chaos of camps, makeshift huts and destitution, the fight for an important new principle of international aid has begun. Even in times of conflict, children must have access to education.

A century and a half ago, the Red Cross established the norm that health care could — and should — be provided even in conflict zones. This principle was carried forward by groups like Medecins Sans Frontieres, whose doctors have risked their lives for the last four decades to deliver medical care to the world's most dangerous places.

Now Lebanon is the site of a pilot program to advance the idea that providing education for refugee children is equally feasible — and no less important. Across 1,500 communities in this troubled, divided country, where Syrian refugee children now make up 20 percent of the school-age population, the aim is to establish children's right to education as a humanitarian priority.

The typical refugee child spends more than 10 years away from home. And every month that a child is out of school makes it less likely that they will ever return. Three years ago, most Syrian children were at school, and the country had near universal primary education. Today, millions of children are being denied any chance to realize their talents. The scars will last for decades.

So in Syria and the surrounding region, there is already a lost generation in the making. There are children who are now 8 and 9 and have never been to school. Other children are condemned to work as child laborers, and hundreds of girls are forced into early marriages. There are gruesome tales of young people who have been forced to sell their kidneys and other organs simply to survive.

Of course, we must provide food, shelter and vaccinations. But in conflicts like these, the one thing that children need, beyond the material basics, is hope. And it is education that provides children with hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel — hope that they can plan for the future and prepare for jobs and adulthood.

The pilot project in Lebanon, designed by Kevin Watkins of Britain's Overseas Development Institute and led by the United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF, and the UN High Commission for Refugees, or UNHCR, creates the opportunity to establish a right to education irrespective of borders. Indeed, it is designed to cater to all 435,000 Syrian child refugees now in the country. Thanks to a historic agreement with the Lebanese government, places for hundreds of thousands of children can be created within weeks by putting 1,500 of Lebanon's schools on a double-shift system.

The scheme is already being piloted in a small village called Akroum in the north of the country. Lebanese children are taught during the first shift, and Syrian children in the second. Using the same school for both sets of pupils means that education can be delivered at a cost of only $670 per child per year.

To secure places for all refugee children, we are seeking $195 million dollars a year for UNICEF and UNHCR, with the plan to be implemented on the ground by nongovernmental organizations and the Lebanese authorities. The aim is to secure all funding during March as the world marks the third anniversary of this tragic exodus from Syria.

We have already assembled a coalition of 10 donor countries to take the lead, but we need 10 more donors to fund the project fully. We are appealing to donors not just to create thousands of school places for desperately needy children, but also to establish a precedent for the 20 million other children driven by violent conflict into displaced-persons camps and shantytowns.

There cannot be universal educational opportunity for the worlds' children without an agreement that we will cater to children in conflict zones. One million Afghan children are in camps along the border with Pakistan. Thousands of children in South Sudan still await their first chance to go to school, and schools have yet to be provided for a million more children in the war-torn Central African Republic.

These children's chances now depend on showing that we can make progress in Lebanon.

The UN Millennium Development Goals, adopted in 2000, expire in December 2015, which means that time is running out to meet the deadline for achieving the target of universal primary education. That goal will remain unattainable unless and until we establish the long-overdue principle that a child's right to education knows no boundaries.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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