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Kuwait- Satyarthi a tireless global advocate of children's rights

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(MENAFN - Arab Times) Nobel Peace Laureate firmly believes he will see end of child labour in his lifetime

Cinatra Fernandes with Kailash Satyarthi

KUWAIT CITY, Nov 20: 'No problem in the world can be solved in isolation or in silo. If the problems are so interconnected, the solutions are definitely interconnected', remarked Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi who firmly believes that he will see the end of child labour in his lifetime.

Satyarthi marked his first visit to Kuwait early this week where he attended the Takreem's new forum, TAKminds, as the Chief Guest and delivered a keynote address. Speaking to the Arab Times on the sidelines of the forum, he detailed his efforts in ending violence against children and touch on various pertinent topics.

'152 million children are toiling in fields and farms, mines and factories, or doing household work. Millions of young boys and girls are bought and sold like animals today, and sometimes for a lesser price than animals', he stated.

He pointed out that 60 million children have never been to school and another 200 million have been forced to abandon their schooling on account of financial constraints or lack of access to primary education.

Additionally, 50 million children are on the move today, navigating for safety and stability, as victims of conflicts, climate change, mass scale displacement or migration. He pointed out that 75,000 children will die of curable diseases, even as each year 3 million children will succumb to hunger and malnutrition. He declared that children, already victims, were further victimised.

Takreem Founder Ricardo Karam and Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi
Tireless

Satyarthi has been a tireless global advocate of children's rights for four decades. He left a lucrative career as an Electrical Engineer to start the 'Bachpan Bachao Andolan' i.e. Save the Childhood Movement, and rescue children and their families from slavery and reintegrate them into society. Under his aegis, the movement has rescued over 87,000 children from the scourge of bondage, trafficking and exploitative labour.

He recounts that his fight against slavery began when a desperate father knocked on his door, looking for help. The family, already victims of trafficking and slavery, were to have their daughter sold to a brothel by their masters. Satyarthi, on hearing the story, decided to rescue the girl himself. Gathering some resources and friends, he made an attempt for which he was badly beaten and his efforts proved unfruitful.

But he did not give up and looked for other ways to help the family. He engaged the Delhi High court and secured the release of not only the girl and her family but 36 other men, women and children. 'This was the first documented civil society initiative to rescue men, women and children from slavery. '

The smiles of freedom that flashed across the faces of the free children strengthened his resolve and he has never looked back. He soon realised the need to expand his movement to other South Asian countries of Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in 1988.

In 1998, he conceived and led the largest civil society network for exploited children through the Global March against Child Labour, a physical march across 103 countries covering 80,000 km, through a coalition of thousands of organisations across 144 countries. They had one demand, an ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour. The march was successful and led to the adoption of ILO Convention 182 which went on to become the fastest ratified convention in the ILO's history.

In 2014, Satyarthi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education. He was surprised by the win and amazed by the awareness it had generated for the cause. 'In the 35 minutes of having won the Nobel Peace Prize, the issue of child's rights was highlighted globally, more so than I could've done in 35 years.'

He then felt the need to expand his efforts to tackle all forms of violence against children and launched the Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation to work towards a child-friendly world where all children are free, safe, healthy and educated.

'Violence has many manifestations. Slavery is just one of them', he pointed out, adding that sexual abuse, rape, health and malnutrition were all interconnected issues.

He shared that various political, economic, structural and systemic issues, social and cultural reasons, had contributed to violence against children. 'We have made great strides and progress in our technologies but still have many inroads to make in securing the rights of children.'

The rights of the child have been a fringe issue until recent years. Satyarthi points out that one reason for this could be the perception of children as vulnerable and pitiable but not considered as individuals who are born with fundamental rights. 'These rights should be acknowledged, properly articulated and enforced as the global universal rights.'

Secondly, politically speaking, children do not have the right to vote and so, exert little influence. Moreover, children who are victims of exploitation and abuse often come from the most excluded and marginalised sections of society, and neither they nor their parents have influence in the politics. But the issue has gained ground through social movements and is now in the mainstream.

Satyarthi's relentless efforts in ending child slavery, trafficking, forced labour and violence received international support as he succeeded in getting child protection and welfare-related clauses included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations in September 2015. 'That was another major policy success, we have very specific clauses against child labour, child trafficking, slavery and violence against children in the sustainable development goals which is a global development agenda that is followed by all governments', he described.

Initiative

In 2016, he founded a novel and unique initiative, 'Laureates and Leaders for children' that has brought together several Nobel Laureates and moral leaders from across the globe to build a sense of urgency, collective responsibility and a strong moral voice to galvanize political will towards ensuring the rights and safety of the world's children and youth.

Satyarthi hopes to build the biggest youth movement and unleash their potential as agents of positive social transformation with his '100 million for 100 million' campaign, a global intervention to mobilize 100 million youth to shape a better future for the 100 million less privileged children.

'100 million children are victims of violence. On the other hand, 100 of millions of youth are ready to take up challenges, they wanted to make this world a better place, they want to prove themselves. They are looking for a purpose and a platform to voice out their strength. Why can't we channelize the youth's energy and power so that they become the change-makers and leaders for 100 million victims of violence?', he explained.

Satyarthi and his team are currently working on establishing a global thinktank related to children's issues in Andhra Pradesh, India. He also revealed that he is working on a new legally binding UN convention to stop the online abuse of children, the newest form of violence against children through pornography, sexual abuse and trafficking.

When asked about the potency of the convention he shared that an international, legally binding convention, would encompass a mechanism for monitoring on a country level. He revealed that his demands include a global high-level task force

with teeth and extraterritorial jurisdiction, and a global helpline monitored by the task force to crack down on these invisible crimes and the individuals and syndicates involved in it.

Trafficking

Child pornography is a \$8 billion industry and trafficking has grown to a \$150 billion industry. 'Governments can ban websites but they cannot control the global servers and data service providers so there is a need for legislation and supporting institutional mechanism to support it', he said.

He shared that faith leaders around the world also have an important role to play in securing the digital dignity and safety of children by exerting their influence to their followers. He spoke of his recent visit to the Vatican and his fruitful talks with Pope Francis who is committed to the cause both in intention and action as well as his participation in the Interfaith Alliance For Safer Communities being hosted at Abu Dhabi, UAE, that will address this issue.

Satyarthi who spent time with children at a refugee camp in Germany recalled meeting a young boy who had lost his legs and his father on his journey from Syria. When asked about his future plans, the boy expressed a desire to return home as an engineer and reconstruct his village.

Satyarthi affirmed that this boy's story echoes that of the millions displaced who are looking to neither steal jobs of those in their host countries nor occupy their houses forever. Refugee children have attachments to their families, villages, and countries, and have dreams to contribute to their communities when they go back home which can only be made possible through education.

Satyarthi believes that education is a fundamental right for all children. 'How can you think of a just, equitable, prosperous world based on social and gender justice without education. Education and learning is key to the rest of the human rights.'

He reiterated that an additional \$22 billion is required per year to ensure primary education for all children in the world. This amount equals to merely 4.5 days of global military expenditure and is also one-fifth of what Americans spend on tobacco.

He shared that a lack of resources or poverty is not an excuse for a failure in the delivery of quality education for all but it is a question of priority, 'If there is poverty, it is of compassion and of not prioritizing the welfare of our children.'

Those who believe that these problems are too complicated or unsolvable are wrong, Satyarthi remarked. Less than 20 years ago, the number of child labourers in the world was 260 million and after the ILO Convention 182, the number dropped to 150 million. '110 million children were saved in the last two decades, so change is possible.'

He continued, 'If we are able to protect one generation, that one educated healthy generation would be capable of protecting all future generations.'

Speaking of the vicious circle of poverty, adult unemployment and child labour, Satyarthi pointed out that today 210 million adults are unemployed and yet we employ 152 million child labourers. 'Every single child labourer is working at the cost of one adult's job. There are studies conducted in many countries, including India, that has proven that most of these child labourers belong to those parents who are

not able to find jobs for 100 days a year. Children are forced to work because they are the cheapest source of labour and are physically and mentally vulnerable while their parents are underpaid or completely jobless.'

He stressed that child labour is the biggest impediment to education and alleviation of poverty, 'If children are not able to get a quality education, they will remain poor for the whole of their lives. Education matters if you want to get rid of individual poverty or the poverty of the nation, we have to ensure education for all children.'

He shared that while governments and international institutions are important stakeholders in this fight, the corporate sector and consumers have an important role to play. 'We are working with the corporate sector and challenging them so that no child is employed in their supply chain.'

'Consumer organisations around the world have become more aware and the media is vigilant and highlighting this issue. If child labour is exposed within the supply chain of any company it becomes a very big news in the world and with social media, it goes viral in real time. This puts more pressure on companies to ensure this', he added.

Success

Satyarthi pointed to the success of Rugmark, a first of its kind certification, and social labelling and monitoring mechanism for child labour free carpets. 'I did not want to kill the carpet industry of India, Pakistan and Nepal. My enemy was child labour, not the industry or carpet manufacturers.'

Since its introduction in 1995, the number of child labourers in the carpet industry of the above three South Asian countries has decreased from 1 million to 200,000. 'At least 800,000 children were saved and since consumer demand or the quantity of production and export has not fallen, it has helped in creating 800,000 jobs at least for able-bodied unemployed adults. In most cases, these unemployed people were the very parents of these children. This is one strategy that has been very successful and we are pushing this idea to other industries as well.'

He added that ordinary individuals in the MENA region need to be sensitized to these issues in order to influence their politics and also invest more in tackling the global education crisis. 'So many children are not in school or are forced to leave school. This crisis should be responded to with resources and countries like Kuwait can be a major partner in it.'

He shared the Gulf countries' contributions to global development had risen to 9% in 2015 compared to 4% in 2007 from the Gulf region and commended them for investing in humanitarian issues of other countries in the world.

In his home country of India, Satyarthi has leveraged his clout as India's only Nobel Peace Laureate to push the government for changes in its child labour law. Child labour in India in all of its forms is completely banned for children until the age of 14 and prohibits the employment of children below the age of 18 hazardous occupations.

India has also ratified two ILO conventions has agreed to enact a holistic and robust law against human trafficking which has already been passed from the Lower House of its Parliament. Satyarthi is hopeful that it will be passed from the

Upper House as it includes provisions for both punishments for violators and rehabilitation benefits for victims. While these positive strides have been made, the Indian government has not dispensed adequate funding for children.

While the rhetoric of its political leaders is one of great pride in the young demographic dividend, which makes up 40% of India's total population, spending on the education, health and protection of children combined, is less than 4% of its GDP.

He also highlighted other developments in India, where various social issues had been brought into the mainstream political discourse of the nation. He urged the civil society social advocates to not lose touch with its grassroots in order to build a sustainable movement.

A 90-minute feature-length documentary, 'The Price of Free', from director Derek Doneen and producer Davis Guggenheim of 'An Inconvenient Truth,' and 'He Named Me Malala' fame will debut on You- Tube on Nov 27. The film, which won the Grand Jury Prize, at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, follows Satyarthi and his team of leaders around the world through gripping secret raids and quests for missing children and hopes to provoke a public conversation about child labour and our own consumerism.

By Cinatra Fernandes Arab Times Staff

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ARAB TIMES (<http://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/satyarthi-a-tireless-global-advocate-of-childrens-rights/>)