



**Convention on the
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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thirty-third session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 884th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 3 June 2003, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. DOEK

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 6) (continued)

Second periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic (continued) (CRC/C/93/Add.2; CRC/C/Q/SYR/2; CRC/C/RESP/28)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Abbas, Ms. Al Jabi, Ms. Al Khiyami, Ms. Morad, Mr. Khadra, Mr. Sarra and Mr. Yasminah (Syrian Arab Republic) took places at the Committee table.
2. Ms. AL JABI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the high number of posts in the executive and legislative branches occupied by persons belonging to minority groups was an indication of her Government's positive attitude towards minorities.
3. The Higher Committee for Children, which operated under the aegis of the executive authority, was currently responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Convention at the national level. If necessary, steps could be taken to establish other mechanisms to evaluate progress in the field of children's rights. Specialists trained in psychology and social work were employed in all schools to monitor the implementation of children's rights at the local level and to help children to resolve their difficulties.
4. Efforts were currently under way to establish a children's parliament, which would encourage children to voice their opinions and participate in the decision-making process. Significant efforts had been made to raise awareness of the right of girls to education. There were now almost as many girls in school as there were boys. In addition to its incorporation into the school curriculum, education on the rights of the child was a topic that was frequently broached in the context of extra-curricular activities.
5. Mr. YASMINAH (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, while a law had been adopted to protect children from domestic violence, there was no specific legislation prohibiting corporal punishment. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education had issued numerous administrative decisions and orders stipulating that children should not be subjected to physical punishment in schools. Teachers were being encouraged to engage in dialogue with children in order to identify solutions to problems rather than resort to corporal punishment. Consequently, the practice of corporal punishment was gradually dying out. A teacher found guilty of inflicting corporal punishment on a child could be transferred to another governorate.
6. A child who was abused at school could lodge a complaint with the school administration, and appropriate investigations would be carried out. Youth organizations such as the Tala'i al-Ba'ath (Baath Vanguard) Organization, to which all persons up to the age of 23 automatically belonged, could file a complaint on a child's behalf.
7. In 2003, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), had held a national seminar on the use of non-violent forms of discipline. Those participating in the seminar had considered ways of protecting children's rights in times of peace and war and had reiterated the importance of implementing the provisions of international human rights instruments.

8. Mr. FILALI asked whether any parents' associations in the Syrian Arab Republic had the authority to prosecute teachers accused of child abuse.
9. Mr. YASMINAH (Syrian Arab Republic) said that parents could file complaints through a parents' council.
10. Girls had access to all services, including educational services, on an equal footing with boys. The Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the Women's General Federation and UNICEF, had launched a literacy plan in the northern and eastern governorates, where there was a high rate of illiteracy among girls, largely because they were expected to work in the fields and usually married very young. Lessons were provided for girls outside normal working hours. To date, the plan had produced some positive results.
11. Ms. AL JABI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that efforts were being made to raise awareness among girls of their right to education. It was hoped that the literacy plan would soon be extended to other provinces.
12. A number of centres had been established in the Syrian Arab Republic to provide care for foundlings. The First Lady made regular visits to those centres, accompanied by a team of specialists to ensure that such children were being provided with adequate care.
13. Ms. AL KHIYAMI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour was responsible for ensuring that adequate care was provided for all children placed in institutions. There were a number of different institutions, both public and private, which provided care for orphans, children deprived of a family environment, children in difficulty, disabled children and juvenile delinquents. Employees working in such institutions received expert training in psychology and social welfare. The Ministry of Health was responsible for providing health care for all institutionalized children.
14. An act on the care of foundlings defined a foundling as being a newborn of unknown parentage. The act stipulated that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour was responsible for the care, maintenance and education of a foundling and was the foundling's legal guardian until he or she reached the age of 18. The Personal Status Code contained provisions to ensure that foundlings were given a name and were issued with a birth certificate, which would allow them to enrol in school and enjoy all the other rights accorded to citizens.
15. Mr. KHADRA (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Higher Committee for Children had been established with the aim of coordinating the activities of the various ministries and all other bodies concerned with children. The Higher Committee had so far achieved all of its objectives.
16. The Healthy Villages Programme was managed and financed by local authorities with the support of the Government. Under the Programme, each village set its own goals in terms of health, education and economic growth. The Programme, which had first been implemented in 1995 in three selected villages, had now been extended to cover some 800,000 people in villages throughout the country. All the villages benefiting from the Programme had made significant progress in achieving their goals.

17. Ms. MORAD (Syrian Arab Republic) said that a distinction was made in the Syrian Arab Republic between foundlings, who were children of unknown parentage, and children born out of wedlock. The mother of a child born out of wedlock had the right to take the father to court if he failed to acknowledge the child as his own and refused to assume his parental responsibilities. If necessary, DNA tests could be carried out to determine the child's paternity.

18. The Ministry of Justice had established a number of centres to encourage the reunification of children with their parents. The centres enabled children to meet their parents in a supervised environment conducive to good relations. Estranged couples with children were also encouraged to meet and attempt to reconcile their differences for the sake of their families. Many families had been reunited as a result of such meetings.

19. As the extended family was a social concept and not recognized by law, grandparents and other relatives caring for children did not have the status of legal guardians. Consequently, a child in their care would not benefit from any inheritance rights.

20. Ms. AL-THANI asked whether members of the extended family were actively encouraged to play a role in providing children with alternative care.

21. Ms. MORAD (Syrian Arab Republic) said that members of the extended family were encouraged to care for children whose parents were unable to do so or unfit. The decision to place a child in an institution was taken only if no alternatives were available.

22. The State of Emergency Law had been adopted to protect citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic against terrorism and other threats to national security. It was implemented only in exceptional circumstances.

23. As all fundamental rights and freedoms were adequately guaranteed under the Constitution, there had been no need to improve the level of protection that had been outlined in the initial report (CRC/C/28/Add.2).

24. Mr. KOTRANE said that the Government should take measures to ensure implementation of child rights. Educational and youth organizations should conduct training programmes with a view to teaching children how to take full advantage of the basic rights and freedoms set out in the Syrian Constitution.

25. Ms. MORAD (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the media, schools and special organizations played a role in educating children about their rights.

26. Ms. ORTIZ wished to know what the difference was between the system of kafalah and adoption.

27. Ms. MORAD (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, under the kafalah system, a child maintained his or her name unless the child's parents came forward and acknowledged their parenthood. In cases of adoption, a child took the name of the adoptive family; that could later prevent the child from being recognized by his or her biological parents.

28. Under the Syrian Penal Code, parents and teachers were allowed to use mild physical punishment, such as a smack on the hand. However, an inquiry would be launched into any cases of beatings and the persons responsible would be asked to refrain from abusing their children. Failure to comply could result in penalties, which would be determined on the basis of the harm sustained by the child.
29. Ms. ORTIZ enquired whether there was a body that could intervene in cases where children were being ill-treated.
30. Ms. MORAD (Syrian Arab Republic) said that district councils and the media were concerned about the ill-treatment of children, and a number of programmes on that subject were conducted for parents. Cases of torture were very rare.
31. Since a court case could last for months, temporary child support was paid to the person who had custody of a child. The court acted in the best interests of the child, ensuring that all his or her expenses were covered. The amount of support was determined on the basis of the child's needs.
32. A number of courses designed to train members of the police force to deal with juveniles were being conducted, and special personnel were assigned to cases involving children. Any policeman who ill-treated a child was liable to a penalty.
33. Ms. AL-THANI wished to know why the infant mortality rate and the under-5 mortality rate had risen in 2001 and fallen in 2002. The delegation should comment on the disparities in vaccination coverage among regions.
34. Ongoing education and information campaigns were vital to ensuring that HIV/AIDS would not become a serious problem in the Syrian Arab Republic.
35. She believed that health sector workers were not properly informed of child rights and wondered whether they received special training in that regard. She expressed concern that mothers were not allowed to accompany their children to hospital.
36. There was a significant difference between the free health services that were provided by the State and the health services provided by the private sector. She wished to know whether there was a health insurance scheme that covered all citizens, and whether low-income families were unable to take advantage of the private health services.
37. She expressed concern that disabled children were being marginalized. The delegation should provide information on the integration of disabled children into the ordinary school system and on their participation in sport and cultural activities. She also wished to know whether all public buildings had facilities for the disabled.
38. Mr. KOTRANE wished to know whether parents had an obligation to send their children to school and whether measures were taken against those who failed to do so.
39. It would be useful to know whether human rights principles were being taught to Syrian children.

40. He wished to know who was responsible for investigating cases of juvenile delinquency and whether experts on children were consulted during the trial. He wondered whether the nature of the crime - whether it had been committed independently or with an adult - was taken into account. He would also be interested in knowing whether all child-related decisions could be appealed and whether the juvenile judge was responsible for implementation of the sentence. He asked what measures were being taken to put an end to child labour in prisons. Lastly, he wished to know who was responsible for supervising juvenile courts.

41. Ms. VUCKOVIC-SAHOVIC said that the delegation should provide additional information on juvenile delinquency. She wished to know what happened to 7- to 15-year-old offenders who were returned to their parents or guardians. She wondered whether parents were responsible for preventing their children from committing further offences. She asked what measures were being taken to reintegrate child offenders into the school system after they had served their term in an institution.

42. Ms. SMITH wished to know what was being done to shorten the length of pre-trial detention for children. Information on conditions in places of pre-trial detention would be useful. She enquired whether children were always granted free access to legal aid.

43. According to various reports, there were few safe recreational places for children in Syrian cities, and she wished to know what steps were being taken to improve that situation. Since most books for children were translations of foreign literature, she would be interested in knowing whether any Syrian writers were being encouraged to write children's books.

44. Mr. AL-SHEDDI enquired why there had been such an increase in the number of centres for disabled children. The delegation should provide information on the measures that were being taken to integrate disabled children into ordinary schools.

45. Although the length of compulsory education in the Syrian Arab Republic had been extended in 2002, the school dropout rate remained high. He wondered what steps were being taken to ensure that children attended school. He wished to know if any official studies had been conducted on the phenomenon of school abandonment.

46. There had been awareness-raising campaigns in the Syrian Arab Republic about the dangers of tobacco consumption and passive smoking. He asked whether the Government had introduced, or planned to introduce, any legislative measures to combat the widespread use of tobacco products and to reduce their harmful effects on children and adolescents.

47. Mr. LIWSKI asked whether the Government had a strategy to address the possible effects on health of the very high rate of marriage between relatives in the Syrian Arab Republic.

48. The written replies from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic indicated that 0.26 per cent of the State budget had been allocated for social welfare in 2002. He requested information about the State services, programmes and other activities made possible by that allocation.

49. He asked whether vulnerable groups of children benefited from State assistance programmes other than institutionalization. In view of the very low school enrolment rate among adolescents, he wished to know whether the Government had a policy to prevent the social exclusion of young people. He asked whether there were social integration programmes for adolescents.

50. The CHAIRPERSON asked how the Government enforced its child labour legislation. He wondered whether there were enough labour inspectors and whether they had sufficient training to address specific problems related to child labour.

The meeting was suspended at 4.40 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

51. Mr. KHADRA (Syrian Arab Republic) said that there was a mistake in the data provided in table 12 of the written replies. The figures on child and infant mortality in 2000 and 2001 were incorrect. However, the figure for 2002 was correct and indicated a satisfactory level.

52. As part of the national immunization programme, the Ministry of Health had taken the necessary measures to train additional staff and encourage vaccination in those parts of the country where immunization coverage had been lower than average. By the last quarter of 2002, the aim of 100 per cent coverage for all vaccinations in every region of the country had almost been achieved.

53. While HIV/AIDS was not a major problem in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education had continued to focus their education and awareness-raising campaigns on vulnerable groups, particularly women and young people.

54. The allegations that some hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic were not implementing the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child pertained mainly to university hospitals, which were notoriously difficult to monitor. The Government had taken an initiative to ensure that all hospitals were child-friendly, and that children and their mothers were given all the support they needed while being treated.

55. With regard to the disparity in the quality of services provided at private and public hospitals and clinics, he said that the new health insurance programme was intended to raise the quality of services in the public sector. State-run hospitals were sometimes required to raise funds, for example by offering private health care. Conversely, private hospitals were required by law to make one tenth of their beds available free of charge.

56. In response to the high level of tobacco consumption in the Syrian Arab Republic, the State had outlawed the advertisement of all tobacco products and had introduced non-smoking areas in public places. National programmes warned young people of the dangers of smoking, including passive smoking.

57. Under the Healthy Villages Programme, which was being expanded, villages received State assistance with the analysis of their health priorities. The State subsequently provided funding for the necessary health projects, sometimes in the form of low-interest loans.

58. While marriage between relatives was less prevalent in the Syrian Arab Republic than in other nearby countries, the State was doing all it could to address the related health risks. Premarital medical screening was frequently carried out. Although the Government was also trying to change mentalities, there was widespread resistance to abandoning the tradition of marriage between relatives.

59. Ms. AL JABI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, as part of the new legislation on the disabled, premarital medical examinations would be required in cases not only of marriages between relatives but also in cases of very early or very late marriages.

60. The CHAIRPERSON asked whether the Government had a policy on integrating children with special needs into society. He wished to know whether such children were integrated into ordinary schools and whether the law made it mandatory to provide disabled persons with access to public buildings. He requested an explanation for the increase in the number of institutions for disabled children.

61. Mr. YASMINAH (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the Government had been studying ways of integrating children with special needs into society, in particular at schools. It was carrying out a number of projects in conjunction with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF. Following the first national forum on disabled children, various pilot projects had been launched in 2002; a national committee had been established to monitor those projects and assist teachers. Teachers were being trained to deal with disabled children at four schools around the country and there were plans to expand that programme.

62. Since legislation had been amended to extend the length of compulsory education from six to nine years, enrolment rates at the preparatory level had risen and the number of dropouts had fallen dramatically. Parents or guardians were informed when children did not attend school. In cases of persistent absence from school, those responsible for the children could face court proceedings.

63. The Government considered it normal to instruct children in traditional and moral values. It encouraged the teaching of civics both at school and in youth organizations.

64. The Government's education priorities included updating and improving curricula in order to take account of technical and scientific innovations. Vocational education was being extended, the number of kindergartens was being increased and the quality of Arabic teaching was being improved.

65. Ms. AL JABI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that several seminars had been held to raise awareness concerning the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

66. Ms. AL KHIYAMI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that a higher council for disabled persons' affairs, which would formulate general policy and oversee its implementation, and local councils to implement policy at the local level, would be established under a proposed bill. That bill would provide disabled persons with numerous services and exemptions, including the issue of a disabled persons' card. While public buildings had not yet been equipped for disabled

persons, after the bill was approved, both private and public buildings would be adapted to meet the special needs of disabled persons and children. A provision in the labour legislation had raised the proportion of disabled persons who could be employed in an organization from 4 to 5 per cent.

67. The Government had adopted a number of measures to limit child labour: it had raised the minimum age of employment from 12 to 15 years, extended the age of compulsory education to 15 and established a system of labour inspectorates. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour was currently involved in efforts to increase the number of inspectors and to provide them with appropriate training. The Ministry of Education had set up committees in every province in order to ensure that compulsory education programmes were being implemented and that under-age children were not being employed in factories and shops. Seminars had also been organized to raise awareness of those measures among parents. Syria had ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) and the optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, which should have a positive effect on limiting child labour.

68. The reason for the rise in the number of institutions for disabled persons was that new facilities had been created in every governorate to provide services and training for the disabled. While the percentage of budgetary allocations to welfare institutions was low, many Governments and national and international organizations were working with the Syrian Government to improve the standards of social welfare institutions and to provide better services for children.

69. Ms. AL JABI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that as a result of awareness-raising campaigns, the stigma that had formally been attached to disabled children was disappearing and people were coming forward more readily to provide information. The Disabled Persons' Affairs Bill contained provisions that would make it possible to provide more authoritative statistics on such children.

70. Ms. MORAD (Syrian Arab Republic) said that children were denied access to certain entertainment establishments that were considered inappropriate and inspections were regularly carried out to ensure that children were not being admitted despite restrictions. There were a number of specialized courts for cases involving juveniles, as well as special investigative judges and social affairs specialists. A single judge administered courts handling minor offences, while several judges administered courts dealing with more serious offences. During the pre-trial period, which could not exceed one month, juveniles were held separately from adults.

71. Various government ministries worked together to monitor facilities for juvenile delinquents. Judges were required to review the legal situation of juveniles monthly and to investigate any complaints. Juvenile institutions enabled children to receive primary education. Children could attend school or sit public examinations in the morning and be brought back to the institution in the afternoon. After their release such children could return to school with a letter justifying their absence. Children were not compelled to work in the institutions; however, if they so wished, they could learn simple trades, such as carpentry or shoemaking, in the institutions' workshops. Children placed in an institution were assigned a behavioural expert who followed their progress and prepared a monthly report on their situation. If warranted, a

court could order the release of a young person subject to certain conditions. Statistics on juvenile delinquency had not been published because that was an extreme phenomenon in the Syrian Arab Republic. Most cases involved harmless acts that never reached the courts because the charges had been dropped.

72. Ms. ORTIZ said that, while it was important to discuss legislative changes in favour of children's rights, it was also necessary to examine children's actual situations. The Higher Committee for Children that had been set up to monitor the implementation of the Convention was composed of persons who were perhaps too far removed from the day-to-day experiences of children. The Government should therefore consider setting up local, independent bodies composed of individuals who could intervene to provide information on laws protecting women and children before problems arose.

73. Ms. AL JABI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that a decision had already been taken to establish a judicial committee in every governorate to support the families and children. A national plan for children's welfare had been drafted with the participation of various NGOs.

74. She agreed that Syrian children should not be limited to reading translated books. It was important to promote literature and culture that drew on the richness of Syrian heritage. Contests were often held to encourage children to help write stories and scenarios. A simplified children's encyclopaedia had been available for a number of years. Arab cultural centres existed in all provinces, and many theatres, ballets and cinemas regularly scheduled children's productions.

75. President Al-Assad and the First Lady were highly interested in the progress of various children's projects. All Syrians hoped that lasting peace would be established in the Golan Heights and that a solution would be found to the Palestinian question that would improve the situation of all Palestinian children. She thanked the members of the Committee for their interesting and useful comments.

76. Ms. AL-THANI said that it was important for the Government to sustain its political will to implement children's rights. She hoped that the third periodic report would contain more examples of how the Syrian Arab Republic was working to implement the Convention.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.