

DG/2003/142
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the Signing Ceremony
of the Agreement on the International Fund for Higher Education in Iraq

Doha, Qatar, 12 October 2003

Your Highness,
Excellencies,
Distinguished representatives of Iraqi universities,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

According to an old Arab proverb, “In the desert of life, the wise person travels by caravan while the fool prefers to travel alone.”

Today, UNESCO is particularly pleased to join forces with the Qatar Foundation in order to help the universities of Iraq to emerge from the “desert” of current hardships, resulting from long years of economic decline, isolation and war-related damage.

The agreement we have signed today with the Qatar Foundation formally establishes the International Fund for Higher Education in Iraq and allows us to get down to work. The aim of the Fund is to provide immediate and longer-term assistance for reconstruction, based on a strategic framework for the revitalization and development of higher education in Iraq. Administered by UNESCO and governed by the Fund Directorate chaired by the Qatar Foundation, the Fund is open to all interested donors for contributions in cash or in kind.

I call on all those in a position to help – be they governments, international bodies or private foundations – to join us in this initiative on behalf of Iraqi universities. In so doing, they would be investing not only in the future of the Iraqi people but also in the prospects for lasting peace and prosperity throughout the region. The State of Qatar has set an outstanding example by making the first donation of 15 million dollars.

From the outset, let me assure the representatives of Iraqi institutions of higher education present here today that assistance provided under the Fund will be closely coordinated with Iraqi universities themselves so as to ensure that priority needs are the first to be addressed.

Your Highness,

Let me extend our particular thanks to you. Only nine months ago, I had the pleasure and honour to nominate Your Highness as UNESCO Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education. Today, thanks to your remarkable energy and exemplary commitment to improving education worldwide, we are able to launch this major joint initiative to help revive Iraqi universities.

I would also like to thank your colleagues and our counterparts from the Qatar Foundation, particularly Dr Sheikha Al-Misnad and Dr Fathy Saoud, whose professionalism and constructive approach were instrumental in setting up the Fund. I seize this opportunity to congratulate Dr Sheikha on her recent appointment as President of the University of Qatar and to wish her well in this challenging task.

Ladies and Gentleman,

I find it very symbolic that today's ceremony coincides with the official launch of the Education City – the flagship project of the Qatar Foundation aimed at creating here in Doha a major centre of academic excellence that meets the highest world standards. The scale of the construction work under way is truly impressive, but even more so are the efficiency and determination of the Qatar Foundation team, led by Her Highness and supported by His Highness the Emir of Qatar, to bring the project to fruition in record time.

Despite present difficulties and uncertainties in Iraq, we are determined to do our utmost to assist the recovery and reconstruction of higher education in that country. We recognise that the needs are great and that it will take many years to re-build the system and its institutions. But we must make a start and partnerships like the one we are celebrating today offer a real beacon of hope.

Your Highness,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, let me thank Your Highness once again for all that you and the Qatar Foundation have done to facilitate our collaboration. On behalf of UNESCO, let me assure you of our full commitment to this project aimed at reconstructing Iraq's universities. I am sure that our common desire to see Iraqi universities thrive again in a new democratic Iraq will sustain us in fulfilling our shared goal.

Thank you.