



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Committee on the Rights of the Child

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention

Third and fourth periodic reports of States parties due in
2009

Syrian Arab Republic*, **

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** Annexes can be consulted in the files of the Secretariat.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction.....	1–8	4
II. General information.....	9–19	5
A. Demographic and economic indicators.....	9	5
B. The economy.....	10–19	5
III. General measures of implementation (arts. 4, 42 and art 44, para. 6).....	20–48	7
A. Considerations of national importance.....	20–24	7
B. Legislative framework.....	25–26	9
C. Measures taken to coordinate national policies on children.....	27–39	9
D. Measures taken to disseminate the principles and provisions of the Convention.....	40–48	13
IV. Definition of the child (art. 1).....	49–55	15
V. General principles.....	56–114	17
A. Non-discrimination (art. 2).....	56–67	17
B. Best interests of the child (art. 3).....	68–69	19
C. The right to life, survival and development (art. 6).....	70–104	19
D. Respect for the views of the child (art. 12).....	105–114	27
VI. Civil rights and freedoms (arts. 7, 8, 13–17 and 37 (a)).....	115–148	30
A. Name and nationality (art. 7).....	117–119	30
B. Preservation of identity (art. 8).....	120–124	30
C. Freedom of expression (art. 13).....	125–130	31
D. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 14).....	131	33
E. Freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly (art. 15).....	132	33
F. Protection of privacy (art. 16).....	133	33
G. Access to appropriate information (art. 17).....	134–135	34
H. Right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (art. 37 (a)).....	136–148	34
VII. Family environment and alternative care.....	149–175	37
A. Parental guidance (art. 5).....	149	37
B. Parental responsibilities (art. 18, paras. 1 and 2).....	150–151	37
C. Separation from parents (art. 9).....	152–153	38
D. Family reunification (art. 10).....	154	38
E. Illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad (art. 11).....	155–159	38
F. Recovery of maintenance for the child (art. 27, para. 4).....	160–162	39
G. Children deprived of their family environment (art. 20).....	163–170	40

H.	Adoption and foster care (art. 21).....	171	41
I.	Periodic review of placement (art. 25)	172–173	41
J.	Abuse and neglect (art. 19), including physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration (art. 39).....	174–175	42
VIII.	Basic health and welfare (art. 6; art. 18, para. 3; arts. 23, 24 and 26 and art. 27, paras. 1–3).....	176–213	42
A.	Disabled children (art. 23).....	176–191	42
B.	Health and health-care services (art. 24)	192–209	46
C.	Social security and childcare services and facilities (art. 18, para. 3, and art. 26)	210	50
D.	Standard of living (art. 27, paras. 1–3)	211–213	50
IX.	Education, leisure and cultural activities (arts. 28, 29 and 31).....	214–253	51
A.	Education, including vocational training and guidance (art. 28).....	215–248	51
B.	Leisure, recreation and cultural activities (art. 31)	249–253	60
X.	Special protection measures.....	254–287	62
A.	Children in a state of emergency	254–265	62
B.	Children subject of the Juvenile Offenders Act.....	266–275	65
C.	Child victims of exploitation, including physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration (art. 39).....	276–286	66
D.	Children belonging to minorities or indigenous population groups (art. 30)	287	68
	Conclusion.....	288–296	68
	Sources		70

I. Introduction

1. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic is pleased to submit its third and fourth periodic reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in accordance with article 44, paragraph 1 (b), of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and wishes to highlight in the first instance the importance of this introduction. The present report follows on from the second national periodic report, which was submitted on 15 August 2000 (CRC/C/93/Add.2) and was discussed by the Committee at its thirty-third session in June 2003.

2. In accordance with the general guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports (CRC/C/58/Rev.1) which were adopted by the Committee at its thirty-ninth session in June 2005, the Syrian Arab Republic decided that the present report would not reproduce the contents of the second report but would simply refer to it on certain topics, as necessary. Moreover, the Syrian Arab Republic decided to respond to the Committee's concluding observations on its second periodic report (CRC/C/15/Add.212) by discussing progress made with regard to the implementation of the Convention. Furthermore, the present report cites recent new statistics and relevant legislation, copies of which are attached as annexes. It refers to bills that are well on their way to being adopted, in addition to all information concerning events since the issuance of the second periodic report, i.e., from August 2000 to February 2009.

3. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic takes this opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to the international treaties, conventions and charters which it has signed and ratified; ratification gives these instruments the force of domestic law and precedence over Syrian laws, in accordance with article 25 of the Syrian Civil Code and article 27 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, to which the Syrian Arab Republic acceded by Legislative Decree No. 184 of 1980. At the same time, the Government reaffirms its belief in the importance of continuing a meaningful dialogue with the Committee on the Rights of the Child in order to achieve a common understanding, in accordance with its commitment to uphold all the rights enshrined in the Convention, subject to the limits established by the reservations that the Government has entered to the Convention, and consistent with the principles and values of Syrian society.

4. In its concluding observations on the second periodic report, the Committee recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should study its reservations with a view to withdrawing them. It is most important to note that the Syrian Arab Republic withdrew its reservations to articles 20 and 21 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by Decree No. 12 of February 2007 (annex 1) and that one reservation to article 14 remains.

Report preparation process (participants)

5. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is responsible for dealing with matters relating to the rights of Syrian children, including the preparation of the report which is customarily submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Commission duly turned to the Prime Minister's Office and numerous relevant government agencies and non-governmental organizations for the preparation of the report. To oversee the preparation of the present report, the Prime Minister's Office established a national steering committee, comprising representatives from the relevant government agencies and non-governmental organizations. Care was taken to include a number of specialists, concerned individuals and children themselves. In addition, a drafting committee was established. The Commission wrote to all government agencies and non-governmental organizations, requesting key data for inclusion in the report. The Central Bureau of Statistics, for its part, submitted all the requested data for the report and helped to check all the statistics and figures cited in the

present report. Moreover, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), facilitated the delivery of training to participants from civil society on the preparation of international reports; a representative from the UNICEF office in the Syrian Arab Republic explained how the national report should be prepared in accordance with the United Nations model. Furthermore, in cooperation with UNICEF, an international expert trained the drafting committee members on how to draft the national report in accordance with international standards, and met with representatives of civil society associations.

6. In the context of the preparation of the present report, six workshops were held with Syrian children and adolescents from various governorates in order to obtain their feedback on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Annex 2 to the present report contains a summary of children's views on the educational and health services offered to them and on topics including violence against children that were discussed at workshops designed to allow the children involved to participate in complete freedom.

7. Once the first draft of the present report had been prepared, meetings were held with specialists, legal experts and concerned persons from government agencies and non-governmental organizations to discuss the report and propose changes. A national workshop was then held, attended by these stakeholders, to approve the final draft. Annex 3 to the present report lists the bodies that provided information and data to the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and those who attended the meetings and workshops.

8. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs will distribute the present report to all government agencies and non-governmental organizations for use in planning with regard to children's issues.

II. General information

A. Demographic and economic indicators

Demographic indicators

9. The estimated total population of the Syrian Arab Republic in 2007 was 19,644 million, of whom 10,042 million were male and 9,602 million were female. In the same year, there were 2,533 million children in the age group 0–4 years, in comparison with 2,508 million children in the age group 5–9 years and 2,301 million children in the age group 10–14 years (annex 4). The rural population represented 46.5 per cent and the urban population 53.5 per cent of the total population. The average annual growth rate between 2000 and 2008 was 2.45 per cent. The average fertility rate between 2001 and 2005 was 3.58 live births per woman of reproductive age.

B. The economy

10. Since the early 1990s, the process of economic pluralism has been characterized by liberalization of the private and mixed sectors. A number of laws and decrees have been enacted to support these sectors, notably the Investment Promotion Act No. 10 of 1991, as amended, which allows them to operate in production, distribution, import and export activities and, also, in the areas of investment and services, which were once the preserve of the public sector.

11. The ninth five-year plan (2000–2005) built on and accelerated the process of economic pluralism, with a greater focus on the human dimension. Crucially, it introduced indicative planning and measures to increase the national economy's absorptive capacity by

developing and strengthening the investment climate. This was all posited on development investment policies, a suitable economic and social infrastructure and the infrastructure of the national economy and on moving away from the traditional economic structure by introducing modern industries (technology, information technology, communications) and developmental alternatives for the future to reduce the national economy's reliance on exports of raw materials (crude oil, cotton). The main objectives of the ninth five-year plan can be summarized as follows:

- Tackle the slow economic recovery and unemployment, and achieve a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 3.7 per cent per annum during the first phase (2001–2003) and 4.7 per cent during the second phase (2004–2005) of the plan
- Improve the standard of living and social situation of the population by continuously assessing salary and wage levels to ensure that they are in line with the cost of living and the expectation that they should contribute to stimulating demand and raising output
- Design and adopt a national population strategy for 2001–2020 that boosts the role of women in the family and society
- Develop the production, services and investment infrastructure
- Develop and expand scientific research and research centres
- Align the education system with labour market requirements and promote the establishment of labour-intensive small and medium income-generating projects
- Protect the environment, make sustainable use of resources and encourage the use of clean and renewable energies

12. As the objective circumstances matured and brought the process of economic transformation to completion, the Arab Socialist Baath Party, at its tenth national conference in June 2005, decided to make the transition to a social market economy. The tenth five-year plan (2006–2010), adopted by Act No. 25 of 7 May 2006, outlines the practical aspects of this transition. The tenth five-year plan differs from previous five-year plans in a number of respects, principally those set out in the following paragraphs.

Indicative planning and the social market

13. Indicative planning is based on the principle that the State should guide investment and market activity without dominating or engulfing it. The State is working to open up opportunities for self-employment, to provide an enabling environment for local and foreign private business and investment and to eliminate monopolies and exploitation.

14. The theme of the plan is “Human development first”. It is based on awareness of the existing pressure to expand employment opportunities, in view of the huge influx of new entrants to the labour market every year, and the need for major development efforts to improve the situation of the least developed groups and areas. In addition, the plan envisages the elaboration of national policies and programmes on social protection and emphasizes the need to devise social protection programmes and projects for deprived families. Moreover, it calls for a revision of services and production subsidies such as to reach out to target groups; this will necessarily have a positive impact on children.

Participatory approach to the formulation of objectives

15. The preparatory stages prior to development of the plan involved extensive discussions by grass-roots organizations, State authorities, the legislature, private sector representatives and intellectuals.

Balanced development through regional and local plans

16. In addition to the national development plan, each governorate will have its own economic plan, which will be in line with the overall objectives and priorities of the national plan. In order to complete the planning sequence (national, regional, local), the tenth five-year plan makes provision for a long-term regional, social and economic plan to turn the Syrian Arab Republic into development regions and poles. This will pave the way for economic diversification, job creation and the delivery of assistance to groups in the lowest income bracket, reflecting the State's commitment to embarking upon this broad and far-reaching undertaking in coordination with the domestic private sector and, in the border regions, with neighbouring countries.

Addressing social justice issues

17. Under the plan, the upper and lower poverty lines were calculated based on the results of the 2004 National Household Income and Expenditure Survey. The plan takes account of the objective of improving living standards, based on recent data and a clear vision of what can be done to reduce the number of households below the poverty line, and of monitoring the situation through establishing a national observatory on living standards. Representatives from the private sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society associations are to be involved in managing the observatory's activities.

18. A partnership agreement with the European Union was initialled on 19 October 2000 and amendments to that agreement, which were introduced to reflect economic changes in the Syrian Arab Republic, were initialled on 14 December 2008. An agreement establishing a free trade zone with Turkey, in addition to procedures to reduce customs duties and unify the exchange rate, was signed on 1 January 2007. Moreover, the Government has taken a number of measures to support income diversification, promote social equity (amendment of the Income Tax and Anti-Tax Evasion Act) and abolish a number of indirect taxes (agricultural machinery duties, the Inheritance Act). On the spending side, salaries and wages have been increased in order to improve living standards. Act No. 28 of 2001 permits the establishment of private banks, while preparations for the opening of the Damascus Securities Exchange have reached an advanced stage. It is anticipated that the Securities Exchange will start to operate in early 2009.

19. According to the latest statistics from the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2007 GDP at constant prices grew by 6.3 per cent in comparison with 2006 rates, while growth at current prices was on average 18.9 per cent higher than 2006 levels. Moreover, average national income grew by 15.7 per cent in 2006 and 20.5 per cent in 2007.

III. General measures of implementation (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)

A. Considerations of national importance

20. As is clear from the following, child welfare and children's issues are considered matters of national importance:

- Article 44, paragraph 2, of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic provides that the State shall protect mothers and children, care for young persons and create conditions conducive to the development of their talents.
- Successive five-year plans, including most recently, the tenth five-year plan, have devoted a chapter to youth, sports and children. The tenth five-year plan is ambitious and serves as a frame of reference for development, based on the national vision for

2025, which seeks to provide an environment in which Syrian society can flourish in terms of achieving economic, social and technological progress. The vision was elaborated based on a review of areas of strength and weakness in existing policies and situations; and was further developed, taking into account anticipated international and regional opportunities and prospects in the coming years.

21. The main quantitative goals for the two consecutive five-year plans to 2015, which reflect the firm commitment of the Syrian Arab Republic to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, include reducing by half the number of families living below the poverty line, currently at 11.4 per cent, taking action to completely eradicate illiteracy, and reducing the unemployment rate from the current 12.3 per cent to some 8 per cent in 2010 and 4–5 per cent by 2015. The Syrian State Planning Commission conducted a midterm evaluation of the tenth five-year plan in order to monitor progress. It found that significant progress had been made on some goals, while there had been delays with others, which will be discussed in greater detail elsewhere in the present report.

The role of non-governmental organizations in the development process

22. The tenth five-year plan places particular emphasis on expanding the development work of non-governmental organizations, as it is anticipated that they will play an important role in shaping collective action to develop local communities and in proposing programmes and projects to realize the plan's goals on poverty reduction, employment generation, women's empowerment, increasing educational opportunities for women, family planning and environmental protection. The role that this sector can play in the plan has been defined as follows:

- Help to achieve quantitative poverty alleviation goals and targets
- Assist with the design and delivery of social reform programmes, in addition to training programmes on and support for women's and children's rights
- Provide services in remote areas where the public and private sectors do not make any tangible contribution and establish high-quality professional associations for that purpose
- Contribute to the implementation of regional development plans and participate in local planning board meetings for the purpose of monitoring the implementation of projects under the tenth plan and those for the development of the least developed regions

23. Increasing importance has been given in the Syrian Arab Republic to building partnerships with non-governmental organizations and civil society associations, in particular devoted to the empowerment of women, and to strengthening the role of civil society associations in national capacity-building for associations on gender issues. There has been a marked increase in the activities of civil society associations in recent years; the number of licensed associations increased from 450 in 2000 to more than 1,200 in early 2007. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour backs the considerable role played by civil society associations, which complement and support government efforts, offering various services, including to different groups of children with disabilities and their families (for example, through the provision of hearing aids, wheelchairs, cochlear implants and corneal transplants).

24. For some years, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has played a supervisory role, rather than providing services directly. It has delegated many of its former alternative care functions to civil society associations and has established partnerships to supply the health, social, educational, professional and rehabilitation needs of persons with disabilities,

and integrate them into society. Partnerships have been formed with a number of civil society associations, including the following:

1. Al-Ahlam Association for the Deaf and Mute;
2. Al-Ihsan Charitable Association for the Blind in Aleppo;
3. Yadan bi Yad (Hand in Hand) Association for Persons with Special Needs, which serves children with physical disabilities attending the Aleppo Vocational Rehabilitation Institute for Persons with Disabilities;
4. Al-Nur wa-l-Zuhur Association for Children with Cerebral Palsy;
5. Bina Association for the Blind;
6. Amal Society for Persons with Disabilities, which works throughout the country to rehabilitate and reintegrate children with disabilities into society in order to ensure their human dignity through the full realization of their rights to education and health care, psychological care and social care, in particular for autistic children and children who have speech and hearing difficulties.

B. Legislative framework

25. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should expedite the comprehensive review of its law, administrative regulations and legal procedural rules to ensure that they conform to international human rights standards, including the Convention. In this regard, we wish to mention that the majority of the general principles set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the relevant instruments are enshrined in Syrian law. Moreover, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is poised to finalize the bill on the rights of the child, which to a large extent conforms to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and will submit it for discussion by the competent authorities in the legislature very soon.

26. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic wishes to record its commitment to the various international, regional and Arab instruments to which it is a party. The Syrian Arab Republic has adopted the seven human rights treaties, in addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the optional protocols thereto. In connection with “A world fit for children” (WFFC), the initiative launched by the United Nations Special Session on Children in 2002, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic submitted its WFFC +5 review report on 22 April 2007. Moreover, the Syrian Arab Republic is bound by the Arab Charter on Human Rights, in accordance with Act No. 50 of 5 January 2006. Furthermore, it has reaffirmed its commitment to implementing the recommendations issued at various sessions by the Arab Childhood Committee of the League of Arab States and to the Arab Framework for the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Council of the League of Arab States at its summit held in Amman on 25 March 2001; the Cairo Declaration entitled “An Arab World Fit for Children: Mechanisms for Joint Arab Action”, which was adopted on 4 July 2001; and the Tunis Declaration, issued by the Third Arab High-level Conference on the Rights of the Child on 14 January 2004.

C. Measures taken to coordinate national policies on children

27. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic:

- (a) Continue and strengthen its efforts to make the Higher Committee for Childhood an effective and efficient body for the coordination of the implementation of the

Convention by, among other things, providing it with sufficient human and financial resources, and ensure good cooperation and coordination between the intended branches and the Higher Committee; and

(b) Provide the necessary support, including sufficient human, financial and other resources, for a full implementation of the new national plan of action and to evaluate regularly its impact on the implementation of the Convention.

28. The principal measures taken at the national level to coordinate policies on children in the Syrian Arab Republic are set out below.

Establishment of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs

29. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs was established by Act No. 42 of 2003, promulgated by the President of the Republic on 20 December 2003 (annex 5). Article 1 of the Act reads as follows: "A public body known as the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs shall be established, with its headquarters in Damascus. It shall be a body corporate with financial and administrative independence and shall be linked directly to the Prime Minister."

30. The Commission is the key body responsible for monitoring and coordinating efforts to implement the Convention. It is assisted in this work by a number of government agencies and civil society institutions, and has replaced the Higher Council for Childhood. It operates using existing coordination systems and mechanisms, which are closely linked to the national administrative system and tailored to the experience and capacities of the Syrian Arab Republic. In monitoring implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Commission performs, inter alia, the following functions:

- Monitor implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the optional protocols thereto
- Monitor awareness of the Convention and the optional protocols thereto
- Prepare periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention and the optional protocols thereto
- Seek to amend legislation in order to improve the situation of Syrian children
- Prepare national reports for submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and other relevant international bodies
- Monitor the situation of children by conducting the necessary research and studies
- Contribute to the implementation of national programmes and activities for children

31. The Commission has excellent human resources. In addition, under the Act by which it was established, the Commission has been given its own budget, which allows it to carry out its responsibilities. Lastly, cooperation with international organizations operating in the Syrian Arab Republic, primarily UNICEF, helps support the Commission's efforts to implement its plans and programmes.

Formation of the National Committee for International Humanitarian Law

32. The National Committee for International Humanitarian Law was formed by Prime Ministerial Decree No. 2896 of 2 June 2004. The Committee, chaired by the Minister of State for Red Crescent Affairs, is tasked with overseeing and coordinating national action to raise awareness of international humanitarian law, harmonizing national legislation with the international treaties ratified by the Syrian Arab Republic and monitoring human rights violations.

Children's Rights Bill

33. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, through a committee comprising academics and competent judges, drafted the Children's Rights Bill. On 22 October 2006, the committee submitted the draft of the bill to the Commission, which presented it for discussion at a workshop attended by 65 participants from various public agencies and civil society associations. After the workshop, a select committee was formed to discuss the comments on the draft. It is anticipated that this committee will complete its work during the first quarter of 2009.

National conferences on children

34. A national conference on children was held from 7 to 9 February 2004 in Aleppo under the patronage of Mrs. Asmaa Al-Assad, the wife of the President of the Republic. The discussions that took place, the studies and research that were presented, the extensive media coverage and the recommendations emanating from the conference helped to highlight children's issues, in particular:

- The issue of violence against children and all forms of child exploitation
- Alternative family care
- Educational quality and proposed mechanisms for making the transition from quantitative to qualitative standards
- Children's culture in general and proposed means of promoting it

35. A symposium on child protection was held in Damascus from 9 to 11 December 2004. It was attended by national, Arab regional and international experts on protecting children from violence and exploitation and was organized by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with UNICEF, Rainbow for a Better Childhood (annex 6), the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), a representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Director of the National Institute for the Protection of Victims of Violence which is based in South Carolina in the United States of America. The high level of attendance was accompanied by intensive media coverage of this event. One of the most outstanding results proposed was the draft national plan to protect children from all forms of violence and exploitation.

36. The Syrian Government devotes considerable efforts to children with disabilities and has organized a series of activities and events in order to draw attention to this group with its particular, pressing needs and to rally support for action to address the issues that affect the most vulnerable children. The establishment in 1994 of the Syrian Special Olympics was a turning point. This independent organization for persons with mental disabilities showcases the special abilities of these children with the aim of encouraging civil society to invest in them. Damascus, which is the regional headquarters of the Special Olympics World Games, was chosen as the venue for the first regional medical symposium on the international Special Olympics Middle East/North Africa Regional Games. The symposium, which was entitled "A better life for persons with mental disabilities", was held in September 2005 and attended by more than 350 physicians and researchers from 16 Arab and other States and from international organizations. The main objectives of the symposium were to raise awareness about health care and social welfare provision for persons with mental disabilities in the Middle East and North Africa region, to focus on the needs of these persons and identify the difficulties involved in providing health and social services. Further objectives included proposing appropriate solutions to close any gaps in terms of the volume and quality of health care and social welfare available to this group, to involve non-governmental and civil society organizations in this effort and, lastly, to highlight the role of the Special Olympics World Games.

37. A Syrian Government delegation, comprising representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and civil society groups, attended the Second Conference on National Human Rights Institutions in the Arab World on the theme “A culture of human rights”, which was held in Doha from 4 to 6 March 2006. Its aim was to learn from the experiences of other Arab countries in establishing national human rights institutions so as to pave the way for the establishment of an independent national human rights institution. In addition, the Minister of Justice represented the Syrian Government at the Arab Conference for Human Rights held in Doha on 14 and 15 December 2008.

National plan for the protection of children

38. Following the First National Conference on Children and the First National Symposium on Child Protection, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs submitted a draft national plan for the protection of children from all forms of violence and a national plan for the protection of women from violence. It did so in cooperation with the Central Bureau of Statistics and with the participation of the People’s Assembly, in addition to relevant government authorities (including the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Religious Endowments) and civil society associations (including Rainbow for a Better Childhood, the Drop of Milk Society, Sisters of the Good Shepherd and the Syrian Family Planning Association). The Government adopted the National Child Protection Plan at a session held on 2 October 2005 and chaired by the President of the Republic. A budget was allocated for the plan and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs was tasked with the supervision of the entire implementation process, which includes the following 11 activities:

- Activity 1. Conduct research and collect statistics on child abuse;
- Activity 2. Set up a national database to register cases of child abuse;
- Activity 3. Conduct public awareness campaigns;
- Activity 4. Include child protection in basic education curricula;
- Activity 5. Include child protection in relevant higher education curricula;
- Activity 6. Develop the skills of the professionals concerned;
- Activity 7. Establish a family protection unit;
- Activity 8. Create a child protection shelter;
- Activity 9. Establish a child support programme;
- Activity 10. Set up a helpline for children;
- Activity 11. Develop comprehensive national legislation on child protection.

39. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs concluded its analysis of the state of early childhood and childhood in general in preparation for updating related strategies and developing national programmes and action plans.

Legislative and other legal measures

- Education is free of charge at all stages and, in accordance with Act No. 35 of 1981, as amended by the Basic Education Act No. 32 of 7 April 2002 (annex 7), it is compulsory up to the age of 15 years.
- Legislative Decree No. 55 of 2004 (annex 8) regulates private institutions which provide pre-university education

- As stated in Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour Decision No. 1736 of 30 December 2004 (annex 9), the minimum working age is 15 years (see para. 281, below)
- The age of criminal responsibility was raised from 7 to 10 years of age under Legislative Decree No. 52 of 2003 (annex 11)
- The Personal Status Code was amended by Act No. 18 of 25 October 2003 (annex 11) to grant mothers the right to retain custody of their sons beyond the age of 9 (up to the age of 13) and their daughters beyond the age of 11 (15 years). The Children's Rights Bill introduces a further amendment, setting the age of custody at 18 years for boys and girls
- The Agricultural Relations Act No. 56 of 2004 (annex 12)
- The Persons with Disabilities Act No. 34 of 2004 (annex 13)
- The Military Service Act was amended by Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007, article 3 of which was amended by Act No. 16 of 2008, reducing the length of compulsory military service from 24 to 21 months (see para. 254, below)

D. Measures taken to disseminate the principles and provisions of the Convention

40. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should expand and make ongoing its programme for the dissemination of information on the Convention and its implementation among children and parents, civil society and all sectors and levels of government. Efforts to raise awareness of the Convention on the Rights of the Child through the media and various activities organized by the childcare and child protection authorities in the Syrian Arab Republic are well under way.

41. The Ministry of Information, for example, carried out a number of activities and programmes to disseminate and promote the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the following:

- A study conducted in 2005 on the impact of television and radio on childrearing.
- A study on the media's approach to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Public awareness efforts to draw attention to a number of issues, including battered children; children's rights; the promotion of a culture of non-violence against children; child labour (a documentary entitled *Hajar aswad* (Black Stone), was produced in collaboration with UNICEF); school dropout rates; education for girls; and other topics.
- Meetings with dramatists and the Cinema Industry Committee to encourage writers to include the Convention in their works. One of the outcomes of these meetings was the series *Hajiz al-samt* (Wall of Silence), which talks about AIDS and its transmission, including from mother to foetus.
- In addition to television and radio programmes for children and programmes produced and/or presented by children, the Ministry of Information has provided training every year since 2004 to teach private sector and government media personnel how to design media messages for children. The Ministry disseminates the Convention on the Rights of the Child and consistently incorporates the provisions thereof in its programming. Moreover, since 2003 the Ministry has sponsored an annual award for child-friendly journalism.

42. Syrian dramatic works on the rights of the child have had a positive reception throughout the Arab world. The film *Qulub saghirah* (Little Hearts), which is about children affected by AIDS, won an “Emmy award” on the occasion of International Children’s Day of Broadcasting. *Qamar li-sama’ al-burtuqal* (Moon for an Orange Sky) won an honorary prize for the best work on Palestinian children in 2003 and the film *Atfal wa murahiqun* (Children and Adolescents) won first prize in the media for children’s rights competition at the Rabat Festival in 2008.

43. Training sessions entitled “The role of the police in the protection of juveniles” were run by the Ministry of the Interior, in cooperation with UNICEF in a number of provinces to disseminate information about the Convention on the Rights of the Child among police officers. Moreover, the Ministry is developing human rights training for the police, in cooperation with the Geneva Institute for Human Rights. It has held a number of seminars and training courses during the past two years and, in cooperation with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and UNICEF, participated in a training course held in the Islamic Republic of Iran from 24 to 28 August 2008 to learn from the Iranian experience in providing police training on mechanisms for dealing with juveniles.

44. The Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with UNICEF, held training courses in 2003 and 2004 to familiarize juvenile court judges with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and train them on how to deal with juvenile offenders in accordance with the Convention and the optional protocols thereto.

45. The Ministry of Culture distributed colourful posters featuring the text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to all of its cultural centres, community centres and directorates. Moreover, since 2000, the Children’s Culture Directorate has organized interactive theatre workshops to promote children’s rights (to date, 13 workshops have been held, averaging 10 days per workshop), in addition to puppet theatre workshops (to date, 6 workshops have been held). The Latakia Culture Directorate has run a number of interactive activities, such as creative thinking exercises and memory training.

46. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs printed, published and disseminated copies of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the optional protocols thereto. In March 2005, it launched a campaign to familiarize children with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which involves visits to schools in the governorates, discussions with children and help for children to express their understanding of their rights through drawing.

47. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into the document on national standards for curricula at all stages of education, and the first steps have been taken to include the principles of the Convention in curricula. In the context of implementation of the National Plan for the Protection of Children, the Ministry of Education is also developing a programme of action to train teachers on how to educate children about their rights and to disseminate the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in cooperation with UNICEF. It has already produced a number of educational television programmes and has held training courses and workshops to raise awareness of the Convention. In addition, children’s rights are currently being introduced into relevant university curricula (including education, law and medicine).

48. Non-governmental and grass-roots organizations play an important role in mobilizing the community, rallying support for women’s and children’s rights, and creating an environment that will allow for some national laws and legislation to be amended, in line with the international treaties that the Syrian Arab Republic has ratified, and for the inclusion of women’s and children’s rights in national development plans. In addition, these organizations help to disseminate and raise awareness of the principles and provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia branches of

the General Women's Union have held seminars in partnership with UNICEF to disseminate the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Experts in law, education and sociology in addition to members of grass-roots and non-governmental organizations were in attendance to discuss the Convention and the reservations thereto of the Syrian Arab Republic.

IV. Definition of the child (art. 1)

49. This issue was addressed in some detail in the initial and second periodic reports (paras. 27–47 and 28–34, respectively). The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should amend legislation to raise the minimum age for marriage for girls to that for boys and undertake greater efforts to enforce it, particularly in rural areas. In this regard, we wish to note that this has been taken into account in the Children's Rights Bill, which raises the minimum age for marriage to 18 years for both girls and boys, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

50. Syrian legislation uses various terms to describe children, such as "minor", "young person", "juvenile", "infant" and "ward". These terms all refer to the child, namely, a person who has not reached 18 years of age. A child, as defined under article 1 of the Convention, means "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". The corresponding text in Syrian legislation is found in the Juveniles Act No. 18 of 1974, which defines a child as any male or female below the age of 18 years. Prime Ministerial Decision No. 903 of 28 February 2005 reaffirms that a child is any person below 18 years of age. Moreover, the law distinguishes between a child who has not reached the age of discretion and one who has.

51. Under Legislative Decree No. 26 of 12 April 2007, amending the Civil Status Code No. 376 of 1957 (annex 14), guardianship of children consists of two elements, namely:

- Guardianship of the person, which involves taking care of the person of the minor in all matters
- Guardianship of property, which involves taking care of all matters relating to the property of the minor

52. Unless it has been removed from him, guardianship of the person and property is assigned to the father. If the father is absent, the two aspects of guardianship are separated; guardianship of property is vested in a male relative on the father's side, according to the order of succession. This person must manage, invest and safeguard the minor's property. The courts act as guardians for any child who has no guardian and have competence to deal with complaints about a guardian's arbitrary conduct. Where there is a conflict of interest between the guardian or the legal guardian and the minor, the court will appoint a representative for the child. A child, just like any citizen, may lodge a complaint with the courts, if the actions of the guardian or legal guardian conflict with the child's interests. In fact, it is acceptable for a child to seek medical advice without being asked whether he or she has the approval of his or her father. Approval is only required for surgical operations and, should the parents refuse to give their consent, the child has the right to turn to the courts to complain about their arbitrary conduct, whereupon the judge will take the necessary decision.

Guiding principles

International cooperation

53. As part of its efforts to improve the situation of children, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has instituted cooperation with international organizations such as UNICEF, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), WHO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Arab Labour Organization and a number of non-governmental organizations devoted to child protection, including ISPCAN, the Aga Khan Development Network, the Italian Movimondo association and the Karim Rida Said Foundation. International human rights treaties to which the Syrian Arab Republic has acceded since 2000.

54. The Syrian Arab Republic is a party to a considerable number of international instruments that establish rights and obligations and call for respect for human dignity and fundamental human rights. It has continued to pursue this course and, since 2000, has signed the following international instruments:

- Arab Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism, concluded on 22 September 1998 – accession in 2002
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – ratified on 28 March 2003 (annex 15)
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict – 17 October 2003 (annex 16)
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography – 17 October 2003 (annex 16)
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – 1 July 2004 (annex 17)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families – 10 April 2005 (annex 18)
- United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime – Act No. 14 of 2008 (annexes 19 and 20)
- Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime – ratified pursuant to Act No. 14 of 2008
- Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime – adopted in 2000 and ratified pursuant to Act No. 14 of 2008
- International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries – ratified by the Syrian Arab Republic pursuant to Decree No. 52 of 2008 (annex 21)

55. Moreover, since 2000 the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has acceded to numerous Arab and ILO conventions on labour rights and trade union freedoms, in addition to a number of international conventions on human rights and cultural property adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), most notably the following:

- Arab Labour Convention No. 17 of 1993 concerning the Rehabilitation and Employment of the Disabled – ratified pursuant to Act No. 34 of 24 May 2001 (annex 22)
- ILO Convention and Recommendation concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (Convention No. 138, Recommendation No. 146) – ratified pursuant to Decree No. 23 18 July, 2001 (annex 23)
- Arab Labour Convention No. 13 of 1981 concerning the work environment – ratified pursuant to Decree No. 616 of 10 December 2001 (annex 24)
- Arab Labour Convention No. 18 of 1996 concerning the employment of young persons – ratified by Decree No. 109 of 15 April 2002 (annex 25)
- SOS Children’s Villages agreement – ratified pursuant to Act No. 19 of 23 October 2007 (annex 26)
- ILO Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Convention No. 182) – ratified by Decree No. 396 of 4 November 2002 (annex 27)

V. General principles

A. Non-discrimination (art. 2)

The right to non-discrimination

56. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should take effective measures, including by enacting or rescinding legislation where necessary, implementing disparity-reduction programmes and so on, to ensure that all children within its jurisdiction enjoy all the rights set out in the Convention without discrimination, in accordance with article 2, and that it carry out comprehensive public education campaigns to prevent and combat negative societal attitudes in that regard.

57. There is no hostility towards children in Syrian society; social mores and moral norms dictate that they must be treated with kindness and consideration. Moreover, children’s views, when founded, are taken into account by the courts, and also in connection with public opinion and the assessment of complaints. Under the Syrian Constitution, non-discrimination is a general principle underpinning the exercise of rights. It can be said that Syrian law does not make concession to allow for discrimination but rather protects all members of society against any form of discrimination, as the legislature is convinced that diversity is a source of richness rather than weakness. Therefore, under the law, any act, piece of writing or speech which is intended to stir up sectarian strife or racism will attract severe penalties. The Syrian Government strives to ensure that there is no discrimination between citizens and resident aliens.

58. All children, whether they are Syrian nationals, have equivalent status or are resident aliens in the Syrian Arab Republic, can enrol in basic education institutions and are afforded equal treatment with regard to care and supervision, due consideration being given to in their different background, social environment and religious affiliation. The Syrian Government provides basic health and education services in rural and urban areas to all boys and girls at all stages of education. School health departments formally assess and certify the ages of children who are not properly registered and enrol them in basic education institutions in accordance with established procedures. Moreover, the recommendation on taking account of the right to non-discrimination in curricula is reflected in the document setting forth the criteria for developing study materials.

59. All children in the Syrian Arab Republic are equal. A wide range of cultural services, including awareness-raising, developmental, social and recreational services, are offered to them, without any discrimination, by 458 cultural centres in the governorates that are affiliated to the Ministry of Culture.

Non-discrimination on grounds of gender

60. This issue is addressed in paragraph 37 of the second periodic report. We wish to emphasize that Syrian laws do not discriminate in any way between males and females with regard to enrolment in education, access to health and social services, the performance of legal transactions or remuneration for work. If there is any discrimination, it is due to a misunderstanding of the law or to individual practices that can be ruled invalid by the courts; in such cases, the injured party has the right to compensation.

61. Educational curricula are free from gender stereotypes, as the Syrian Arab Republic has developed school curricula to include the gender perspective. A number of studies and workshops on this topic have been conducted since 2000, when the Syrian Arab Republic ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, with some reservations.

62. Girls' enrolment rates at various stages of education are some of the most significant indicators of gender equity. The ratio of girls to the total number of pupils in kindergartens was 47 per cent in the academic year 1999/2000 and also in 2007/08. This is a good rate, as, although education is not compulsory at this stage, almost half of those enrolled were girls. This reflects how much interest is taken in educating girls at this stage. The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with all relevant sectors, organizations and institutions, aims to increase kindergarten enrolment rates for children in the age group 3–5 years, as this stage is important in the development of the child's personality.

63. The ratio of girls to the total number of pupils enrolled in primary education was 47 per cent in the 1999/2000 academic year and increased to 48 per cent in the 2007/08 academic year. The increase is due to the raising of compulsory school age pursuant to the Basic Education Act No. 32 of 7 April 2002. Under the Act, primary and secondary education were merged into a single stage, known as the basic education stage, which is compulsory up to the ninth grade (until the age of 15 years).

64. The ratio of girls to the total number of pupils enrolled in secondary school was 47 per cent in the 1999/2000 academic year and increased to 53 per cent in 2007/08. Moreover, 40 per cent of students in vocational secondary education were girls in 2007/08. The reason for the high enrolment rate for girls in vocational education is that new prospects have opened up in this area with the creation of new areas of specialization in industrial and commercial education (electronics, computer technologies), which has provided an opportunity for girls to take up this type of education.

Measures taken to reduce economic and social disparities, including between rural and urban areas

65. The Government is making every effort possible to eliminate disparities. The general budget and government projects are allocated across different areas, depending on utility and need. From the outset, the tenth five-year plan has concentrated on the north-eastern region and, establishing a development plan for the region. The Ministry of Education has duly drafted plans to improve the state of education and reduce disparities and discrimination with regard to the provision of services. It has drawn a map showing school locations and increased the salaries of teachers working in remote areas by 50 per cent and of those working in semi-remote areas by 30 per cent (annex 28). Some 90 per cent of teachers who passed a public competitive examination for employment in

government schools have been appointed to teach in the areas of greatest need. The Ministry of Education has introduced what it calls the “flexible school year” (see para. 221 below) and has furnished mobile schools consisting of tents or vans, together with teachers trained to adapt to the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouin community, so as to provide instruction for Bedouin children (see paras. 222 and 223 below).

66. An education programme has been implemented for girls who drop out of school for many reasons, in order to give them the opportunity to complete their education. New curricula are being developed for these girls and teachers are being trained to teach the new curricula; this project will continue until 2010. The Ministry of Education has devised what it terms as a cumulative approach, whereby topics are added to the same subject every two academic years in a single textbook, in order to make it easier for girl dropouts to study. A training manual was prepared recently for teachers of girl dropouts that draws attention to self-education methods. The Ministry of Education issued a number of publications containing advice on the school dropout problem (annex 29). In addition, it holds public awareness-raising seminars in the northern and north-eastern governorates to promote girls’ education and emphasize the role of knowledge in the development of girls’ social awareness.

67. Grass-roots organizations and civil society associations contribute to these efforts. The General Women’s Union has implemented a “disparities reduction programme” in order to facilitate access to and improve the quality of basic social services in the Dayr al-Zawr, Raqqah, Hasakah, Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Moreover, some non-profit associations and institutions, including Rainbow, the Syria Trust for Development and the “Paradise Villages” project, are opening kindergartens in remote areas.

B. Best interests of the child (art. 3)

68. The question of the best interests of the child was addressed in some detail in paragraphs 40–48 of the second periodic report.

69. The best interests of the child are fundamental considerations with respect to policy choices and other measures taken in connection with health, social, educational and other services in the Syrian Arab Republic. Through its policies and the laws in force, the State has given priority to the best interests of the child, which are the basic foundation for the development of the person and a healthy society. The care and protection of children is at the very core of family and social life; this is reflected in various areas including health, education and legislation. The family allowance for employees was increased under Decree No. 23 of 2003. The Social Insurance Act was amended by Decree No. 78 of 2001 (annex 30) to make it possible to inherit the pension of a female civil servant, whereas, previously, this was only possible for male civil servants. Furthermore, working women are granted paid maternity leave under Syrian law. Moreover, the Children’s Rights Bill is founded on the principle of the best interests of the child. In addition, the majority of the provisions of the Maintenance and Social Solidarity Fund Bill are specifically geared towards children (see para. 161, below).

C. The right to life, survival and development (art. 6)

70. The subject of the right to life, survival and development is dealt with in paragraphs 49–52 of the second periodic report.

71. The Syrian legislature considers the right to life to be the most basic of the rights inherent in the human person and stresses the importance of protecting this children’s right, from the embryonic stage of life until the age of majority. The legislature, domestic law and

national policy therefore guarantee all children and adults the right to life through a number of measures and mechanisms. Various new pieces of legislation and ordinances on the right to life, survival and growth have been introduced, notably Ministerial Decision No. 39/2001, article 2 of which prohibits and punishes the sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products to anyone under 18 years of age, in addition to Decision No. 4334 of 8 July 2007, concerning the establishment of the National Anti-Smoking Committee in partnership with WHO, UNICEF and relevant government agencies.

72. The situation of children in the occupied Syrian Arab Golan is a significant subject of concern; children there are not safe from the arbitrary practices of Israel, which pays no heed to the rights of Syrian Arab children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Israel has violated the rights of Syrian Arab children in the Golan by imposing Israeli nationality on them and denying them their Syrian Arab nationality, in violation of article 12 of the Convention. In addition, it has denied Syrian Arab children in the Golan free access to ideas and information by imposing restrictions on and limiting the mobility of the population, including children, in violation of article 13 of the Convention. Moreover, Israel has imposed Israeli culture on children in the Golan and prevents them from engaging in intellectual and artistic activities. The occupying authorities have abolished Syrian Arab curricula in all schools in the occupied Golan and replaced them with Israeli curricula in an attempt to raise a generation that has no intellectual or cultural ties to its homeland. Furthermore, there is a dearth of suitable classrooms and school buildings in the Golan. Classrooms are overcrowded and parents pay high rates of tax, purportedly for education. With regard to health, Israel's violations of the Convention are reflected in the acute shortage of health centres, clinics, emergency rooms and doctors in the occupied Syrian Arab Golan and the absence of basic information on child health.

73. Israeli landmines pose a constant threat in the Golan in so far as they remain in areas close to villages, fields and pastureland belonging to the local inhabitants. There have been 531 victims of Israeli landmines in the occupied Syrian Arab Golan including 202 fatalities, mostly among children, and 329 persons who suffer from permanent multiple disabilities as a result of injuries. It is our children's right and the responsibility of the distinguished Committee on the Rights of the Child to demand that the occupier respect international conventions and children's rights in the occupied Syrian Arab Golan.

Care in early childhood

Health care

74. The Ministry of Health provides a range of child health services, from premarital to adolescent and youth health programmes. All the programmes on offer are run in conjunction with local communities and non-governmental organizations. The growing interest in health issues has led to the establishment of a number of non-governmental organizations, such as the Basma Association (see para. 87, below), which engage in advocacy work and support activities to address these issues in Syrian society, helping to raise awareness of pressing and critical health issues, such as AIDS.

Premarital medical examination programme

75. The Ministry of Health began to develop this programme in 2002, with the aim of providing premarital counselling, medical examinations and laboratory services, in conjunction with the Physicians' Association throughout the Syrian Arab Republic by the end of 2008. The purpose of the programme is to ensure the health and safety of couples who wish to get married and that of their children and, consequently, to reduce child mortality and morbidity rates caused by increasingly prevalent genetic diseases such as diabetes, thalassemia and sickle-cell anaemia, and to reduce the prevalence of disability.

Programme activities have focused on raising awareness of the dangers of intermarriage between relatives — given the impact of the practice on the emergence of underlying genetic diseases — especially as the 2001 Family Health Survey showed that the rate of intermarriage had increased to 40.4 per cent (34.3 per cent in urban areas and 47.4 per cent in rural areas). At present (2009), the programme is being implemented in the Idlib, Dar`a and Latakia governorates as a step towards its introduction throughout the Syrian Arab Republic.

Safe birth programme

76. The 2001 Family Health Survey showed that the home birth rate was 45.2 per cent in 2001, down from 64 per cent in 1993, which provides good evidence that the hospital birth rate is rising. Moreover, the proportion of births assisted by trained birth attendants increased from 76 per cent in 1993 to 83.8 per cent in 2001 (45.3 per cent assisted by doctors and 38.5 per cent by midwives). The Ministry of Health has taken various steps with a view to reducing the neonatal mortality rate to 0.6 per cent by 2015, including the following:

- (a) Creation, in 2002, of a perinatal programme for infant care and resuscitation in some hospitals, involving training for doctors and midwives working in maternity and children's wards and the provision of suitable equipment. The programme will be extended to cover all hospitals;
- (b) Expansion of midwifery training and of obstetrics departments in all hospitals;
- (c) Creation of a natural birth programme. In 2002, 35 natural birth centres were opened;
- (d) The Ministry is currently fitting out 39 district hospitals, all of which have maternity wards.

77. In 2007, 28 qualifying and refresher courses were held for paediatricians from various governorates who had been trained under the programme. By the end of 2009, all members of the target group of midwives, paediatricians, obstetricians and anaesthetists will have been trained in neonatal resuscitation. The training will then be extended to the private sector. Those who have received training will be evaluated on the job and the results of their interventions to deal with newborns will be compared with global rates. There have also been efforts to raise public awareness of neonatal care.

Neonatal tetanus programme

78. Neonatal tetanus was completely eliminated in the Syrian Arab Republic in 1997. The Ministry of Health continues to provide women of childbearing age with vaccinations against tetanus at various health centres, medical posts, family planning and maternity clinics and, also, deploys mobile teams for this purpose. Health education campaigns are conducted on an ongoing basis to inform all women of childbearing age of the importance of completing the five-dose course of the tetanus vaccine and having a trained attendant present when giving birth.

Low birth weight programme

79. A Ministry of Health study in 2004 showed that 6.6 per cent of newborns were of low birth weight (6.3 per cent in urban areas and 6.9 per cent in rural areas). The Ministry of Health hopes to reduce these rates to less than 5 per cent, but has difficulty monitoring pregnant women from the start of their pregnancy and, consequently, has difficulty in providing them with health education on proper nutrition and healthy eating habits.

Integrated Management of Childhood Illness for healthy and sick children

80. The Syrian Arab Republic adopted its Integrated Management of Childhood Illness Strategy in 2000 in order to reduce the number of deaths caused by common childhood diseases and to help promote children's growth and healthy development (exclusive breastfeeding until the age of 6 months; proper and balanced complementary nutrition; and early detection of disabilities and developmental difficulties). To that end, it took steps to develop its human resources and enhance the effectiveness of personnel in caring for and managing children under 5 years of age with a view to improving the quality of children's services and the care offered by the family and the community to healthy and sick children, and to strengthening community participation. The programme covers 15 per cent of children under 5 years of age.

National immunization programme

81. The national immunization programme was launched in the Syrian Arab Republic in 1978. It covers all children in urban, rural and desert areas and provides free vaccinations in order to achieve the highest level of coverage for each separate vaccine. New vaccines have been added to the six standard WHO vaccines in order to ensure that children are protected and immunized against hepatitis B, rubella, mumps and Haemophilus influenzae type B (Hib). In addition, meningitis vaccine is given to children in the first year of primary school, bringing the total number of vaccines approved under the Syrian national vaccination programme to 10.

82. Although the Department of Child Health has established a surveillance system involving zero reporting and effective detection reporting, and although training courses on the surveillance system are conducted for health professionals and seminars on immediate reporting are held with the private sector, greater efforts are needed to reach children who have not been vaccinated and to eradicate the targeted diseases.

Polio

83. The Syrian Arab Republic is polio-free. There have been no cases of wild poliovirus, which causes the disease, since 1995. National immunization campaigns using oral polio vaccine for all children under 5 years of age have been carried out since 1993; the most recent campaign was carried out in 2000. The latest figures point to a coverage rate at the national level of over 99 per cent, and efforts are being made to follow up on a house-to-house campaigns to administer polio vaccine to unvaccinated children under 5 years of age in high-risk areas.

Measles and rubella

84. The national Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccination campaign, which was conducted in 2007, achieved over 95 per cent coverage. The campaign was divided into two phases – the first focusing on children below school age and the second on schoolchildren in the second, third and fourth grades. The third phase of the campaign, aimed at schoolchildren in the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth grades, was implemented in 2008.

Programme to control diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections in children

85. The Ministry of Health instituted this programme in 1988 and has sought to ensure good case management of diarrhoea by health workers and to educate mothers on the importance of increasing fluid intake and continuing to feed and breastfeed during a diarrhoea episode. The Ministry has achieved this by holding workshops, courses and seminars, in addition to holding meetings with public and private sector physicians.

Moreover, it has organized awareness and education campaigns on radio and television and in the press. A study on the incidence of diarrhoea was conducted in selected reporting hospitals in 2001. The number of cases of diarrhoea recorded was 45,290, with 41 deaths or a mortality rate of 0.09 per cent. The study showed that the incidence of diarrhoea and deaths from diarrhoea was higher in Aleppo, Dar`a and the north-eastern governorates (Raqqah, Dayr al-Zawr and Hasakah), which are high-risk areas. There is cooperation with grass-roots organizations in these governorates and health professionals are trained to address the problem. A national training team, drawn from Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Quneitra, Dar`a, Suwayda' and Tartus governorates, was created to raise awareness about the programme in health centres and among parents in cooperation with grass-roots organizations and through the media.

Healthy child programme

86. This programme targets children under 5 years of age. When children visit a clinic, their height, weight and head circumference are measured and their nutritional status is assessed. The aim here is to promote children's health, growth and development through proper nutrition. Checks are carried out to ensure that safety conditions are met with regard to the treatment of children in the environment in which they live. Efforts are made to prevent accidents and diseases, through follow-up on vaccinations and early diagnosis of diseases, delayed growth and development, and disabilities. Periodic tests are conducted and the results are submitted to a physician. However, it should be noted that few parents bring their children for tests, whether in private sector or government institutions, and tend to bring their children in only when sick. Efforts are being made to raise awareness among parents of the need to attend the health centre in order to have their children monitored, even if they are not sick.

87. The Basma Support Association for Children with Cancer is a voluntary non-profit association. It was founded in 2006 to support children with cancer and their families during treatment. Today, the association provides material, moral, psychological and educational support to more than 1,200 registered children and their families from all over the Syrian Arab Republic. It also raises awareness about childhood cancer in the community as a whole and mobilizes community support for this issue. The association has collected donations from Syrian expatriates and, in February 2009, received \$500,000 in voluntary contributions from the Syrian community in the United States. It is currently considering the possibility of establishing a specialized treatment centre for children with cancer. The cost has been estimated at \$30 million, apart from the running costs. The centre would provide free services and treatment and would, at the same time, provide a national programme of training for medical professionals. In addition, the association plans to build guesthouses to accommodate the families of children with cancer being treated in hospital.

Early childhood nutrition

88. Those most vulnerable to the diseases caused by malnutrition are preschool children, in particular children under 3 years of age. The Ministry of Health conducts studies and research and disseminates information on improving children's nutrition. The fact that malnutrition indicators for children have not improved to the same extent as infant and under-five mortality rates points to the need for greater efforts in the future. Existing objectives focus on: reducing malnutrition rates to below half their current level; ensuring that healthy children clinics are accessible and provide preventive services to 90 per cent of children; ensuring the quality of services offered at such clinics; and providing all families with correct information on nutrition, breastfeeding and on children's spiritual and physical growth and development. The most important of these efforts are described in the following paragraphs.

Breastfeeding programme

89. This programme was launched in 1970. The Ministry encourages exclusive breastfeeding of children up to the age of 6 months, with the introduction of complementary foods and continued breastfeeding until the age of 2 years (global public health recommendation arising from the expert consultation held in Geneva, 28 March 2000). Health education is offered to mothers through the media, in cooperation with the Ministry of Information and grass-roots organizations, in particular the General Women's Union, and by child-friendly hospitals that encourage breastfeeding (annex 31) and participate in the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding [initiative].

Application of the Syrian Breast-milk Substitutes Code

90. The Ministry of Health applies the Syrian Breast-milk Substitutes Code (Regulatory Decision No. 19/T of 3 July 2000, regulating and promoting breastfeeding, published in the *Official Gazette* No. 33 of 30 August 2000) (annex 32). The Minister of Health issued a circular to all health directorates in the governorates (No. 17748/5/163 of 28 July 2001, on monitoring the Ten Steps initiative in all hospitals, with reference to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes). Moreover, the text of the Breastfeeding Protection Bill has been finalized by a joint Ministry of Health and Ministry of Higher Education committee. The difficulties that arise relate to the ongoing reassessment of child-friendly hospitals and the lack of commitment to the implementation of the initiative on the part of paediatricians and hospitals in the private sector.

Weaning and supplementary nutrition

91. A statistical study conducted in 2002 showed that children were being offered a higher proportion of sugary and starchy foods (32 per cent) and a lower proportion of foods rich in vitamins and proteins (3.3 per cent), a trend that gives rise to child malnutrition (annex 33). It was observed that mothers were uncertain about how to wean infants onto solid foods and about the quality of such foods. Accordingly, educational seminars and lectures have been held for health workers and mothers attending health centres in a concerted effort to improve weaning foods and train mothers to provide their children with age-appropriate foods. Moreover, there have been efforts to promote awareness of these topics through the media, in cooperation with civil society associations working in the field of child welfare (annexes 34 and 35).

Micronutrient deficiency prevention programme

92. Since the World Summit for Children in New York in September 1990 and the International Conference on Nutrition in Rome in December 1992, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has set the elimination of micronutrient deficiency (vitamin A, iron and iodine) as a target. Consequently, the Ministry of Health adopted a national strategy to prevent micronutrient deficiency that relies mainly on providing micronutrient supplements to children, women and pregnant mothers and emphasizes the importance of health education.

Iron deficiency anaemia prevention programme

93. A Ministry of Health study on iron deficiency anaemia in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2007 yielded the following results:

- The prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia among pregnant women was 52.6 per cent
- The prevalence of anaemia among children under 5 years of age was 22.3 per cent (22.22 per cent among boys and 22.39 per cent among girls)

- The prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia in children under 5 years of age was 12.24 per cent (12.26 per cent among boys and 12.22 per cent among girls)

94. Consequently, in order to reduce the iron deficiency anaemia rate among children and women of childbearing age, the Ministry of Health has pursued a strategy which involves:

- (a) Encouraging breastfeeding;
- (b) Distributing iron sulphate (60 mg) and folic acid (1.5 mg) to pregnant women;
- (c) Fortifying flour with iron; at the end of 2002, equipment to add iron sulphate to flour was installed in the Salmiyah district in Hamah governorate. The Ministry is seeking in earnest to obtain the resources and funding necessary to extend this procedure to include other governorates.

Vitamin A distribution programme

95. Since 1998, the Ministry of Health has continued to pursue a strategy to limit or reduce the prevalence of serum retinol deficiency by distributing vitamin A capsules with measles vaccine to target groups, namely, children of 4–16 months, and post-partum women.

Iodine deficiency prevention programme

96. In 2001, the Department of Nutrition, which is part of the Directorate of Primary Health Care at the Ministry of Health, conducted a joint study with the Central Bureau of Statistics and WHO on iodine deficiency disorders among primary school pupils in the Syrian Arab Republic. The study showed a severe iodine deficiency prevalence rate of 1.1 per cent and a moderate iodine deficiency prevalence rate of 8.3 per cent, as against an average severe iodine deficiency prevalence rate of 29 per cent in 1990. In 2005, the Department of Nutrition, in cooperation with the Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, conducted a study on the use by Syrian families of iodized salt. It found that 79.3 per cent of Syrian families used iodized salt. In 2006, it conducted another study, in cooperation with the Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, on urinary iodine levels in elementary school pupils in the Syrian Arab Republic. It found that the rate of severe iodine deficiency was zero per cent, but that the rate of moderate iodine deficiency was 49 per cent.

Educational and pedagogical services

97. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, with all relevant partners, prepared a strategy for early childhood based on an analysis of the current situation of children in the Syrian Arab Republic. The national team described the proposed services as a children's rights-based system, rather than a needs-based system. Moreover, it introduced measures of positive discrimination in the proposed programmes for the most vulnerable children. An entire chapter was dedicated to the importance of funding sources and the budget in ensuring the quality and credibility of the programmes and activities implemented. The strategy was developed in partnership with most ministries and government bodies, the relevant international organizations and a number of non-governmental organizations, and will become a national action plan within a year.

98. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with UNESCO, established the first early childhood development centre to offer training for all those involved in caring for young children. The centre will offer training courses for anyone wishing to prepare a Master's or doctoral thesis on the subject of children in this age group. In addition, it will

provide all concerned with information, studies and research gleaned from regional and international sources for use in the conduct of comparable national research.

99. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), completed the preparation of a comprehensive training guide on early childhood care and development dealing with the full range of issues and topics relating to early childhood development. Containing a number of sections, the guide is addressed first of all at families, followed by teachers and alternative family carers and, lastly, media strategists, programme developers and planners whose work is targeted at the very young.

100. The General Women's Union prepared the first part of a family guide on children from infancy to 8 years of age, covering such matters as children's educational and health problems, the importance of breastfeeding, protection for children against accidents in the home, child socialization, dealing with teenagers, and difficulties encountered by families.

101. Kindergartens, which cater to children aged between 3 and 5 years, increased in number from 1,170 in 2000 to 1,533 in 2006 (i.e., by 32 per cent) and 1,737 in 2008, as (statutory) approvals for kindergarten licences continued to be granted to grass-roots organizations, professional trade unions and the private sector, reflecting the importance of the kindergarten stage in preparing children for basic education. The number of children enrolled in kindergarten nevertheless remains low, as does the enrolment rate; in the 2001/02 school year, the number of children enrolled amounted to 121,289, increasing slightly each year to reach 149,811 in the 2005/06 school year and 155,731 in the 2006/07 school year. The tenth five-year plan has set the goal of increasing the future intake in kindergartens from 10 to 30 per cent of children between 3 and 5 years of age.

102. Legislative Decree No. 55 of 2004 (annex 8) was issued to regulate private, pre-university education institutions and was amended by implementing directives of 2 May 2006. It should be noted that the number of private schools rose from 302 in 2000 to 1,479 in 2008. Under the Decree, permission is given to open private kindergartens and Ministry of Education kindergartens, in accordance with ministerial directives. Directives on the establishment of Ministry of Education kindergartens were issued on 1 June 2006, and new kindergartens have been supplied with the latest equipment and materials. Kindergarten sections and schools are managed by specialist instructors, in line with programmes developed by the Department of Curricula and Instruction. The number of new kindergartens amounted to 65 in 2006/07, 46 in 2007/08 and 21 in 2008/09. Competitive fees for licensed private kindergartens were set pursuant to ministerial directives and are payable in two or three instalments.

103. Kindergartens run by grass-roots organizations make an immense contribution. The nurseries and kindergartens run by the General Women's Union accept children between the ages of 6 months and 6 years at a nominal charge, payable in instalments. In all, there are 365 nurseries and kindergartens catering to 27,402 children. They serve as model facilities, fulfil health conditions in full and provide child health care in conjunction with the Ministry of Health. The General Women's Union worked in cooperation and coordination with the Fund for Integrated Social Development (FIRDOS) on the furnishing and supervision of FIRDOS kindergartens and on supervisor training in Aleppo, Homs, Quneitra, Latakia and Damascus Countryside. The Child Welfare Office of the General Women's Union in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (annex 36) also trains child supervisors for work in the Union's kindergartens. By the 2008/09 school year, the Teachers' Union had also established 329 kindergartens catering annually to some 10,000 children in the governorates. These children receive care and attention under the supervision of qualified kindergarten workers, who undergo continuous training.

104. In order to focus on quality issues in kindergartens, specific performance criteria for kindergarten workers have been elaborated (annex 37), in addition to which:

- The Ministry of Higher Education offers training at its colleges of education for kindergarten workers, the first batch of whom graduated in 2007
- The Ministry of Education provides training for those currently in charge of kindergartens and has drawn up a timetable for the replacement of existing teachers with teachers who have graduated from colleges of education or kindergarten colleges
- The Ministry of Education has finalized national standards for the development of modern, up-to-date kindergarten curricula based on active learning and has produced teaching and cultural programmes for these curricula
- Efforts have been made to improve and enhance the performance of specialist instructors in the educational management of kindergartens
- A plan for training child carers in early childhood issues was implemented during the period from 2005 to 2006 by the General Women's Union, in cooperation with the Aga Khan Development Network, in the governorates of Damascus, Tartus, Hamah and Quneitra, as well as in the Damascus Countryside
- A local capacity-building programme on early childhood care was implemented for supervisors and child carers, in coordination with the General Women's Union, the Aga Khan Development Network and the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPANNA)
- Awareness seminars and educational talks have been delivered in cultural centres and in the governorates for all kindergarten supervisors and stakeholders; children's summer clubs, exhibitions and drawing workshops have been organized; and a toolkit (environmental education for kindergarten level) has been developed and delivered

D. Respect for the views of the child (art. 12)

105. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should continue to promote and facilitate within the family, the school, institutions and the courts, respect for the views of children and their participation in all matters affecting them, in accordance with article 12 of the Convention, as well as develop skills-training programmes in community settings for parents, teachers, social workers and local officials to support children to express their informed views and opinions and to take these views into consideration.

Right to free expression of opinion

106. This subject was addressed in some detail in paragraphs 72–75 of the initial report and in paragraph 62 of the second periodic report.

107. As a matter of social custom, children's views are treated by the family with the same respect as those of adults. There is no restriction on a child's (or adult's) exercise of the right to express his or her views, provided that there is no conflict with the laws under which it is prohibited to fuel discord, division or discrimination or to commit an act contrary to public order or public morals. The measures and procedures adopted by the State encourage children's initiatives and respect for children's views. In September 2005, for instance, the Syrian Government embraced the idea of establishing a children's parliament, as a ground-breaking experiment, in the governorate of Dayr al-Zawr. This

parliament has held nine sessions and received a visit from the President of the Republic. Conducted under his auspices, the experiment provides opportunities for the 100 and more child parliamentarians concerned to participate, express their views and aspirations, engage in objective criticism and immerse themselves in the decision-making process through workshops involving such decision makers as governors and ministers. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs has developed a proposal on replicating the children's parliament on a wider scale following the success scored in the governorate of Dayr al-Zawr. The legal aspects of the proposal are now under examination.

108. The national curriculum standards for all levels of schooling emphasize respect for children's views, with attention focused on: the child's personality and development; the expansion of training for children in self-directed learning; new perspectives in learning (life skills and making the connection between knowledge and life); putting lessons learned into practice in the child's daily life; training in decision-making; and respect for the views of others. The Ministry makes sure to issue circulars to education directorates in the governorates on running competitions that encourage children to express their views freely. The Ministry also makes educational television programmes on cooperation between schools and families and the impact of positive treatment within the family on a child's ability to adapt to school and community life. At the beginning of each school year, the Ministry circulates guidelines to schools on how to welcome children, which include offering them encouragement and respecting their views. The steps taken to establish parent councils and seasonal clubs, engage the services of social researchers in all levels of education and focus on the development of children's talents clearly continue to produce tangible results with respect to consolidating the right of children to express their views on matters affecting them.

109. All concerned ministries and authorities accord particular importance to children's participation; as befits its cultural role and in association with the entire spectrum of government bodies (in particular the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf)), grass-roots organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and such international children's organizations as UNICEF, the Ministry of Culture is building an integrated cultural system for children in the Syrian Arab Republic that recognizes their Arab identity. The system is also designed to reflect children's openness to other cultures of the world and to promote their freedom of expression through the work of committees involved in organizing children's activities. Children participate in these committees by taking decisions about the organization, preparation and running of such activities. They also arrange seminars with ministerial aides, governors, town council chairpersons, decision makers, child experts and public figures from the cultural, art, scientific and social worlds, in addition to interactive and puppet theatre workshops. The Ministry likewise began media workshops and has published a periodical produced by children. It has been staging celebrations for the Arab Child Day (annex 38) and Universal Children's Day annually since 2002, with additional environment-focused festivities to celebrate children and the environment and World Animal Day. It also takes part in a spring festival of children's theatre that entails open seminars, drawing workshops and book fairs, in addition to attending many of the events run by public and private organizations, such as the annual Saint Elian Cultural Week in Homs and the flower show arranged in conjunction with the Ministry of Tourism. On these occasions, most children in the governorates congregate in one spot and are given the opportunity to engage in special activities in complete freedom. During 2008, 236 drawing workshops were held, in addition to 27 Arabic calligraphy workshops, 32 literature and reading workshops, 2 music workshops and 2 plasticine workshops.

110. The Baath Vanguard Group includes children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, for whom it organizes activities in vanguard units (schools), activity centres, applied

education schools and at annual festivals. It offers its cultural, social, art, sports and science facilities free of charge to all Syrian schoolchildren, without distinction, and hosts approximately 100,000 children a year in its camps. It also runs the following activities:

- An annual creativity symposium in the governorate of Tartus aimed at developing the talents of over 500 child vanguards
- An annual vanguard festival, consisting of an experiment unique in the Arab world whereby participating children (Syrians, Arabs and foreigners) stay as guests in Syrian homes as a way of broadening their social horizons
- Publication of a series of illustrated short stories, entitled *Qisas wa lawhat* (Stories and pictures), which are composed and illustrated by children
- Sponsorship of Syrian children in international competitions, such as Shankar's International Children's Competition, in which they have been awarded several prizes

111. The Revolutionary Youth Federation runs similar activities to those offered by the Baath Vanguard Group for children aged from 12 to 18 years (annex 39). It is the largest grass-roots organization involved in adolescent and youth issues.

112. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs pursues concerted efforts to ensure that the participation of children in the design and implementation of all child-related activities and programmes becomes a deep-rooted tradition. Children were also involved in the preparation of this report; six workshops were held in order to determine the extent of their knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and canvas their views on the rights that they enjoy (annex 2 sets out the main points covered in these workshops). Another activity in which they participated was an analysis of the current situation of children in the Syrian Arab Republic. The analysis was coordinated by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, the State Planning Commission and UNICEF in 2007. Children took part in hearings and consultations, putting questions to officials representing the government agencies responsible for dealing with different aspects of childhood. They also took part in consultations held in a number of governorates to solicit adolescents' views on key issues relating to their standard of living, education and health (annex 40).

113. A number of Syrian children were participants in delegations of the Syrian Arab Republic sent to regional and international conferences and symposiums on children, including the Regional Conference on Violence against Children, held in Cairo from 25 to 27 June 2007, and the Ninth Symposium for Arab Children on the theme of "Pan-Arabism is my identity and openness is my culture", organized in Damascus by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs. The symposium was attended by 110 child participants aged between 13 and 15, including 6 children with special needs from different Arab countries. The participants comprised 35 Syrian children and 4 children from each of the other countries. The symposium highlighted the main issues of the day in an enjoyable atmosphere of discovery created to help build the character of the participants, foster mutual understanding, dialogue, tolerance and friendship and encourage the free expression of views. Over the five days of the symposium, the children drove the proceedings, participating in 15-person working groups supervised by Syrian teenagers, acting as facilitators, who were older than the group by two years or so. A team of experts was also on hand to provide answers and clarifications on questions concerning the key discussion areas. At the end of the symposium, each working group chose a delegate to finalize recommendations and serve as a spokesperson presenting the wishes and views of Arab children on their way of life, rights and obligations.

114. NGOs play a part in the efforts to promote participation and voluntary work. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (annex 41), for instance, runs a cub scouts project, which

encourages volunteering among children between 9 and 14 years of age and teaches them first aid and the principles of international humanitarian law. Children over 16 years of age are accepted as youth volunteers, helping to provide psychological support for children in emergencies and disasters, as well as for children with special needs. The organization Rainbow for a Better Childhood also established a voluntary teenage task force to work on promotion activities and rally support on the most pressing issues. As part of an environmental project entitled “Our green planet”, approved in 2009, children designed and began implementing their own schemes.

VI. Civil rights and freedoms (arts. 7, 8, 13–17, and 37 (a))

115. These subjects were addressed in some detail in the second periodic report (paras. 57–69).

116. Civil rights and freedoms are protected under the Syrian Constitution and relevant laws, including the Syrian Criminal Code, which prescribes penalties for any person who violates these rights and freedoms, arbitrarily deprives individuals of their liberty, divulges secrets learned by virtue of his or her occupation, enters people’s homes without their consent, abuses his or her authority to extract confessions and information from people, or engages in slander. The Code furthermore provides for the punishment of anyone who abandons a child in a state of need, fails to pay maintenance for a child, violates his or her duties of guardianship or abuses or rapes a child. All offences against individuals, their property or their privacy are similarly punishable, as are deprivation of liberty, slave trading, exclusion, intimidation, degrading treatment and any other undermining of rights.

A. Name and nationality (art. 7)

117. This subject is covered in detail in paragraphs 65 and 66 of the initial report.

118. The Syrian legislator requires everyone to have a first name and a family name. There are no children without a name in the Syrian Arab Republic. This principle is embodied in article 40 of the Syrian Civil Code No. 84 of 1949, which provides that: “Everyone must have a name and a family name to pass on to his children.” There is nothing in Syrian law to prevent the same rule from applying to Arabs or foreigners who migrate to the Syrian Arab Republic. All children living in the Syrian Arab Republic, regardless of their origin, enjoy the same protection, without discrimination, and are educated at schools on a basis of equality.

119. According to articles 20 to 29 of Legislative Decree No. 26 of 12 April 2007 (annex 14), amending the Personal Status Code No. 376 of 2 April 1957, all children must be registered at birth. Families who fail to comply with this requirement must answer before the law. The Code provides details on the information and data required for registering a birth and on related mechanisms. All Syrian Arabs (male and female) are also entitled to an identity card when they reach 14 years of age (art. 70 *et seq.*).

B. Preservation of identity (art. 8)

120. This subject is covered in detail in paragraphs 67–71 of the initial report.

121. The civil registrar names foundlings (Personal Status Code, arts. 34–36). The Personal Status Code sets out the method of registration and the obligations required of the father, doctor, midwife and hospital directors. A fine or a penalty of imprisonment for between 10 days and 1 month will be imposed if the time limits for registration are

exceeded (Personal Status Code, art. 22 *et seq.*). To ensure that children have a family to care for them, the Code also requires health facilities to notify the competent authorities of births. Neither a birth certificate nor the birth register may include any indication to the effect that the child is of unknown parentage or bears the name or family name of the head of household.

122. The main principles on which the functions of the Ministry of Culture are founded include preserving cultural identity and fostering pride in the Arab character, with emphasis on distinctive national characteristics and a feeling of inclusion. The Ministry is intent on developing a culture for children through theatre performances, symposiums, cultural competitions, art exhibitions, musical evenings, fairs, summer clubs and book circles, in addition to film screenings and poetry mornings held at cultural centres (annex 42). The General Cinema Organization created a special children's department, which has produced two fictional films for children, namely *Khayt al-hayat* (Thread of life) and *Rihlat al-yamam al-masi* (The diamond pigeon's journey). It also presents film screenings, festivals, fairs and musical evenings at Dar al-Asad. The General Book Organization publishes children's materials and the Adham Ismail Centre for Visual Arts runs drawing courses.

123. Every year since 2002, the Children's Culture Directorate at the Ministry of Culture has announced competitions in literature (poetry, short stories, articles and novels) and art (drawing), in which children take part. A main condition for entering a competition is that the work created must take inspiration from the child's environment and identity. During the past two years, over 200 children have been honoured; their work has been published and they have taken part in Arab and international competitions. The Directorate also ran a training workshop on children's book illustration for young artists who specialize in this area with a view to fostering in children their sense of Arab identity and their openness to Arab cultures.

124. On 18 and 19 November 2008 in the Syrian capital, Damascus, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs organized activities under the language development strategy for Arab children, in association with the Secretariat of the League of Arab States. The strategy includes guidelines on instilling a sense of inclusion and developing the essential components of Arab identity in Arab children. To that end, it addresses the concepts underlying language and childhood, the features of each stage of linguistic development, and the boundaries, requirements, assumptions, core areas and linguistic policies of its own constituent parts. The core areas include linguistic education for Arab children; developing children's linguistic environment and culture; practical guidelines on meeting the challenges involved in child language development; the Arabic language and childhood; language and art; therapy for linguistic communication disorders; and the language of expatriate Arab children.

C. Freedom of expression (art. 13)

125. Article 26 of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic provides that: "Every citizen has the right to participate in political, economic, social and cultural life, as regulated by law." Article 27 provides that: "Citizens exercise their rights and enjoy their freedoms in accordance with the law." The Constitution also guarantees the right of every person freely and openly to express his views in words or writing and through all other media of expression (art. 38). This right is safeguarded in the courts. Although under article 59 of the Data Act No. 359 of 10 June 1947 (which is applicable in the sharia courts pursuant to Legislative Decree No. 88 of 21 November 1949), persons under 18 years of age are not eligible to give evidence, the case law of the courts of cassation has established that a minor victim is eligible to do so in cases of rape or acts of indecency (decision 156 of 3 March 1979).

Right of the child to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, regardless of frontiers

126. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should actively promote the implementation of these rights by, among other things, making children more aware of them and by facilitating their active use in daily practice.

127. Syrian Arab children have access to all kinds of information and ideas, in which regard, families, schools, the media, cultural centres and clubs all play a part. The same is true of both public and private libraries, which children are entitled to visit regularly and which house a tremendous number of books relevant to children. We would also mention: school wall newspapers, which convey children's views and are edited by children; the impact of the World Organization of the Scout Movement; periodic cultural festivals; and the role of grass-roots organizations and NGOs, such as Rainbow for a Better Childhood, which is engaged in setting up free public children's libraries in every Syrian governorate. The first such library, established in the governorate of Latakia, was so successful as to prompt the organization to replicate the experiment on a wider level. It also inspired similar action by other associations and committees, including the committee responsible for organizing the celebrations marking the selection of Damascus as the Arab Capital of Culture. The committee opened a children's library in Damascus to mark the occasion.

128. The role of the Children's Culture Directorate at the Ministry of Culture was operationalized by a ministerial ordinance issued on 1 May 2001. On 24 November 2001, the Directorate saw an increase in its staffing levels to perform the tasks of:

- Disseminating cultural output among all groups of children
- Strengthening cultural identity and a sense of belonging to the nation
- Promoting openness to and imparting information on the cultures of other peoples
- Fostering children's talents and providing opportunities for the development and future expansion of those talents
- Optimizing local capabilities and expertise with a view to providing a sophisticated cultural output for children
- Optimizing the material resources available for the delivery of cultural services to children

129. In 2007, the Directorate of Children's Publications was created as part of the Book Organization attached to the Ministry of Culture. This was in addition to the academies created by the Ministry in 2002, which included the Sulhi al-Wadi Music Academy, the Ballet School, the Children's and Puppet Theatre, and the Adham Ismail Centre for Visual Arts. The objectives in these two areas were furthered with the issuance of the Ministry's Circular No. 7018/400/T of 23 March 2006, designating an officer with responsibility for children's cultural activities in all directorates of culture at the governorate level.

Ordinance on the operation of Internet cafes

130. Having opened up to the outside world and recognized the great importance and growing role of technology today in the communication of information, the Syrian Government still harbours concerns for its citizens with respect to the abuse of information resources. Pornographic websites are therefore blocked by Internet service providers, both public and private. In addition, the Ministry of Local Administration issued Ordinance No. 472 of 22 June 2004, regulating the operation of Internet cafes and using the term "Internet corner" instead of "Internet cafe" to avoid missing its main target. The Ordinance stresses that all such premises must meet health and safety requirements and have measures in place

to prevent children under 18 years of age in particular from accessing pornographic websites. It also prohibits the sale and supply of all harmful drinks, smoking and any promotion of video-display equipment or the like in Internet corners, which must have approval from the Syrian Computing Society and the Ministry of Culture before commencing business.

D. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 14)

131. The Syrian Government respects religious diversity and guarantees to its citizens and anyone living in its territory the freedom to engage in religious practices in keeping with the teachings of religion and the laws specific to each religion. The Syrian Arab Republic earlier entered a reservation to article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, concerning freedom of thought, conscience and religion. We emphasize here that children are not permitted under any legal system in the world to conduct financial or personal business or even to choose a partner in life. These are not matters to be elevated to the status of a conviction. To allow children the freedom to change or choose their religion as they wish would be incompatible with article 18, paragraph 4, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, which provides for the liberty of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. The same principle is articulated in the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights. How can it be, therefore, that this right is established for parents in these two international instruments and then subsequently denied under the Convention on the Rights of the Child? It is our hope that, for all of these reasons, the Committee appreciates why we continue to maintain our reservation to the above-mentioned article, while stressing that the reservation is limited to the right of the child to choose his or her religion. We say this because the Government is concerned not to undermine the freedom of parents with respect to their children's religious education and because it believes that this right may harm family cohesion, the solidity of which is regarded as a merit of Syrian society. To deny children the right to inherit from their parents would be damaging to them and would create conflict between them and family members, because of the legal principle that there can be no transmission by inheritance where the religion is different. Furthermore, it makes no sense to prevent children from disposing of their property because they have not reached the age of majority and yet allow them free rein in the matter of belief.

E. Freedom of assembly and freedom of peaceful assembly (art. 15)

132. Article 39 of the Constitution provides that: "Citizens have the right to meet and demonstrate peacefully in conformity with the principles of the Constitution. The law regulates the exercise of this right." Syrian children are encouraged to join and run their own youth associations, such as the Revolutionary Youth Federation, and to design and run the activities of such associations. Scout movements are one example of these associations, which are encouraged by the State, as they advocate worthy aims and principles that encourage volunteering, a spirit of citizenship and participation in social action.

F. Protection of privacy (art. 16)

133. The State guarantees personal liberty to all citizens and safeguards their dignity and security. All citizens are equal before the law with respect to their rights and obligations. Under article 557 of the Syrian Criminal Code, anyone who enters another person's house or home or annexes thereto without that person's consent, and anyone who remains on

premises against the wishes of a person entitled to evict him, is liable to a penalty of up to 6 months' imprisonment. The penalty is increased to imprisonment for a term of between 3 months and 3 years, if the offence is committed at night or by means of breaking and entering, physical violence or the use of weapons, or if it is committed by a number of persons acting in concert. Under article 566 of the Code, any person employed by the Post and Telecommunications Establishment who abuses his or her position by reading sealed correspondence, or by destroying or misappropriating a letter or disclosing its contents to anyone other than the addressee, is liable to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of between 2 months and 2 years. The same penalty is applicable to any person employed by the Telephone Establishment who discloses the contents of a telephone conversation of which he or she learned by virtue of his position or job. In addition to protection under criminal law, moreover, protection is guaranteed under Syrian civil law with regard to the right to privacy and all personal rights. This is affirmed in article 52 of the Syrian Civil Code promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 84 of 1949, which provides that: "Anyone who is the victim of an unlawful infringement of any of his personal rights is entitled to demand the cessation of such violation, together with compensation for the damage suffered."

G. Access to appropriate information (art. 17)

134. The Committee encouraged the Syrian Arab Republic to undertake the following:

- Collect statistics on all persons under 18 years for all areas covered by the Convention, including data on children living in remote areas, victims of abuse, children with disabilities, adolescent health, juvenile offenders, etc.
- Strengthen the Child Information Unit and provide it with adequate human and financial resources
- Consider ways to improve the reliability of data by, among other things, harmonizing statistical definitions among various government departments
- Continue to seek assistance from UNICEF

135. The efforts of government bodies (in particular the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs) culminated in the publication of a report analysing the current status of both childhood and early childhood. The available systems for collecting data and information on children are inadequate, however, there is no standard comprehensive system of data collection and analysis that would provide a clear picture of children's status and thus enable decision makers to make appropriate choices on the basis of sufficient and timely information. To address this issue the Central Bureau of Statistics created a child data unit, in cooperation with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and UNICEF. The establishment of a division for dealing with statistics on children and women's empowerment was also approved under the Bureau's internal regulations, pursuant to Ordinance No. 203 of 13 July 2008. UNICEF is poised to assist on that score by offering personnel from the Central Bureau of Statistics and the State Planning Commission training in the use of the DevInfo programme.

H. Right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (art. 37 (a))

136. The Committee recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should establish an independent national human rights institution, in accordance with the Paris Principles relating to the status of national institutions (General Assembly resolution 48/134) and the

Committee's general comment No. 2, to monitor and evaluate progress in the implementation of the Convention at the national and local levels. It further recommended that this institution should be adequately resourced, accessible to children, and empowered to receive and investigate complaints of violations of children's rights in a child-sensitive manner and to address them effectively.

137. Studies have shown that punitive methods vary in Syrian families and are linked to the culture and educational level of parents. Families with some degree of education and culture, for instance, usually adopt appropriate punitive methods, such as a scolding or the temporary denial of pocket money or leisure activities. As for families who are less educated and cultured, they resort to methods that include yelling, a reprimand or a beating. Although the legislature used to allow or authorize parents or teachers to smack children as a generally accepted form of discipline, this practice has been prohibited ever since the Syrian Arab Republic ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Children's Rights Bill contains a provision prescribing disciplinary sanctions for teachers who are violent towards their pupils. The Ministry of Education has issued a number of circulars prohibiting the use of physical and verbal violence in schools (annex 43), which is monitored using the report cards system (annex 44). Generally speaking, the educational system in place can be said to ensure that children are not subjected to any form of moral, physical or psychological violence, as it:

- Emphasizes the prohibition of the use of violence and provides for disciplinary sanctioning for offenders
- Offers teachers training in instruction methods that help boost children's morale and provide them with a well-balanced education
- Has introduced psychological and social counselling in schools in order to offer students psychological support
- Provides for parent councils and steers families away from the use of any form of violence
- Placing stress, in the school curricula, on humane treatment, respect for children and help in ensuring that they obtain all their rights

138. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs has established national committees for the protection of children and women against all forms of violence and exploitation. In addition to representatives of government bodies, NGOs are included with the aim of involving civil society in the efforts to provide such protection. In cooperation with the Syrian Physicians' Union and the Syrian Forensic Physicians Guild, the Commission has formulated a plan to run training courses for forensic physicians and first-aid and emergency medicine physicians on identifying cases of violence against children, in particular sexual violence, and dealing with child victims.

139. As part of activity No. 2 under the Syrian National Child Protection Plan (establishment of a national database for recording cases of child ill-treatment (see para. 38 above)), the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the Central Bureau of Statistics, established a database on all forms of violence against children. This database is intended to serve as a mechanism for obtaining full information about and following up on all cases of violence against children, including sexual violence. The data will be disaggregated by region in order to focus national policies and programmes on prevention and treatment, depending on the nature of the episode, where it occurred and the surrounding circumstances. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in coordination with the various entities involved in the database (Ministry of Justice – Ministry of the Interior – Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour – Ministry of Health – Central Bureau of Statistics), is designing a prototype form for use in reporting cases of violence against

children. The form will eventually be circulated to hospitals, police stations, care centres, schools, and other facilities and sites where such cases are likely to be recorded, in the context of efforts to establish a national observatory on child abuse.

140. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education, publicized research conducted among 4,000 children between 15 and 18 years of age, who were questioned about the different forms of violence to which children are subjected, such as physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, negligence and neglect.

141. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs launched campaigns to raise awareness of the adverse consequences of violence directed against children, including:

- A two-day campaign entitled “No to violence – happy childhood”, which was held in the summer of 2006 at the Abbasiyyin Stadium and organized in conjunction with UNICEF and Rainbow for a Better Childhood as a celebration to usher in the child protection plan; hundreds of thousands of children attended the festivities and participated actively in a variety of cultural, recreational and educational activities
- A campaign entitled “A way to end violence against children in schools”
- A campaign in which thousands of cartoon posters against all forms of violence were circulated to schools

142. On 21 October 2008, the first batch of students graduated with a diploma in child protection. In order to qualify them for work in the Child Protection Unit, they were given a gap year to further build their capacities by taking specialist training courses, including a training course organized in Jordan in November 2008, in conjunction with UNICEF, on the principles of child protection management.

143. Projects on which work is currently in progress include a project to establish the Child Protection Unit of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and a cooperation project between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs to set up a family advice line with a free phone number that can be used to report any case of ill-treatment of a child or obtain advice on any legal, psychological or social matters relating to a child’s ill-treatment. Once the implementation and assessment of this ground-breaking project are complete, the Government (represented by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs) intends gradually to extend the experiment to all governorates. Work is also under way to establish two residential centres in Damascus and Aleppo to take in and look after child victims of violence and temper the physical and psychological effects of the violence suffered.

144. A four-day training course, begun on 29 September 2004, was organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, in cooperation with UNICEF, on protecting children against torture and harm and communicating complaints from child victims of violence. The course was attended by representatives of groups that come into contact with children (forensic physicians, police officers, social workers and children’s NGOs) in each of the governorates of the Syrian Arab Republic, the aim being to train them to establish an agreed definition of violence against children in all of its forms and enable them to identify and deal with cases of child assault and to deploy the most suitable mechanisms for communicating complaints from child victims of violence.

145. In the framework of cooperation with the Hamburg Institute of Forensic Medicine, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs participates in all the symposiums organized jointly by Damascus University and the Hamburg Institute. In that context, the Commission participated in a symposium on the theme of “Approaching child victims of domestic violence”, held at the Faculty of Medicine in Damascus during the period 15–17 July 2008. It also took part in the Fourth Symposium on Combating Family Violence, held by the

Forensic Medicine Section of Damascus University during the period 9–13 November 2008.

146. The Ministry of Culture stages activities and theatre performances on the protection of children against all types and forms of violence. The Directorate of Children's Culture at the Ministry of Culture also organizes various activities of its own. For instance, it mounted a competition for child authors on the subject of protecting children against violence and printed the five winning works; with the cooperation of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, it dedicated two pages to the subject in the magazine *Usama*, over a two-year period starting on 1 September 2006; it visited juvenile facilities and implemented a full-day awareness and leisure programme (over six facilities were visited during the past two years); and it participated in a child protection workshop, supervised by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and UNICEF in 2007, at which an expert on the subject from France was on hand. Through the Directorate of Adult Education, the Ministry of Culture is developing literacy programmes for children in juvenile facilities.

147. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is exploring the possibility of running a workshop for judges, legal practitioners and clerics, as well as representatives of the People's Assembly, the Syrian Association of Internet Service Providers and civil society organizations working in the field of child protection. The aim of the workshop would be to draft a bill to provide protection against trafficking and the sale of children, child pornography and related Internet crimes, thereby harmonizing the law with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

148. In recent years, a public dialogue has been opened up through workshops and consultations on such issues as child abuse and neglect, violence against children and child labour. NGOs have become much more involved in raising awareness of these subjects and in running training courses, workshops and various other activities. Rainbow for a Better Childhood was one of the first NGOs to address the subject of violence against children when it raised the issue at a conference on childhood, held in Aleppo. Thereafter, it played a particularly active role in convening a conference on violence against children, in cooperation with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and in coordination with the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). Additional programmes are run by the General Women's Union and the Family Protection Association. In 2008, moreover, the Syrian Association for Psychological Science organized an international conference on violence against children, in which scores of researchers and psychologists from across the world participated.

VII. Family environment and alternative care

A. Parental guidance (art. 5)

149. This subject was addressed in detail in paragraphs 99–104 of the initial report.

B. Parental responsibilities (art. 18, paras. 1 and 2)

150. This subject was addressed in detail in paragraphs 105–110 of the initial report.

151. The Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and their respective departments and schools collaborate in organizing awareness-raising activities, lectures and seminars for parents to ensure that they assume their child-rearing responsibilities in a manner that provides their children with the best possible care. The activities conducted during these events have a major impact on families, by providing them with indirect guidance from the

child's perspective. The children become involved in home life with an unprecedented degree of enthusiasm, as they are allowed unlimited freedom of expression and more time, space and freedom of choice, which in turn promotes their physical and mental development.

C. Separation from parents (art. 9)

152. This subject was addressed in detail in the initial report (paras. 111–116) and in paragraphs 73–78 of the second periodic report, which dealt with the provisions governing visiting rights where the parents are separated (the principles of family access). The Children's Rights Bill modifies the provisions governing these matters in line with the provisions of the Convention.

153. As part of the social services project on behalf of women, the Executive Office of the General Women's Union held (in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour) the first vocational training course in childminding in December 2008. Some 40 women and teenage girls took part in the training programme, which was designed by professional teachers and covered all stages of a child's development, approaches to child-rearing, and the skills required to communicate and converse with children in general, sick children and children with special needs. The course focused on the space to be accorded to children and suitable topics of conversation. The trainers provided scientific data on health and training in healthy nutrition, the skills required to prevent household accidents (kitchen, balcony, electricity and gas accidents, etc.), and how to behave in such circumstances and to contact a doctor and the family without arousing undue fear, the overall aim being to create a friendly and safe environment for children in the household and to protect them from all kinds of risks.

D. Family reunification (art. 10)

154. This subject was addressed in detail in the initial report (paras. 117–119).

E. Illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad (art. 11)

155. Trafficking in persons is absolutely prohibited by the Syrian Constitution and Syrian legislation. The law requires the State to counter and suppress human trafficking, and the relevant provisions, which recognize freedom as an inalienable right, prohibit unlawful detention, physical torture, financial duress and other forms of degrading treatment, and prescribe penalties for offenders. Trafficking in persons constitutes a flagrant violation of the inalienable right to freedom, as it exposes the victims of trafficking to physical and mental torture and other forms of degrading treatment.

156. Human trafficking is sometimes carried out for the purposes of forced labour. This is also prohibited by the Syrian Constitution, which grants working persons an absolute right to a just wage consistent with the nature and value of their work and requires the State to guarantee that right. Paragraphs 2 and 3 of article 36 of the Constitution also require the State to set fixed working hours and guarantee other labour rights. These paragraphs read as follows: "Every citizen has the right to earn a wage that corresponds to the nature and value of the work done. The State shall guarantee this right. The State shall fix working hours, guarantee social security and regulate workers' rights to rest periods, holidays, allowances and bonuses."

157. The Prime Minister, acting on the relevant constitutional provisions, set up a committee to draft a bill on combating crimes of trafficking in persons. The committee

carried out its mandate and submitted the draft to the competent authorities to complete the procedures for its enactment. The purpose of the bill is to combat such crimes, to offer the victims protection and care and to develop international cooperation, to open the way for the development of a social and educational culture that will help to prevent human trafficking, and improve approaches to dealing with the consequences of the phenomenon. The bill prescribes penalties for human traffickers and includes provisions on aggravating and mitigating circumstances and exemption from punishment. There are provisions concerning care for victims and protection for witnesses. The competent authorities are required to take all necessary measures to protect victims of trafficking and to respond to requests for assistance in ensuring their physical, mental and social rehabilitation. The bill also includes provisions regulating international cooperation in combating human trafficking and provides for the establishment of a special department in the Ministry of the Interior to be known as the “Department for Combating Trafficking in Persons”.

158. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has signed a memorandum of understanding with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on national capacity-building for the running of two shelters for victims of human trafficking in the Syrian Arab Republic located in Damascus and Aleppo. The aim of the memorandum of understanding is to enhance the technical expertise of the government officials and representatives of civil society organizations who run the two shelters. The Damascus shelter was opened on 31 December 2008.

159. Grass-roots organizations are also involved in combating human trafficking. For instance, the General Women’s Union has organized seminars and workshops, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and IOM, to raise awareness of trafficking in persons.

F. Recovery of maintenance for the child (art. 27, para. 4)

160. This subject was addressed in detail in the initial report (paras. 120 and 121) and in the second periodic report (paras. 41 and 81).

161. Mothers are generally entrusted with the care of their children and fathers are required by law to pay maintenance when the mother has custody of the child. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is drafting a bill on the establishment of a maintenance and social integration fund. The purpose of the fund, within the limits of its capacity, is to receive or levy and collect all amounts of maintenance due from obligors to beneficiaries, as determined in decisions or judgements issued under sharia or ordinary law. There will be an entitlement for the fund to receive and accept financial contributions, bequests, donations and assistance in the form of social solidarity allocations from the State budget, and to take appropriate action to identify legitimate funding sources that can be used for regular payments of maintenance due pursuant to decisions or judgements to registered beneficiaries, regardless of whether or not maintenance payments have previously been disbursed. Lastly, efforts will be made to develop the fund’s resources with a view to providing financial assistance, in addition to maintenance, at a rate designed to cover the cost of living of beneficiaries.

162. Civil society organizations are involved in providing financial support for children from poor families, and also offer various kinds of health, educational and recreational services. For instance, financial support has been provided by the women members of the Social Committee of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to 1,500 of the neediest schoolchildren. The same organization runs the *Yadan bi yad* (Hand in Hand) project, which provides for children from poor families by linking them with sponsors, who cover the costs of a decent life and appropriate schooling.

G. Children deprived of their family environment (art. 20)

163. This subject was addressed in detail in paragraphs 122 and 123 of the initial report and in paragraph 82 of the second periodic report.

164. A child born out of wedlock is not affiliated to the father but to the mother. In such cases the mother usually abandons her child. The State provided for the care of such abandoned children under Legislative Decree No. 107 of 1970, which defines a foundling as “[a] newborn who is found and is of unknown parentage”. The following are deemed to be foundlings pursuant to article 18 of the Legislative Decree: (a) Children of unknown affiliation who have no legal guardian responsible for their support; (b) Children who become lost and are unable to seek assistance in retracing their family, because they are very young or suffer from a mental disability, or because they are deaf or mute and their family takes no steps to find them.

165. Pursuant to Syrian law, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour is responsible for ensuring the care, guardianship and education of foundlings until they become self-reliant and are able to earn a living. The Ministry retains responsibility for foundlings until they reach 18 years of age. The scope of its guardianship includes general education, vocational education, health and social care and other aspects of the foundling’s welfare. Article 10 of the Legislative Decree allows the authorities to place a foundling with a family or a female applicant, provided that the carer is capable of attending to the child’s needs and fulfilling his or her rights and provided that the placement is in the foundling’s best interests. The care arrangement must meet certain conditions to ensure that the social, economic, educational, health and other forms of care afforded to the child do not impede the child’s development. The child is placed with a carer pursuant to a decision of the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour and based on a temporary fostering contract, the terms of which are regulated under the Minister’s Decision No. 819 of 19 July 1981. Article 2 (a) of the Decision was amended on 7 September 2000, imposing the requirement that foster parents should not be below 30 or over 60 years of age. The Ministry may waive this condition in a child’s best interests.

166. Cooperation and partnership between the Government and civil society organizations capable of running childcare centres and institutions was based on the condition that such partnerships should not breach Government laws or affect the general framework in which such institutions operate. The organization Rainbow for a Better Childhood thus assumed responsibility for taking care of foundling children. Working in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, it built a 20,000 m³ housing complex, in which foundling children live in an intimate family environment modelled on that of a natural family. The organization also provides the children with comprehensive medical, educational and cultural services, taking into account their aptitudes, interests and abilities. It thus lays a sound basis for their integration into society in a manner that preserves their dignity, safeguards their rights and gives priority to their best interests.

167. When foundlings cannot be placed with suitable civil society institutions, they are placed with one of the two centres for foundlings, namely, the Childcare Institution in Damascus and the Child Foster Home in Aleppo. The two centres provide children with shelter, food, education and vocational skills. In 2007, some 130 children benefited from these services. The Childcare Institution in Damascus provides foster care for foundlings, in cooperation with the Rainbow for a Better Childhood organization.

168. There are 35 orphanages run by charitable organizations across the different Syrian governorates. They provide accommodation for 2,430 male and female orphans. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour ensures administrative, technical and financial oversight of the orphanages and seeks to enhance the qualifications of their staff. It provides them with the annual financial support which they require to carry out their work.

This support supplements the funds obtained by the orphanages in the form of contributions and donations from various sources, from the activities that they organize and from their investments. The Ministry of Religious Endowments also runs two orphanages which accommodate a total of 320 male and female orphans. Palestinian orphans living in the Syrian Arab Republic are accommodated in three orphanages run by the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (the body that attends to the basic living conditions of Palestinian refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic). The Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni Orphanage accommodates 179 girls, the Saeed al-Aas Orphanage accommodates 65 boys and the Dar al-Awda Orphanage accommodates 128 boys and girls.

169. The Society of Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Damascus provides assistance to women victims of domestic violence or war victims. It runs a shelter for mothers and children who live in fear of their lives and a kindergarten in which children are provided with all kinds of nutritional, health, educational and recreational care.

170. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent organization runs the Orphan Entertainment Programme (annex 41) to assist in integrating orphan children into society and to promote a volunteer culture among them. Some 2,500 children in the 6–17 age group benefit from the Programme each year. The organization also participates in the celebration of Orphan Day — an event organized by the Directorate of Children’s Culture at the Ministry of Culture during the first week of the fourth month — to draw attention to orphans as a group, since the lack of consideration shown to them by society has an adverse psychological impact on some orphans, crushing their inventiveness and initiative. Other activities on behalf of orphans are included in all the events organized in the governorates and consist in drawing and painting workshops, dramatic performances, musical events, environmental and archaeological excursions and the launching of paper aeroplanes.

H. Adoption and foster care (art. 21)

171. The Syrian Arab Republic withdrew its reservations to articles 20 and 21 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by Decree No. 12 of February 2007. The only remaining reservation concerns article 14 of the Convention, on the subject of adoption. The reasons for this reservation are related to the religious teachings of Islam. The religion provides for the system of *kafalah* (guardianship) and placement in foster families, on condition that the filiation of the children concerned is not altered to prevent them from enjoying the right to know who their natural parents are (if their identity subsequently comes to light) and to rejoin them. It should be noted in this connection that adoption is permitted in Christian communities under their separate personal status codes.

I. Periodic review of placement (art. 25)

172. Children who are placed with foster families are monitored by committees, in accordance with article 13 of Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour Decision No. 819 of 1981, which stipulates that: “The home and institution responsible for the care of foundlings shall monitor the living conditions of children placed in foster care by undertaking visits on a regular basis (once every three months) and whenever the need arises.” Since early 2008 even greater importance has been attached to the work of these committees in all governorates. The work involves monitoring children living in foster families to see how they are getting along with the family and check up on their educational, psychological and social conditions.

173. Provision has also been made for continuous judicial oversight and regular inspections of centres for young offenders to ensure that the conditions are decent and that

the treatment afforded to the young people meets the requirements of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Syrian legislation, which emphasize the need to provide educational programmes, adequate food and recreational and sports facilities necessary for young persons' development and education and to prevent young persons from returning to violence when they leave the centres.

J. Abuse and neglect (art. 19), including physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration (art. 39)

174. Articles 478, 479 and 480 of the Criminal Code characterize as offences certain acts perpetrated against children, such as abduction, concealment, substitution of one child for another, affiliating a child to a woman who is not his or her mother, abandoning a child, leaving a child without care and food, or leaving a child on the public highway.

175. The Ministry of Education continuously advises teaching staff to refrain from using physical or psychological violence against students and to use pedagogical techniques to resolve all difficulties that they encounter with their students (annex 45). It also seeks to enhance the role of psychological and social counsellors in schools. With a view to ensuring compliance with article 11 of the internal regulations, concerning non-violent forms of punishment, all departments were instructed to prohibit all forms of violence in schools. Education departments monitor compliance with the article.

VIII. Basic health and welfare (art. 6; art. 18, para. 3; arts. 23, 24 and 26 and art. 27, paras. 1–3)

A. Disabled children (art. 23)

176. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that a survey should be conducted to assess the causes and extent of disability among children; that existing policies and practices in relation to children with disabilities should be reviewed; and that greater efforts should be undertaken to make available the necessary professional and financial resources, to promote and expand community-based rehabilitation programmes, including parent support groups, and to include children with all forms of disability in mainstream education. We wish to emphasize the importance that the Syrian Government and civil society attach to people with disabilities as active members of society. The main steps taken on their behalf are set out below.

177. The Syrian Arab Republic accords considerable attention to people with special needs, endeavouring to integrate them into society, to enhance their capacities and to protect them. The Persons with Special Needs Act No. 34 was promulgated in July 2004 to elucidate the role of different sectors and ministries in addressing disability issues and ways of ensuring cooperation between them. Moreover, Legislative Decree No. 12, promulgated in January 2009 (annex 46), provided for ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

178. The National Plan to Combat Disability, which was adopted by the Government in 2008, represents an important step in the process of improving conditions for persons with disabilities, meeting their demands and needs, and bringing about the requisite change vis-à-vis disability and related issues. The National Plan was drawn up to guarantee persons with disabilities access to care and rehabilitation delivered by civil society organizations, led by the Syrian Organization for the Disabled (AAMAL). It was discussed on 3 December 2007 at workshops held during the First Conference on Ways of Assisting

People with Special Needs in Syria. The Plan focuses on promoting rehabilitation based on social participation, supporting and enhancing health-care and rehabilitative services for people with disabilities and their families, and supporting the development, production and provision of assistive technology.

179. A committee was set up to study the national classification of disability and to look into the possibility of adopting the international classification system. Another committee was set up to consider introducing an amendment to Decision 904 to include medical and architectural intervention and a number of disabilities that were not mentioned in the previous version. Moreover, the Minister of Health issued a decision on organizational directives to identify persons with mobility needs covered by Decree No. 36 of 2003 (annex 47), which permits persons with disabilities to use cars.

180. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has taken steps, on the basis of Act No. 34 and the National Plan to Combat Disability, to provide free preventive and therapeutic services to persons with disabilities and to enhance the capacity of units specializing in physical and rehabilitative medicine to provide therapeutic and rehabilitative services. It also supports early childhood education for children with disabilities, together with basic education either in regular schools or in institutions, based on criteria established in coordination with the Ministry of Education. Last but not least, it provides sports facilities for persons with disabilities and encourages them to engage in physical exercise in schools and institutions. Internal regulations have been established for institutions providing social services for people with disabilities. Educational establishments for persons with auditory disabilities were established in Raqqah and Hasakah, specialized staffs were appointed and the institutions began to operate during the 2007/08 school year. An educational establishment for persons with mental disabilities was established in Tall.

181. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour provides the following facilities for persons with disabilities and special needs:

- Persons with physical disabilities are given priority access to loans granted by the Public Commission for Employment and Enterprise Development and they are exempted from paying fees and taxes to establish the enterprises for which such loans are granted.
- The Ministry is authorized to conclude contracts with associations to implement joint projects for the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.
- A private-sector employer who employs more persons with disabilities than the minimum required under the legislation and regulations in force benefits from an income tax reduction equivalent to the minimum wage payable to each additional disabled person, provided that the employer obtains certification from the Ministry.
- Persons with physical disabilities are provided with whatever public communication equipment, devices and installations they need and are given priority access to various means of communication.
- Land owned by the State and administrative units can be provided free of charge for the establishment of institutions run by the Ministry and associations.
- Imports of equipment to be used exclusively for persons with disabilities are exempted of all customs duties.
- Allowances may be paid to any poor family that looks after a disabled person suffering from cerebral palsy. The Minister will determine the amount of the allowance to be paid (depending on the severity of the condition affecting the person concerned) after obtaining approval from the Ministry of Finance.

182. The Syrian Arab Republic is the only Arab country (and one of three countries in the world) to have made contributions to the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. It seeks to raise awareness of disability in the Arab world through messages communicated in Syrian drama programmes. By faithfully representing Arab culture and by focusing on deep-rooted elements that influence awareness in the Arab world, these extremely popular programmes have enjoyed wide distribution and have succeeded in changing attitudes and behaviour towards persons with special needs and their requirements.

183. The provision of care for persons with disabilities is perhaps the area in which grass-roots and civil society organizations are most actively involved. Educational support for the blind is provided by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent organization under a project to supply them with educational materials and miscellaneous skills. These persons are offered psychological support, and their supervisors and family are trained in how to treat them, to assess their aptitudes and to assist them in planning their future. The Executive Office of the General Women's Union decided to admit children with mild and moderate disabilities, free of charge, to its kindergartens, in cooperation and coordination with the Drop of Milk Society, which submits lists of children for admission. The General Women's Union has organized many workshops, in cooperation with the Karim Rida Said Foundation, to train kindergarten supervisors in how to deal with children with special needs and provide them with services that are geared to their individual requirements.

The Syrian Organization for the Disabled (AAMAL)

184. AAMAL is a non-governmental and non-profit-making civil society organization that was established on 21 August 2002. It is one of the foremost bodies specializing in activities aimed at improving the living conditions of persons with disabilities and ensuring their full integration into Syrian society. The Organization focuses on the following activities:

- Establishing and running special rehabilitation centres for people with disabilities
- Training rehabilitation teams to assist people with disabilities, focusing on practical applications
- Urging the authorities to enact and implement legislation that guarantees the rights of people with disabilities
- Launching public awareness-raising campaigns on disability and encouraging approaches that enable the community to assist in integrating people with disabilities
- Quantifying and identifying the most severe cases of disability in the Syrian Arab Republic with a view to establishing a national database to improve the supply of services
- Helping to procure artificial limbs and other medical appliances for people with disabilities
- Developing master's degree programmes to train specialists in the treatment of speech defects and linguistic disorders and special education in cases of autism, auditory and visual disabilities. More than 40 specialists have graduated from the 5 centres that the Organization established to provide services of the highest standard at the lowest possible prices
- Establishing a scientific research centre on disability

185. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour celebrated Disabled Persons Day on 3 December 2006 at Al-Amal School for the Physically Disabled. The event was also celebrated in all social affairs and labour departments in the governorates. In December 2008, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour marked Disabled Persons Day by

convening the first special Syrian forum for people with special needs, which adopted as its motto “We are all responsible”.

186. In the field of special education and care for people with special needs, the Ministry of Education has continued to issue directives, based on the Syrian Constitution and legislation on compulsory education, confirming that children with mild and moderate motor and mental disabilities and visual and auditory impairments can enrol in school. Its aim is to democratize education and guarantee equality of opportunity and universality of general, vocational and cultural education so that educational opportunities are effectively available to every child (annex 48). The integration project is implemented in the Syrian Arab Republic on the basis of national, humanitarian and cultural criteria and scientific approaches. A Public Integration Commission composed of representatives of all ministries, grass-roots organizations and relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies was set up in 1999. The Bina Association for the Blind translated all schoolbooks into Braille, thus enabling many blind children to continue their education.

187. The first national workshop on education for all was held in Damascus in 2002, with the participation of UNICEF and UNESCO and international partners (the Karim Rida Said Foundation, Save the Children – United Kingdom and Sweden). An experimental project for the integration of people with special needs was launched and is currently being implemented in four governorates (Damascus, Homs, Hamah and Aleppo). Integrated education schools have been established to guarantee the right to education and provide appropriate services for all children, including children with disabilities, taking into account individual differences. The integration programme is assessed each year so that any favourable results can be shared with all Syrian schools.

188. The Integration Unit at the Ministry of Education has been involved in awareness-raising aimed at protecting children from abuse. It also produced a code of conduct and circulated it to all compulsory education establishments. Today’s vision and message of integration is based essentially on international standards, which require education to be provided in integrated education schools in order to achieve equality of opportunity for all, irrespective of differences. Concurrently with these efforts, the Ministry of Education is taking a variety of measures on behalf of children with special needs who are automatically integrated into the schools of all governorates, including:

- Appointment of an integration coordinator in each governorate to monitor children with special needs at school in cooperation with the teaching staff
- Conduct a statistical study of children with special needs throughout the Syrian Arab Republic
- Publication of ministerial circulars, leaflets and directives to provide teachers with assistance in this regard (annex 49)
- Production of a teachers’ handbook on special education
- Establishment of criteria for admitting pupils with special needs to regular schools

189. One of the outcomes of the integration experiment has been that, for the first time, people with special needs have been allowed to participate in competitive teacher selection processes and a number of them have been appointed to Ministry of Education teaching and administrative posts. Their experiences have also been cited as examples of success stories.

190. The Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, conducts research on integration activities run by civil society organizations and kindergartens to assist children with auditory and visual impairments and mild motor and mental disabilities. The activities are designed to integrate children with mental or physical disabilities into society at various levels and to involve them in all children’s activities in

the Syrian Arab Republic. Thus, programmes for children with special needs are included in all festive events. The children are either invited to attend as guests or visits to the children are arranged. In 2008, the Ministry offered children with disabilities the opportunity to take part in an art competition to mark World Animal Day, and one of the children did very well in the contest. The Ministry plans to instal passages or corridors in all theatres and cultural centres, such as the Dar Al-Assad hall and most modern cultural centres, to meet the needs of people with disabilities and allow them to move around freely in their wheelchairs.

191. The Baath Vanguard Group (see para. 110 above) cooperates with the Japan International Cooperation Agency in integrating people with special needs into society. For instance, the Vanguard Group has hosted groups of children with disabilities in its camps.

B. Health and health-care services (art. 24)

192. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should continue its efforts to implement the Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses strategy throughout the country, that it should undertake greater efforts to promote better home-care practices in early childhood, and that it should continue to support and expand the Community School Initiative and the Healthy Villages Programme. It also recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should ensure that adolescents have access to and are provided with health education, that it should strengthen efforts in the area of adolescent health education within the school system, and that it should continue and strengthen HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns.

193. The Government is endeavouring, in cooperation with grass-roots and civil society organizations, to guarantee access to health services for the smallest population groups (inhabitants of desert regions and of areas with special needs) by increasing the number of mobile clinics, expanding the network of health-care centres and hospitals, planning for the wider application of the health insurance regime, and promoting health awareness and health education among all age groups, particularly through mother and child health-care programmes. It is also encouraging the community and other sectors to become involved in such efforts.

194. The action taken on behalf of children in the Syrian Arab Republic by the community as a whole and by different sectors, particularly the health sector and the Ministry of Health, has led to an improvement in basic health indicators. Average life expectancy has increased, average infant and maternal mortality rates have fallen sharply (annex 50) and there has been an improvement in vaccination coverage for childhood illnesses. However, expenditure on public health in the Syrian Arab Republic must be increased, closer coordination is required among service providers, and more qualified human resources are needed to enhance the quality of health services.

195. Primary health care is a core component of the strategy of the Ministry of Health. Primary health-care units (medical stations, health-care centres, regional centres, specialized centres and general clinics) provide services free of charge to all children, citizens and residents. The network of health-care centres and medical stations has been widened in response to existing needs, with priority being given, in the light of the health map, to rural and remote areas. The number of such units totalled 1,770 on 30 June 2008, compared to 1,105 in late 1999.

196. Civil society organizations are also involved in delivering health-care services, especially to poor families. For instance, the Family Protection Association (annex 51) has provided health care for children suffering from thalassaemia and performed complex surgical operations for children with problems affecting the bladder and urinary system.

The Drop of Milk Society offers thousands of health-care services free of charge in its dispensary and elsewhere for children registered with the Society and also distributes free milk to the children (annex 34). The Syrian Family Planning Association, which was founded in 1974, offers valuable services to improve health education for adolescents and also provides reproductive health services, consistent with social values, to both sexes (annex 35).

Programme for the prevention of accidents involving children

197. A 2001 study on the causes of child deaths showed that accidents are the primary cause of death among children under 5 years of age. A study of 2000 on the accident rate in the Syrian Arab Republic showed that 10.14 per cent of accidents involved children in the under-5 age group. Household accidents account for 52 per cent of the total. In the light of these figures, the Ministry of Health established a special programme in 2001 for the prevention of accidents involving children, which promotes family and maternal awareness of accident risks and encourages them to take precautions to prevent child accidents in and around the home, involving fire, falls, etc. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs also devoted a separate chapter of its family training manual on early childhood care and development to the subject of household accidents. Another chapter deals with road safety and how to train children to take precautions and to be on their guard against accidents.

Adolescent health programme

198. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should ensure adolescents access to and education on their health and other adolescent health issues, in addition to confidential counselling services; strengthen efforts in the area of adolescent health education within the school system; continue and strengthen HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns; and continue to cooperate with and seek assistance from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

199. Adolescents make up 25 per cent of the population of the Syrian Arab Republic, and the latter does everything possible to care for them. The Ministry of Health, in cooperation with international health organizations, instituted a health programme in 2002 to improve the health status of young persons aged between 10 and 19 years by providing them with education on health problems in general and reproductive and psychological health in particular. A film entitled *Al-Murahaqa* (The Adolescent Girl), which was produced by Manal al-Saliha of Syrian Arab Television, won the UNICEF Arab Media Award on Child Rights, and a special study on the needs of adolescents and their awareness of reproductive, sexual and psychological health issues is being prepared with a view to establishing a database on these topics. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) are also working on a study of adolescents and young persons.

200. The Ministry of Health has provided many health workers in the governorates with training and education on techniques for dealing with adolescents. An adolescent health centre, comprising a reference room with a library of books for users of all ages and a computer training room, was set up in the town of Dayr al-Zawr.

201. The Ministry of Health focuses its attention on national capacity-building in the delivery of health education to prevent AIDS. In cooperation with UNFPA, and in line with the national strategy, the Ministry encourages participation by the private sector, civil society organizations and associations in the delivery of a national response to AIDS which includes free, voluntary testing, confidential high-quality counselling services for young people and skills development for health workers to help prevent mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy. A committee bringing together representatives of the

agencies concerned was set up recently to review the legislation on AIDS and support the National Coordinating Committee in preparing the preliminary text of a bill on AIDS, to be funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and UNFPA.

Health education and information programme

202. The Ministry of Health attaches considerable importance to health education and information activities run jointly with relevant partners, particularly the Ministry of Information and youth organizations. Efforts have focused on raising public awareness using the national and local media and educational materials such as publications, posters and printed matter, together with seminars and meetings.

203. The topics of health, prevention, safety precautions and AIDS awareness for adolescents have been included in the standards set for teaching skills and concepts in all academic curricula. The Ministry of Education has taken the following measures to improve health care for children and teenagers:

- Health information on drugs, psychotropic substances, AIDS and AIDS prevention has been included in the national standards and all curricula.
- Seminars and training courses for school health personnel and educational counsellors have been held on AIDS and sexual health awareness, the dangers which drugs pose for students, and developing the ability to detect cases of drug dependency among students at an early stage.
- Coordination is effected with various organizations involved in childhood issues so as to raise awareness of AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and the dangers associated with drugs and psychotropic substances. Educational literature and posters are distributed to schools and school infirmaries in order to draw attention to AIDS (see annex 52), the dangers of drugs and psychotropic substances, and prevention methods.

204. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent organization runs an awareness project on AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, under the auspices of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The project entails trainer training, and those involved carry out extensive school visits. Plans have been drawn up to establish a counselling centre in Damascus, to place the project activities on a regular footing and expand their scope so as to include university students.

205. The Ministry of Culture offers lectures, seminars and workshops to highlight the dangers of drug dependency. It also produces publications, posters and booklets for this purpose. In this way, the Ministry helps support the work of the Ministry of the Interior, which is directly involved in this issue, and that of other ministries such as the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Health.

School health programmes

206. The School Health Directorate has overseen the introduction of school cards in primary education, which are used to register information on the physical and psychological health, social background and intellectual faculties of newly registered children and monitor their development during the course of their studies. Follow-up is assured through programmes on the early detection of disabilities, the delivery of primary health care for students, immunization and diagnosis, and access to treatments. The following programmes are undertaken:

- School immunization programme

- Programme on regular medical examinations, in particular oral and dental examinations
- School health education and health awareness programme
- Programme on monitoring the school environment and combating communicable diseases
- Health-care programme under the camps and examinations programme
- Programme on diagnosing disability and managing persons with special needs
- School health programme for the health promoting school (community school)

Desert health services

207. In 2000, the Ministry of Health initiated a programme, in which roving teams conduct regular visits to desert areas to offer preventive and treatment services to citizens and their children. There are 19 such teams, which are made up of 77 health workers, including 19 doctors, 41 nurses and 20 others. A plan has been drawn up to provide a sufficient number of roving clinics to cover desert areas and deliver primary health-care services.

Psychosupport and protection programme for children

208. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent organization runs this programme in cooperation with UNICEF. A child-friendly space was created at the Refugee Registration Centre in Duma. Between January and July 2007, over 6,000 children attended the centre, with more than 350 of them needing specialized care. Three additional child-friendly spaces were established, and the project shifted to the third level of intervention with the opening of three psychosocial support clinics in three Red Crescent clinics and the integration of their services into those of the clinics in April 2008. Then, in September 2008, the programme was expanded to include mothers and adolescents.

209. Psychosocial support and child protection units provide their services free of charge to children, adolescents and family members. A multidisciplinary team delivers the following services:

- Confidential psychological assessments by specialist case workers and psychiatrists
- Psychosupport therapies: targeted sessions (psychological awareness; psychological support; dealing with long-term trauma; improving adaptability; monitoring children's psychological development)
- Drug therapies, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and WHO: some drugs are provided free of charge, while others are dispensed at clinics with patients making a co-payment amounting to 20 per cent of the cost
- Measures to deal with speech disorders and language difficulties
- Advice for families on other programmes that offer medical care and material assistance in the form of food, basic necessities for the home and school supplies
- Social work, including visits paid to homes, schools, child-friendly centres and family members who cannot attend the clinic, and the identification of cases of child labour or child exploitation
- The distribution of publications designed to raise awareness of psychological health issues and the prevention of illness

C. Social security and childcare services and facilities (art. 18, para. 3, and art. 26)

210. The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Syrian Arab Republic should ensure its commitment to public primary health care is matched by adequate allocations of human and financial resources and that all children, especially in rural areas, have access to health care. In this connection, we should like to point out that there were 1,770 health centres as at 30 June 2008, as compared with 706 in 1990 and 1,188 in 2000. At year-end in 2007, the number of children's wards stood at 1,223, as compared with 1,092 in 2005 and 954 in 2000.

D. Standard of living (art. 27, paras. 1–3)

211. The Government's efforts to improve the populace's standard of living have indubitably been met with numerous difficulties, the key ones being the high rates of population growth, the global financial crisis, which has struck at virtually the entire global economy and whose true dimensions and impact on the economies of developing countries remains unknown, and, last but not least, the drought that has afflicted the region for several years, affecting the agricultural sector, particularly in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic (a predominantly agricultural area). Notwithstanding Government efforts and the assistance lent to the people of these areas, the combination of these factors has adversely affected the population and children living there.

212. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour launched a project on the establishment of a national social assistance fund with the following aims:

- Protecting and providing for persons and families in target groups by offering them regular or emergency cash assistance
- Promoting the development of and investment in human capital by linking cash remittances from the fund to the achievement of health, educational and other developmental goals
- Empowering beneficiaries economically through linkages with employment institutions and programmes, small and microenterprises, financial institutions, etc.

The Ministry oversees anti-vagrancy and social assistance programmes, in cooperation with civil society organizations.

Water supply and sanitation services

213. The Government has encountered many difficulties in financing improvements to the safe water supply and sanitation system, because of the high rates of population growth in the Syrian Arab Republic (compounded by an influx of more than 1.5 million Iraqis, mainly in the Damascus Countryside governorate), increased consumption levels, the contamination of water sources as a result of weak controls, and a lack of technical support for and administrative expertise in the operation and planned management of water treatment plants, and the growing costs of subsidies. Despite all this, the Syrian Government managed to supply water to the population in the period from 1993 to 2006 and to provide a further half a million rural inhabitants with a connection to the public drinking water network as of 2000 (achieving a 90 per cent coverage rate) – the urban coverage rate is 99 per cent. As for sanitation networks, the coverage rate does not seem to have changed since 1993 (as the increase in coverage has not matched the increase in the size of the population). Despite Government plans to establish a large number of treatment plants, the Syrian Arab Republic does not have the technical expertise to operate these

plants, a situation which could adversely affect the quality of the water that they produce and counter the positive impact of these plants on public health.

IX. Education, leisure and cultural activities (arts. 28, 29 and 31)

214. Human development is a challenge that the Syrian Arab Republic hopes to meet, if it is to play an active part in the information age which is expected to prevail in the coming decades. Government investment in education increased by 50 per cent in the first year of the tenth five-year plan and should increase by 100 per cent by the end of the plan. The education system still faces many challenges, however, notably globalization; guaranteeing the quality of education (some schools have to run a double timetable and there are still schools operating in rented premises or mud structures); lifelong education; helping the national economy to generate employment; achieving social equity; eliminating poverty; and ensuring balanced regional development. Accordingly, educational policies for the next two decades (as stated in the tenth five-year plan) will focus on the following areas:

- Promoting the value of learning, adding new content to knowledge, cultivating a new personality in the learner and a new kind of teaching process
- Improving the inputs for the educational and teaching processes and increasing internal efficiencies
- Developing training and assessment methods and examinations for all educational stages in order to strengthen the linkages between pre-university education and university education
- Preparing a workforce that is suited to the labour market, highly skilled and able to compete at the regional and international levels
- Opening up schools to the community and forging partnerships with production and services sectors and the civil society sector for the purposes of policy formulation and educational programme development

A. Education, including vocational training and guidance (art. 28)

215. The Ministry of Education allows all Syrian and non-Syrian children living in the Syrian Arab Republic, without any discrimination, to enrol in basic education. It ensures that the full range of educational inputs, including school premises, furniture, books, administrative, educational and supervision structures, are supplied for all children, even in remote and desert areas and in different kinds of schools (tents, caravans) so that the right to education is enjoyed by all children. Accordingly, the share of the State's general budget allocated to the Ministry of Education was raised from 10.47 per cent in 2000 to 13.15 per cent in 2007, and spending on education as a proportion of the State's general budget was raised from 16 per cent in 2005 to 16.5 per cent in 2007. The number of colleges also rose – from 63 in 2005 to 111 in 2008.

Basic Education Act

216. Under the Basic Education Act No. 32 of 7 April 2002 (see annex 7), primary and middle school education were merged into a single stage, namely, the basic education stage. Basic education is free and compulsory from the first to the ninth grades. It ends with a public examination, in which successful candidates receive a basic education certificate. The Internal Regulation for Basic Education issued in Decree No. 443/21231 of 21 July 2002 explains how the basic education system is to work and the distinctive features of this stage of education. It also serves as a direct reference point for running the basic education

system and dealing with any obstacles that may impede the proper application of the law. The Regulation was amended pursuant to Decree No. 443/3053 of 16 August 2004 in the light of feedback from those working on the ground. Basic education classes are organized in two stages (or cycles). In the first cycle (from grade 1 to grade 4 – i.e. up to the age of 10 years), teachers and assistant teachers offer classes in sports, technical education, music and English. Teachers may also fill in as needed in the second cycle (from grade 5 to grade 9 – i.e. up to the age of 15 years), which is taught by specialist teachers, assistant teachers and classroom teachers (with university degrees).

217. The interim assessment by the State Planning Commission of the tenth five-year plan showed that the mid-term goal of 85 per cent enrolment in basic education had been surpassed: the enrolment rate rose from 82 per cent in 2005 to 92 per cent in 2007. By the mid-way stage, all the governorates had exceeded the quantitative targets set for the end of the tenth five-year plan and had thus succeeded in implementing the strategy to provide universal basic education by the end of 2015.

218. The enrolment rate in general and vocational education over the period 2005–2007 was around 34 per cent, while the enrolment rate in secondary education rose from 25 per cent to 26.2 per cent over the same period. The reason for this was an increase in the number of students leaving vocational education for general education, notwithstanding the strategy in the tenth five-year plan to develop vocational and technical education. The disparities between governorates are widening. For example, the governorates of Suwayda' and Tartus had exceeded their targets for the end of the period, whereas Aleppo and Raqqah have achieved not more than 15 per cent of their target. This is evidence of a large dropout rate between basic and secondary education.

219. Students, particularly girls, who drop out of basic education and general and vocational secondary education for socio-economic reasons pose an essential problem for education in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Ministry of Education, in conjunction with other authorities, has taken measures to curb this phenomenon, including the following:

- A working group was formed to follow up on students who drop out of school with a view to eliminating dropout rates through action taken firstly at the central government level and lastly at the local community level.
- The number of schools was increased in order to include all villages, rural areas, farmlands and inhabited zones and thus provide educational opportunities for all children. At the same time, basic education schools were given supplies (including free textbooks for all students) and measures were taken to implement the Compulsory Education Act No. 35 of 1981 and Act No. 32 of 2002. Monitoring is carried out through visits paid to basic education schools to inspect conditions and address any difficulties that could lead to children dropping out of education.
- Efforts have been made to enhance the psychosocial counselling services offered in schools in order to identify the causes behind children dropping out of school and devise appropriate solutions, in which regard parents' councils are involved so as to forge closer cooperation and ties between schools and families.
- Vocational education was introduced in the school curriculum beginning in grade 5 so as to establish links between theory and practice and curricula and the outside world, and to develop students' vocational skills.
- Trained classroom teachers who are graduates of teacher training colleges have been recruited by schools, and a bonus is paid to teachers who work in isolated and remote areas.

- Strict measures have been put in place to prevent physical and psychological violence against students, and teachers have been instructed to use pedagogical techniques to deal with problems and difficulties.
- Committees have been established to inspect commercial and industrial premises for infringements of the laws on employment of children of compulsory school age. Pursuant to Decree No. 443/552 of 15 January 2004, governors were given delegated authority to bring proceedings under the Compulsory Education Act against parents who fail to send their children to school.

220. The dropout rate for basic education, which was to be reduced to 1 per cent under the plan, in fact fell to 8 per cent in the first six grades of education in 2001. It subsequently rose after middle school education and primary education were merged, because many students did not continue their studies after the sixth grade and thus were now considered to have dropped out of school. The dropout rate then fell – from 3.8 per cent in 2004 to 2.3 per cent in 2007. This exceeds the interim target set in the tenth five-year plan and is a result of awareness-raising among students and their families about the importance of children continuing their basic education until they receive a leaving certificate in the ninth grade.

221. The efforts that the Government has made and is making to educate every child in the Syrian Arab Republic, reduce the school dropout rates and combat illiteracy have been confronted with major challenges, notably high rates of population growth, population mobility and instability in desert areas, and the fact that families, especially in the north-eastern regions, need their children to contribute economically during such times as the harvest season. This has prompted the Ministry of Education to introduce a “flexible school year” in some regions, where studies begin and end at different times from those in other parts of the country (although the total length of the school year remains fixed) so as to fit in with agricultural cycles. Children are given a chance to pursue their studies and in this way the dropout rate is lowered. The Ministry is pursuing solutions to allow all children access to education under a variety of initiatives, in particular Decree No. 39 of 20 July 2008, concerning remuneration for teachers working in isolated areas, and other initiatives and programmes, some of which are described below.

Boarding schools for children from desert areas

222. Three boarding schools were opened up for children from desert areas, in Homs (2002/03), Damascus Countryside (as of the second semester of 2002/03) and Dayr al-Zawr (beginning of the 2003/04 academic year). In addition to school supplies, these schools provide free textbooks, paper, lodging, food and care. After the experiment proved successful in keeping students at school and stopping them from dropping out, similar schools were established in Hamah and Raqqah at the start of the 2004/05 academic year, bringing the total number of boarding schools up to five by 2005/06. There are 5 schools for boys and girls and 498 desert schools operating out of prefabricated structures (see annex 53).

Mobile/caravan schools project

223. Mobile schools have been established for desert children who move with flocks in search of food and pasture. Mobile schools consist of vehicles which have a teacher’s room and a classroom that can accommodate up to 40 students. When the need arises, the vehicle will be towed by a tractor or a car to wherever the desert children are found. The teacher teaches students at different levels in the classroom. Measures are taken to devise a basic education curriculum for the children that reflects their aspirations and environment. In 2007/08, there were 102 mobile caravan schools. The dropout rate for boys and girls at these schools is very low indeed.

School Meals for Education Project

224. The Ministry of Education is determined to implement this project, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, the State Planning Commission and the World Food Programme (WFP). The project covers the most deprived areas in the northern and north-eastern governorates of Aleppo, Dayr al-Zawr, Idlib, Raqqah and Hasakah, and its aim is to provide a nutritious meal to children in need and impoverished families, thereby preventing children from dropping out of school. The focus is on schools and impoverished women, and the project is due to run for three years, beginning in 2009. In the first year, 23,000 students in basic education in 145 schools in the eastern and north-eastern governorates are to be fed. In the second year, an additional 29,000 children will be covered, bringing the total number up to 52,000. In the third year, some 36,000 children will be added, bringing the total number up to 180,000 persons, including both children and families in need. In the first year, two methods will be used to distribute the food. The first will involve the distribution of a household ration for students' families at the end of every month. The second will involve the delivery of a household ration and a school meal. The meal will be provided to students on a daily basis, in addition to the family's monthly ration. Depending on the results, whatever method works best will be adopted. In the first year, the Syrian Government will pay for 60 per cent of the project costs and WFP will pay 40 per cent. In the second year, the Government will bear 66 per cent of the costs and the remainder will be borne by WFP. In the third year, the Government will pay 75 per cent and WFP 25 per cent. In the fourth year, the Government will bear 100 per cent of the costs. The project is expected to improve the effectiveness of basic education, reduce levels of long-term school absenteeism and reduce dropout rates, especially among girls.

Girls' Education Project

225. In the light of field studies that showed particularly high dropout and illiteracy rates among girls in the northern and eastern governorates (Dayr al-Zawr, Raqqah, Hasakah, Idlib and Aleppo), the Ministry, in cooperation and coordination with UNICEF, instituted the Girls' Education Project. The objectives of the project are to eliminate dropout rates, get girls back into school and enrol children aged from 10 to 17 years who have either never attended or have dropped out of school and teach them the basic skills needed to equip them for a better life. These endeavours will focus in particular on children in rural and impoverished areas. At the beginning of 2001/02, special classes were opened up for groups of from 10 to 25 students and were run both during and outside official school hours (informal education). Intensive education curricula were designed for four levels, together with textbooks and teacher's handbooks. The curricula give students the option of taking two years in one (from first grade to eighth grade in four years), based on a study plan designed to take account of their circumstances. After completing four years of study, the students can sit an examination for a basic education certification (see annex 54). Although the project has been a success, some problems remain. These problems include: early marriage and certain customs and traditions that discourage girls from returning to school; poverty; agricultural seasons which interrupt girls' school attendance; students of different levels being placed in the same class; and, last but not least, the lack of incentives for girls and female teachers.

Satellite education channel project

226. Decree No. 169/E of 5 June 2006 provides for the establishment of a satellite education channel. The channel began broadcasting on an experimental basis in the 2008/09 academic year with the aim of:

- Supporting the educational process by producing distinctive educational and cultural programmes for all stages of education

- Presenting informative programmes and effective teaching techniques to help train teachers in the use of modern, state-of-the-art technologies in education
- Focusing attention on the Arabic language and Arab culture, offering Arabic language programmes for those who do not speak Arabic, and broadcasting those programmes to most countries in the world
- Strengthening cooperation with educational organizations, in line with their aims and objectives
- Raising awareness of education; informing the public of new educational developments and projects; establishing active partnerships with all sectors of society; and helping to enrich these projects through constructive proposals and initiatives
- Reducing disparities between schools in different social and educational settings, and helping to ease the burden on families by offering scheduled lessons for all stages of education
- Helping to eradicate illiteracy in all its forms

Illiteracy eradication

227. The State and civil society sectors have made concerted efforts to free the country of illiteracy. Act No. 16 of 2 April 2002 provides for the eradication of illiteracy among all citizens over the age of 8 years who do not know how to read and write Arabic and perform the four basic written mathematical operations and those who are not enrolled in school. Pursuant to the Act, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education assumed the functions of the Higher Council for the Eradication of Illiteracy.

228. The Adult Education and Cultural Development Directorate at the Ministry of Culture bears most of the burden for combating illiteracy. In that regard, it draws up an illiteracy eradication plan, submits proposals to ensure its success and oversees its implementation. It monitors the work of adult education departments in the governorates and literacy promotion activities organized by grass-roots organizations, trade unions and governmental bodies. It furthermore designs, prints and distributes books, publications and periodicals on illiteracy, runs training courses for literacy teachers, cooperates with ministries and local, Arab, foreign and inter-governmental organizations involved in literacy eradication, and participates in efforts to ensure coordination as regards their activities and resources.

229. The goal of the illiteracy eradication project is to halve the rate of adult illiteracy by 2015, especially among women, and achieve equality of opportunity in basic education and continuous education for all adults. To that end the following steps have been taken:

- An illiteracy map was drawn for the governorates, showing that the northern and north-eastern governorates have the highest illiteracy rates. Consequently, efforts have been focused on these governorates.
- Literacy classes have been set up in the governorates by branches of the Adult Education Directorate.
- Literacy curricula have been updated to reflect changes in the contemporary world. New subjects have been included, together with material on demographic, health and environmental subjects.
- Adult illiteracy rates have been lowered and efforts stepped up to eradicate female illiteracy.

230. As described hereunder, a specific curriculum for adult education was developed and is overseen jointly by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education.

(a) The goal in level 1 (foundation stage) is to eradicate pure illiteracy. Some 200 hours, spaced out over a period of three months and entailing three sessions a day, are allocated for this activity;

(b) The goal in level 2 (follow-up stage) is to build up and conserve reading skills and provide some preliminary cultural information. Some 200 hours, spaced out over a period of three months and entailing three sessions a day, are allocated for this activity;

(c) The goal in level 3 (completion stage) is to consolidate reading skills and develop cultural knowledge. Some 312 hours, spaced out over a period of not less than four months and entailing four sessions a day, are allocated for this activity.

231. In the past two years, the Ministry has published an educational magazine on illiteracy as a means of providing guidance and information on particular and general issues for those involved in literacy development. As a result of these intensive endeavours, the illiteracy rate among those aged between 15 and 45 years fell from 19 per cent in 2004 to 14.2 per cent in 2008, exceeding the interim goal set under the tenth five-year plan of 16.8 per cent. By the end of 2008, 3 Syrian governorates, namely, Tartus, Suwayda' and Quneitra, had been freed of illiteracy, as had 555 villages and communities in the eastern and northern regions.

232. The quality of education is a key concern of the Ministry of Education, which seeks to improve internal efficiencies by reducing classroom size and the student/teacher ratio. In basic education, these efforts led to a reduction in the number of students per class from 28 in 2005 to 26 in 2007 and the number per teacher from 28 in 2005 to 22 in 2007. There was only a slight improvement in secondary education, however, where these ratios remained more or less the same between 2005 and 2007. In secondary vocational education, by contrast, the average number of students per class and per teacher fell from 32 and 7 respectively in 2005 to 29 and 6 respectively in 2007. The Ministry has made extensive efforts to improve quality, as explained below.

National curriculum standards project

233. National curriculum standards were drawn up for all stages of education, including the kindergarten stage. This project was introduced to: establish standards for curriculum design and produce a document that would make it easier for designers to prepare textbooks in accordance with these standards; develop a teaching manual and a guide to practical activities and exercises; develop indicators for assessing curricula; and improve the mechanisms for designing textbook content and products. An international competition for textbook writers was announced in July 2007.

Advanced teacher training project

234. A system of open learning was established by the Ministry of Higher Education and advanced training began in 2004/05 for 7,809 teachers (8,079 in 2005/06 and 8,500 in 2006/07). Some 88,128 teachers will have been trained by 2009.

Teacher training project

235. The aim of this online education project, which is run in cooperation with the virtual university, is to allow teachers to gain a teacher training diploma and acquire skills in the use of information technology and its applications for learning and teaching. The programme set a target of training 40,659 teachers by 2010.

Psychosocial counselling

236. Psychological counselling is offered in schools in the second cycle of education and the secondary stage. Graduates in psychology and education have been recruited as psychoeducation counsellors in accordance with Circular No. 543/2153 (3/4) of 10 October 2000. The number of psychosocial counsellors in 2008/09 was around 3,336. Psychosocial counselling serves to improve the effectiveness of education and students' academic performance, as the school counsellor carries out the following tasks:

- Helping students to gain insight into their own capacities and potential
- Encouraging educational approaches and coordinating activities that are suggested by teachers to teach students self-respect and respect for others and enhance their cultural knowledge and sense of national pride
- Helping students to resolve their psychological problems
- Identifying students who drop out of school and devising appropriate solutions
- Getting to know students with special needs, both those who are exceptionally gifted and those with a disability, and designing special programmes for them
- Developing teamwork skills
- Contributing actively to school activities

Child-friendly schools

237. In the framework of a cooperation and coordination plan established by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, the Ministry, UNICEF and the Education Faculty of Damascus University drew up a guide on child-friendly schools, which describes a suitable school environment for children. The Ministry initiated a project in a number of governorates (Idlib, Raqqah, Aleppo and Dayr al-Zawr), elaborated standards for child-friendly schools and organized courses to train teachers and help improve the school environment.

Ten standards for child-friendly schools

- A child-friendly school must have an active management board, which involves children, parents, teachers, school administrators and civil society representatives
- The school must involve children in all school activities in order to boost their sense of responsibility and self-confidence
- The school must offer children with special needs a positive and inclusive environment
- The school must provide children with mental and physical health care
- The school must promote equality among children and eschew all forms of discrimination on any ground
- The school must communicate actively with parents and the local community
- Educational and administrative staff at the school must be allowed to develop their expert knowledge and pursue personal training
- The school premises must offer children a healthy, clean and safe environment that is conducive to meeting educational and learning goals
- The school must apply active learning techniques, ensuring that the learning environment is enjoyable and attractive for children and that links are established with the local community

- Learning resources in the school must be varied and include the use of modern technologies

Development project for vocational and technical education

238. In 2007, the philosophy and material for the curriculum were developed and subject areas were identified for each grade, together with knowledge areas or domains. General standards were written down and grouped by educational cycle and stage, and standards and outputs were written for each subject and grade. Units and lessons for each grade were defined and study objectives for each lesson were detailed in writing. In 2008, a textbook-writing competition was announced. The aims of the project are to:

- Prepare workers equipped with the vocational and technical skills to be able to raise output and productivity
- Improve quality and compliance with quality standards so as to positively affect the national economy
- Produce trained graduates to meet the needs of the labour market
- Involve the employment sector in the development of human resources and in training and curriculum design

Information technology investment project for education and education management

239. This project involves the following:

- (a) Using the information technology network developed by the Ministry, including new technology in education and learning, and meeting international standards with regard to the number of students who use computers;
- (b) Developing essential computer skills for education and other areas of life;
- (c) Adding to the Arabic language content of the education network and updating it constantly;
- (d) Exchanging information and knowledge among teachers and students both locally and around the world;
- (e) Turning textbooks into interactive electronic materials;
- (f) Automating administrative functions at the Ministry (central and local administration); training educational and school administrators; and using educational and administrative standards to select all administrators in central administration, education directorates and school administrative bodies;
- (g) Using the education network to exchange data on:
 - (i) Examination results;
 - (ii) The educational data management programme;
 - (iii) Internal electronic mail;
 - (iv) Electronic archiving in central and local administration;
 - (v) The establishment and training of a dedicated working group (information technology emergencies);
 - (vi) Videoconferencing;
 - (vii) Online education (teacher training diploma);

(viii) Training teachers to use computers for educational purposes (550 teachers were trained in 2006, 1,000 in 2007 and 10,000 in 2008);

(ix) Connecting schools to the Internet (1,368 schools were connected in 2008).

Project to professionalize education and select educators

240. The aims of this project are to:

(a) Establish a classification system for the educational professions and educational institutions and a process for evaluating educators;

(b) Select educational staff based on professional criteria that apply in all stages of education and in the areas of administration, instruction and education;

(c) Supply the needs of educational establishments for teachers, assistant teachers, subject-matter and classroom teachers and psychological and social counsellors;

(d) Improve the quality of education by enhancing the skills of all educators.

Examinations development project

241. This project was established to:

(a) Provide a better educational and psychological environment that encourages students to improve their performance in the examinations for the secondary school certificate;

(b) Introduce a system allowing students who fail not more than three subjects to retake examinations in some subjects, in accordance with a given set of criteria;

(c) Use modern technologies to develop a bank of questions and answers in order to save time and money and ensure greater objectivity in the assessment process;

(d) Introduce practical testing, where the right conditions obtain;

(e) Improve educational performance by achieving the aforementioned goals, modifying success criteria and raising output standards for academic subjects.

242. In 2006, a draft decree was prepared on the examinations system and in 2007 it was submitted to the Prime Minister's Office after being amended at meetings of the Human Development Committee. Sub-units in education directorates prepared the answers for the basic and secondary education certificates and examiners were then given training. The final text of the draft was submitted for adoption in 2008.

Project on the integration of technology into education and the use of computers for education and learning (World Links)

243. The Syria Trust for Development, whose patron is Ms. Asmaa al-Assad, the wife of the President of the Republic, works with the Ministry of Education (see annex 55) on this project, which was set up to train teachers to use information technology in education and to enable students to use it for learning, making the student the main focus of the education process. In this process, teachers take on a guiding role and classes become interactive rather than unidirectional, which prevents boredom and motivates students to learn. A unit was set up at the Ministry of Education to integrate information technology into education, and teams were formed at the central and local levels to offer training in the governorates. A total of 7,000 new teachers received training in the summer of 2008, and work is continuing to include all teachers according to schedules set at the central and local levels.

Educational complexes

244. The aim of the project is to establish educational complexes to perform administrative and educational functions in large regions and districts. The complexes resemble educational mini-directorates. Internal regulations have been issued and the criteria set out therein have been used in the selection of supervisors and administrators. As of 2007, there were a total of 91 such complexes.

Project for a centre for exceptionally gifted children's centre

245. This project was set up to:

(a) Establish a centre for exceptionally gifted children and create a better educational environment in which to offer such children a distinctive kind of education at the secondary and tertiary stages;

(b) Cultivate talent and creativity; the centre is different from schools for high performers, in terms of the criteria used for selecting students, the curricula, the evaluation process and teaching methods.

246. In 2006, a study of the centre's curricula and academic plans was completed and in 2007 the building was refurbished. The centre's internal regulations were drawn up by special committees, equipment was supplied, the curricula were finalized and teacher training was delivered.

247. The "Massar" project was launched under the patronage of the wife of the President of the Republic on 2 January 2005. The aim is to encourage children aged between 5 and 15 years to be creative and curious about themselves and the world around them and to pursue knowledge by themselves. The project is a non-governmental initiative designed to include all children in the Syrian Arab Republic. As of the end of 2007 more than 50,000 boys and girls had taken part in activities organized under the project. The project enjoys considerable support from the Ministry of Education and has been commended by teachers. It led to the establishment of a discovery centre in Damascus, which was designed with input from children in a form inspired by the Damask rose. Another centre was established in Latakia (annex 56).

Public Printing Corporation project

248. The Public Printing Corporation was established pursuant to Legislative Decree No. 15 of 2008 to achieve the following objectives:

(a) Print good quality textbooks in a timely manner;

(b) Add more modern printing presses to the stock of existing equipment used for printing textbooks. The Public Printing and Textbooks Corporation currently produces around 48 million textbooks. The Corporation prints just 7 per cent of this large number of books at its own presses; 68 per cent are printed by public sector presses (mostly using antiquated machinery that is not suited to textbook format) and 25 per cent by the private sector.

B. Leisure, recreation and cultural activities (art. 31)

249. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture (particularly the Children's Culture Directorate) are committed to carving out an appropriate space for recreation in educational and cultural activities. The basic education curricula include arts, music and sports education, and extra-curricular activities are scheduled. The Children's Culture Directorate endeavours to run its programmes and activities in a fun atmosphere that allows

children to mix without being subject to any restrictions on their freedom or mobility. Culture is taught in an enjoyable manner and to a certain degree indirectly, through the hobbies that children wish to pursue. To these ends, the directorate either stages events or participates in activities with other directorates and children's organizations. Recreational events include:

(a) Drawing workshops, usually accompanied by reading workshops, "space and the universe clubs", and excursions. Announcements of festive events are prepared at drawing and calligraphy workshops; children produce large posters, which are displayed on the streets of the governorate concerned and at the cultural centre where the event will be held;

(b) At workshops on Arabic calligraphy, children are given the chance to use coloured pens freely, without having to follow set rules. The children can write whatever phrases they like and adorn their pictures with the script and forms that they choose;

(c) Children's theatre and shadow plays, dolls and puppet shows, and musical performances;

(d) Launching paper aeroplanes and teaching those who are interested how to make them;

(e) Excursions to the countryside and archaeological sites, with games to make the trip a fun and useful experience for the children;

(f) Astronomy evenings, in which children observe the night sky through a telescope.

250. The Ministry of Culture provides opportunities to spend leisure time at its cultural centres, which offer services from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and at public libraries (see annex 57). The Theatre and Music Directorate organizes children's theatre; the Children's Theatre Club run events around the theme "Children value their theatre". The Club trains children in the theatrical arts and gives them the opportunity to discuss suitable subjects for children of different ages and present them in the form of a show.

251. In 2003, the Theatre Directorate at the Ministry of Culture founded the *Yasmin al-Sha'm* group, which is made up of 50 children between the ages of 9 and 14 years. The group stages popular arts and dance theatre performances. It has taken part in many festivals and events, including the Basra Festival, the Mahabba Festival, the flower show, Arab Children's Day, Universal Children's Day, etc. In 2005, at Dar al-Assad for Culture in Al-Thawrah City, the *Tutul* Popular Arts Group was formed. It was selected to represent the governorate in local festivals and some Arab festivals. The group also took part in the Antakya and Adana Festival. A children's popular arts troupe was furthermore established in Dayr al-Zawr at the end of 2006.

252. A directorate called the Arab Music Institutes Directorate was established at the Ministry of Culture. Its work includes educational and recreational activities that are geared to musically gifted children and involve parties and competitions (piano, lute, violin and the zither), together with trips for students to archaeological sites and nature areas.

253. In mid-January 2007, a museum culture project was launched in a partnership between the *Qaws quzah* (Rainbow) Foundation and the Ministry of Culture Directorate of Museums and Antiquities. The aim is to familiarize children with ancient Syrian history. This project has links with the National Museum, which is a major part of the cultural and historical heritage of the Syrian Arab Republic. Through this project, children learn about history by undertaking activities and practising arts of all kinds, including mosaic work, writing Sumerian script, colour printing on fabric, archaeological excavation, pottery, glass making, decorative design and woodcarving.

X. Special protection measures

A. Children in a state of emergency

254. Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007 (containing the National Service Act, which applies to men but not to women) states that the age of enlistment begins at 18 years. A man may be exempted from national service on grounds of health (particularly, if he has a disability) or if he is an only child, a foundling or a person of equivalent status. National service can be deferred until the person concerned has completed his education. Article 3 of this Legislative Decree was amended pursuant to Act No. 16 of 2008, which reduced the length of compulsory national service from 24 months to 21 for everyone, except those who have not completed the fifth grade of basic education. This provides an incentive for individuals to study. Similarly, the Military Service Act (Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2003) states that a person must be at least 18 years of age to volunteer for military service.

Immigration policies

255. The Syrian Government is fully committed to drafting a law on this subject. In accordance with Prime Ministerial Decision No. 3175 of 9 July 2006, a special committee representing different institutions and ministries was formed to prepare a draft text. The committee is now preparing a text which will conform to the relevant international standards. The committee is expected to complete its work quite soon and to submit a draft to the legislative authorities.

Refugee issues

256. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic is not a party to the 1951 United Nations Convention [relating to the Status of Refugees], which is a fundamental instrument on refugee issues. Nevertheless, as reports of international organizations have attested, the Syrian Arab Republic is one of the better States when it comes to dealing with refugee issues and affording refugees rights and protection. This is clear from the treatment extended to refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic, who account for around 10 per cent of the population, and, more specifically, to the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees present in Syrian territory.

257. Child-friendly centres offer a safe environment, in which children's activities are run throughout the day and all week long. These centres seek to safeguard and encourage refugee children's natural development and help them to deal with the pressures of their situation. Children are given the chance, in a group setting, to express themselves freely, to explore and to listen. The four centres receive more than 1,000 new children a month. Data on these children and their families is entered into the database of the governorate concerned, and children with psychological disorders are referred to psychosupport units for treatment and follow-up to ensure their proper psychological growth. The centres run special days every two months and on occasions such as World Refugee Day, Arab Children's Day, or when a special person comes who can provide moral support to users of these centres. On these occasions, there are between 400 and 500 children from all centres in attendance.

Measures taken with respect to Palestinian refugees

258. A number of laws and statutes have been passed to provide legal protection to Palestinian refugees, beginning with administrative decisions exempting them from the nationality condition which applies to most free professions and access to jobs in the State administration and State institutions. Examples of the occupational areas concerned

include: fishing in Syrian territorial waters; sworn translation; petition writing; and employment in the customs administration. It is to the credit of the Syrian Arab Republic that it has treated Palestinians exactly like Syrians, while refusing to accept any form of naturalization for them. In this way, it has ensured that they retain their Palestinian nationality but still enjoy virtually all the rights accorded to Syrian nationals. Palestinians in the Syrian Arab Republic can own more than one business, enjoy tenant's rights and have the right to join Syrian trade unions (for example, the Medical Association, the Bar Association and the Contractors' Association). Palestinians have the same rights and obligations as Syrians in Syrian trade unions, including the right to put themselves forward for the leadership or membership of all Syrian trade unions. They also have the right of legal recourse and the same right as Syrian nationals to the services of legal counsel. They have absolute freedom to move around and travel in the Syrian Arab Republic and to live in any Syrian village or town or city. These rights were granted by the Syrian Government voluntarily, in keeping with its nationalist principles and humanitarian commitments.

Measures taken with respect to Iraqi refugees

259. When the American invasion of Iraq began, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis headed for the Syrian Arab Republic seeking refuge and protection. The report entitled "Assessment on the situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria", which was produced by the Damascus bureau of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), states: "Most of the Iraqis who left Iraq since the [Gulf] war [of 2002] have been attracted by Syria's open door policy, its tolerance and generosity towards refugees. Hence in less than three years, a silent and steady exodus has made of Syria the host of the largest number ... of Iraqis in the region." The Syrian Arab Republic is the only Arab country to have allowed Iraqi refugees to enter freely and take up temporary legal residence for a period of six months, without being subject to any restrictions, conditions or discrimination on religious, confessional or ethnic grounds.

Health services for Iraqi refugees

260. The Ministry of Health (with technical and material support from the European Union and international organizations) provides preventive health services and treatment free of charge to Iraqi refugees. The Ministry has modernized health centres and provided them with equipment and laboratories. It has also trained staff in 20 health centres that serve the areas with the largest concentrations of Iraqi refugees. The training covers primary health-care interventions and treatment of common diseases. The Ministry also supports the national immunization programme, for which it has provided a set of refrigerators and safe needles. It has begun building a database on the nutritional status of children and mothers and intensified efforts to diagnose child malnutrition at an early stage, providing some special foods and vitamin A supplements. In addition, action has been taken to offer more comprehensive health education for mothers and fathers, by training health centre personnel and school doctors in communications skills and delivering publications and information materials to health centres for distribution both to Iraqi refugee mothers who turn to health centres for assistance and schoolchildren.

Educational services for Iraqi refugees

261. The United Nations estimates that 34.5 per cent of Iraqis present in the Syrian Arab Republic are children aged between 5 and 18 years, i.e. children of school age. Iraqi students are treated as equals of Syrian students. In 2007/08, some 49,132 Iraqi children were enrolled in Syrian government schools. The cost of accommodating these children amounted to \$13.7 million, which was essentially borne by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. Further to a decision of the Executive Office of the General Women's Union (see annex 58), Iraqi children were granted a full exemption from paying

kindergarten fees for summer clubs and a 50 per cent exemption from kindergarten fees and bus fares due during the school year. The Syrian Government, in cooperation with United Nations organizations and the European Commission, is planning to secure the resources needed to absorb around 100,000 Iraqi children in Syrian schools, which are under great pressure because of classroom overcrowding in localities with large numbers of Iraqi refugees. More schools need to be built and others expanded, especially in the Damascus and Damascus Countryside governorates. In addition, efforts are needed to boost school budgets, support teaching and administrative staff and cover operating costs (textbooks, learning aids, electricity and water). In February 2009, the German Federal Government offered the Syrian Government assistance in the form of a “grant” of 6 million euros, to be disbursed via the German Reconstruction Loans Bank, to fund an emergency assistance project to build and refurbish schools in areas with a high concentration of Iraqis and localities where schools receive large numbers of Iraqi children.

Parenting skills support for Iraqi mothers

262. This programme is run by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, in cooperation with UNICEF. Centres in Jirmana, Al-Sayyidah Zainab and Qadisiyya 6 receive groups of (from 15 to 20) mothers, who attend a total of 12 educational support sessions that are supervised by trained psychologists with assistance provided by trained Iraqi women. This programme also includes recreational activities and trips for participating mothers.

Psychological empowerment for adolescents

263. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent runs this programme in cooperation with UNICEF. A group of Iraqi adolescents aged between 14 and 18 years was selected for training under a programme designed to equip them with the necessary skills to train their peers. The programme is run at the Jirmana, Al-Sayyidah Zainab and Qadisiyya centres on Saturdays. There are two such groups (of from 10 to 12 young people) taking a total of 12 training sessions.

Cultural services for Iraqi refugees

264. The Children’s Culture Directorate at the Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with UNICEF, developed a cultural and arts programme which involves the staging of theatrical and popular arts shows, together with group drawing workshops. Exhibitions have been held showcasing the work of children who fled from the Israeli attack on Lebanon from 13 to 20 August 2006. Events to support Iraqi child refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic were held on 1 October 2007: paper aeroplanes were launched in “Unknown Soldier” Square and group drawing workshops were held in Umayyad Square. In 2008, the Ministry of Culture and UNICEF signed an agreement on a joint project to support Syrian children and adolescents and all children present in the Syrian Arab Republic. The preparatory work on the project has begun.

265. The Syrian Government is to be credited with treating the Iraqi refugees well, often just as well as its own citizens. It has opened up its cities, schools and hospitals to these refugees, rather than pushing them into isolated camps on the fringes of the desert. While this is a humanitarian approach, it has imposed considerable costs and a heavy burden on Syrian society, as detailed in the paper presented by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic at the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries, which was held in Geneva on 17 and 18 April 2007. The paper describes some of the economic, health, educational, social and security burdens involved, together with the costs associated with a heavy Iraqi presence in the Syrian Arab Republic. It should firstly be stressed that the figures provided are not the final figures, but largely estimates calculated

based on the assumption that there are 1.2 million Iraqis in the Syrian Arab Republic. In fact, recent figures suggest that there are at least 1.5 million Iraqis in the Syrian Arab Republic at the present time.

B. Children subject to the Juvenile Offenders Act

266. The Juvenile Offenders Act No. 18 of 1974, as amended, regulates juvenile trial procedures, as detailed in the second periodic report (paras. 196–216).

267. In order to protect young persons from exploitation and create more favourable conditions for their social reintegration, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has set itself the following goals:

- (a) Increasing allocations for juvenile institutes and centres by 40 per cent by 2015;
- (b) Increasing the annual assistance for juvenile welfare associations by 40 per cent by 2015;
- (c) Establishing three juvenile offender reformatories, one of them in Homs by 2009, and the other two in Dayr al-Zawr and Damascus Countryside by 2015;
- (d) Establishing three girls' supervision centres in Dayr al-Zawr, Dar`a and Suwayda' respectively by 2009, and four in Raqqah, Tartus, Hasakah and Hamah by 2015;
- (e) Establishing, in accordance with the tenth five-year plan for 2006–2010, three centres to provide follow-up services for juvenile offenders and to receive complaints from children;
- (f) Establishing two family counselling centres, in accordance with the tenth five-year plan for 2006–2010;
- (g) Establishing two model centres for the care of abandoned children, in Damascus and Aleppo, in accordance with the tenth five-year plan for 2006–2010;
- (h) Establishing a drop-in centre for child victims of crime, in accordance with the tenth five-year plan for 2006–2010;
- (i) Establishing two institutes for homeless children, child beggars and street children, in accordance with the tenth five-year plan for 2006–2010.

268. In cooperation with the Italian agency Movimondo, the Khalid ibn al-Walid Institute for Juvenile Offenders, which is located in Damascus, was renovated in early 2005.

269. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has issued licences to a number of community associations working on child protection and child development issues. These associations include the Salam Association for Child Welfare in the City of Homs (10 August 2004) and the Syrian Child Development Association (17 October 2004). The Ministry has forged a partnership with the Birr Society in Homs to improve the care offered at the juvenile centre there.

270. Juvenile reformatories offer young persons vocational education and training and suitable work, together with advice on life issues or on how to earn a decent living. Children of 15 years or over who have committed serious offences (those classified as the gravest crimes under Syrian law) face very light punishment. They will be placed in a reformatory, provided that it has a special wing for them, in accordance with article 29 of the Juveniles Act. Under no circumstances may they be placed or allowed to mix with adult prisoners or detainees. Juveniles in reformatories are looked after by professionals of proven experience and moral rectitude.

271. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the Judicial Institute established in 2002, is exploring the feasibility of providing training for judges who specialize in children's issues.

Juveniles

272. The Ministry of the Interior issued Decision No. 1747/Q of 2006, providing for the separation of the Morality and Juveniles Branch of the Criminal Security Department into two distinct branches with their own special functions and sections in the governorates, namely, the Morality Protection Branch and the Juvenile Protection Branch.

273. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, in cooperation with the Women's Development Homes Association, is developing a social education institute for female offenders in Damascus to provide rehabilitation services so as to prevent beneficiaries from repeating the behaviours that place them at risk.

274. The Ministry of Culture organizes literacy courses at juvenile centres in the governorates and its Children's Culture Directorate is constantly present, through the activities which it runs at juvenile centres in the governorates.

275. Associations for prisoners and their families and juvenile welfare associations work with the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour to raise awareness among young persons on a continuous basis. They deliver regular talks about the dangers of drugs and sexually-transmitted diseases, together with youth literacy courses and computing courses for those who are interested. They help and encourage young persons to pursue their studies and provide them with everything that they need to do so. These associations also supply a social worker to deal with young persons' bad psychological habits and help with their social reintegration.

C. Child victims of exploitation, including physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration (art. 39)

276. On 17 October 2003, the Syrian Arab Republic ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The Criminal Code prescribes heavy penalties, including a minimum term of 12 years' imprisonment for sexually exploiting children, while the Publications Act No. 50 of 2001 makes it illegal to use a child in the production of pornography or related activities. Syrian law prescribes harsh penalties for adults who exploit children to commit crime, especially arms and drug trafficking. These penalties are set forth in article 18 of Legislative Decree No. 51 of 2001 and article 39 of Act No. 2 of 1993, and adults who use minors to carry out drugs offences do not benefit from consideration of mitigating circumstances.

277. The Syrian Government participates in most international forums concerned with combating the recruitment, financing and training of mercenaries and expends considerable efforts on protecting children from a culture of armed violence.

278. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs announced the results of the first ever national research project on child abuse, which involved a study of a cross-section of children between the ages of 15 and 18 years and focused on abuses to which they had been subjected in the past. A random sample was taken of 4,000 children from all the governorates, based on the size of the target group in each governorate and the place of residence (rural or urban). Some 47.7 per cent of the children in the sample were enrolled in school and the others (52.3 per cent) were not.

Preventing child exploitation

279. There are no up-to-date or accurate statistics on child labour in the Syrian Arab Republic, although the interim assessment by the State Planning Commission on the progress achieved by the tenth five-year plan showed that the proportion of child workers in the age group from 6 to 17 years fell from 8.2 per cent in urban areas and 10.11 per cent in rural areas in 2004 to 6.37 per cent and 8.2 per cent respectively in 2007. The assessment showed that the main influence on child labour is household income.

280. The Syrian Government seeks to curb child labour by applying a range of international laws and treaties. Moreover, the Labour Code No. 91 of 1959, as amended by Act No. 24 of 10 December 2000, prescribes penalties for families and employers who put children to work and deny them an education.

281. The Prime Minister's Office issued Decision No. 903 of 28 January 2005, regulating the criteria and conditions for employing young people (part I, section 23). The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour issued directives on the implementation of the Labour Code under Ministerial Decision No. 182 of 2001, which defines the industries and occupations in which children below 18 years of age may not be employed. The Ministry issued Decision No. 1736 of 30 December 2004 (see annex 9), which defines a juvenile as any male or female below the age of 18 years and prohibits the employment of persons below 15 years of age in any kind of work whatever. Persons under 18 years of age may be employed in productive work. The workday for juveniles is set at six hours, with an hour for food and rest breaks, which cannot be counted as part of the workday. Young persons may not work for more than four hours consecutively and may not be required to work overtime. They may not work between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. or on weekly rest days, official holidays or religious feast days.

282. The Decree also stipulates that young persons must undergo a medical examination at the beginning of their employment to make sure that they are fit for work and must have another examination every year until they reach the age of 18. They may not be given work involving the use of dangerous machinery or equipment (forklift tractors, electrical work). Before employing a young person in any kind of work, the employer must provide him or her with a training course or other form of instruction suited to the work involved. Young people may not be taken on to perform dangerous or heavy work.

283. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour issues circulars to its directorates in the governorates instructing them to step up inspections at industrial, agricultural and commercial establishments and to visit travelling salesmen to check that they are not employing children. The directorates follow the legal procedures and refer employers who break the law to the courts. The Ministry monitors development and social welfare programmes for children that are run by juvenile offenders' reformatories, institutes for persons with disabilities, orphanages and homes for the poor.

284. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the International Labour Organization (ILO) are working together on the implementation of the Decent Work Programme, which is designed to curb child labour. The Ministry, jointly with UNICEF and ILO, drafted a paper on a national programme for the elimination of all forms of child labour. The project is to run from 2008 to 2011, with the first phase focusing on the non-regulated sector in Damascus. The focus of the second phase is children working in industry in Aleppo and in agriculture in Dayr al-Zawr.

285. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour intends to establish a national committee to combat child labour, which will consist of representatives of relevant public and private sector institutions, together with civic and international children's organizations. The aim is to help the Syrian Arab Republic to meet its obligations as a party to the ILO Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of

Child Labour, 1999 (No. 182) and to prevent new entries by children into the labour market. Together with ILO and UNICEF, the Ministry will set up a unit to combat child labour, which will liaise with families, schools, grass-roots organizations, trade unions, employers and governmental and non-governmental organizations.

286. The Ministry will also work with ILO to build the capacities of its staff in many areas, particularly training on the basics of social budgeting, which is an essential element for the poverty reduction programme carried out in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and for programmes to ensure the empowerment of women and address child labour issues.

D. Children belonging to minorities or indigenous population groups (art. 30)

287. In the Syrian Arab Republic, there is no minorities problem. The Permanent Constitution of 1973, the Unified Workers Act and other Syrian laws and legislation make no distinction between Syrian Arab nationals with regard to their rights and obligations. As far as education is concerned, equality is guaranteed under the Constitution and the law, without any discrimination on grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, racial or social origin, wealth, descent, or any other consideration. Children who belong to minorities enjoy all the rights and privileges accorded to Syrian children. They can learn their own languages and traditions, in addition to studying the Ministry of Education curricula at Ministry-run schools. They also learn everything that they need for harmonious coexistence, while their specific identity is protected.

Conclusion

288. This report was prepared in accordance with the established guidelines. It contains pertinent statistical data and legislative and other information that either was not provided in the second periodic report or has been updated (from August 2000 to February 2009). It responds to the Committee's concluding observations on the second periodic report.

289. In order to explain the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and the circumstances and difficulties surrounding the implementation of certain articles of the Convention, part II of this report provides basic information about the country, including geographical, demographic, economic, health, educational and social information.

290. The laws in force in the Syrian Arab Republic safeguard human rights, including the rights of the child. Part III of the present report elaborates on some of the laws mentioned in the second periodic report and others that were not mentioned there or that were enacted after the report was written. Information has been provided on the Constitution of the State, the Syrian Criminal Code, the Civil Code, the Commercial Code and the Personal Status Code. These laws cover the contents of article 42, paragraph 4, and article 44, paragraph 6, of the Convention. The Syrian Arab Republic continues to conduct detailed studies of the laws in force to make sure that they are consistent with children's rights. It is about to enact a law which will encompass all children's rights, in keeping with the Committee's recommendation with regard to the second periodic report.

291. The Constitution guarantees all the human rights and freedoms set out in international treaties and declarations. The Syrian Labour Code grants the competent minister the power to raise the minimum age for admission to employment for both males and females (15 years) in pertinent industries and occupations. This goes a long way to satisfying the requirements of the recommendation set out in the Committee's concluding observations on raising the minimum age for admission to employment.

292. The Civil Code and the Commercial Code safeguard children's best interests in proceedings taken by or against them. Children's best interests are considered as the primary concern, in keeping with the Committee's recommendation on the second periodic report. Accordingly, and having due regard to the Criminal Code and the Personal Status Code, the Syrian Arab Republic takes the view that the concerns about ensuring the best interests of the child which the Committee articulates in its concluding observations on the second periodic report are no longer founded. Moreover, the Personal Status Code is consistent with article 7 of the Convention. Hence, the Committee's observation on this point does not reflect the true picture as far as the legislation is concerned: there is no justification for rescinding the legislation, since it safeguards the confidentiality of information indicating that a child has been born out of wedlock.

293. In keeping with the Committee's recommendations, the Syrian Arab Republic has taken a raft of measures to disseminate the principles of the Convention. It has distributed numerous copies of the text to the relevant institutions, publicized it through the media, designed posters, informational materials and publications for distribution to schools and institutions that work on children's issues, and broadcast short messages on children's television and radio programmes on the meaning of the Convention. The general principles of the Convention have been incorporated into academic curricula and modified curricula. In order to provide training on the Convention, courses have been held, together with comprehensive meetings, talks and television and radio programmes. Writing and cultural competitions have been organized to publicize the Convention, articles have been published in local newspapers and the press, and studies have been undertaken.

294. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is the government body responsible for monitoring and coordinating the implementation of the Convention, with the assistance of several government institutions and civil society organizations.

295. Civil society organizations work with one another and through their representatives in national committees and the Convention Committee. They also liaise on and participate in activities on behalf of children. Children's and youth groups in schools, clubs, the scout movement and other bodies play an active part in discussions on the rights and freedoms set out in the Constitution. All this is consistent with the Committee's recommendations regarding the second periodic report.

296. Lastly, this report confirms that the Syrian Arab Republic is committed to implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child (having due regard to the reservations which it has entered) and that it will do everything in its power to fulfil all its obligations under the Convention, notwithstanding the economic, social and statistical difficulties with which it must contend. It considers that overcoming these difficulties will take time, judging from the comprehensive plans which it has established and the mechanisms that it has set up and guided in its endeavours by the Committee's recommendations and the principles that it espouses.

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