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Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE BY PERMANENT MISSION OF QATAR ON FIRST WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY

Building on his country's well-known commitment to protecting and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities, Nassir Abdelaziz Al-Nassir, Permanent Representative of Qatar, today announced his delegation's intention to commemorate the first World Autism Awareness Day by convening at United Nations Headquarters an expert panel on coping with the neurological disorder.

He said at a Headquarters press conference that, on the afternoon of 2 April, the Permanent Mission of Qatar, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and Autism Speaks, an advocacy organization for individuals with autism and their families, would sponsor a panel discussion on "Challenges, Responsibilities, Actions", to raise awareness about the urgent health crisis, which was now the world's fastest growing developmental disability.

Alongside representatives of the event's main sponsors, the panellists will include other eminent personalities from Brazil, the World Autism Organization, the Shafahla Centre in Qatar, Al-Jazeera, and Colombia Presbyterian Hospital. Mr. Al-Nasser, who was joined at the press conference by Alya Ahmed S.A. Al-Thani, Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of Qatar, also announced that an art exhibition would held in the East Lobby of the Headquarters building immediately following the panel discussion.

He said that, recognizing the current lack of effective means to prevent autism, the paucity of effective treatments and the absence of a cure for the complex neurological disorder, Qatar had been instrumental last year in pushing through a draft resolution in the General Assembly to galvanize global efforts to address the emerging health issue. The 192-member Assembly had adopted the text unanimously, designating 2 April as World Autism Day, and encouraging all Member States to take measures to raise awareness of the disorder.

Today, the Permanent Representative said that autism, a brain disorder which manifests during the first three years of a child's life, interferes with the ability to understand what is seen, heard and touched. Its hallmark feature is impaired social interaction. While autism has a tremendous impact on children worldwide, as well as families, schools and social service institutions, it has thus far received only passing attention and even less focused international action. "Autism is not recognized as a disorder, which in turn hampers proper diagnosis, needed research, early behavioural intervention and even adequate treatment."

Calling on all journalists present to join the global campaign to help raise awareness, and expressing the hope that the 2 April event would provide a platform for national-level action, he went on to say that his delegation's initiative was guided by the dedicated attention of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, First Lady of Qatar. "Through her deep commitment and inspiring vision, Qatar has improved and enhanced the lives of children with disabilities, as well as those with other special needs." She had diligently promoted the mainstreaming of the rights of persons with disabilities into the wide development agenda.

Responding to questions, Ms. Al-Thani said Qatar had settled on the 2 April date during negotiations on the text last year, when delegations noted that civil society groups around the world held events to raise awareness about autism during the month of April. "We didn't want to just invent something," she added.

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