



AFRICA/SWAZILAND - 140,000 young orphans risk not being accepted into primary school

Mbabane (Agenzia Fides) – In Swaziland the new school year has just commenced. Among the young faces that populate the classes of this mountainous Country are 140,000 orphans and vulnerable children (OVC's). “Apart from not having a school uniform, the orphans do not even have warm clothes,” reports a teacher from the Central Primary School in Motshane. Many of these children also come to school on an empty stomach and it is difficult for them to concentrate in class before they get their meal at school during break time. This year there is even more to worry about because principals have refused to accept OVCs back into class. This follows a stand-off between the Swaziland Principals' Association (SWAPA) and the Deputy Prime Minister's (DPM) office, which is responsible for paying fees for the children. Some schools have already done turned pupils away. This is a setback for Swaziland's pursuit of Universal Primary Education - goal two of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Free Primary Education was supposed to be launched in 2008, but a shortage of funding forced its delay. Finally introduced last year, there has been significant improvement in facilities and staffing for 2011. The government has provided mobile classrooms to many overcrowded schools and also hired more teachers. However, the OVC controversy threatens to overshadow this. One in four Swazis in the age band from 15 to 49 is infected with HIV; the high death rate of people of reproductive age means a huge number of children are now growing up without parents. Aggravating this, about 70 percent of the one million-strong population lives below the poverty line of less than two dollars a day. This makes the question of school fees a significant one. Of the 579 pupils at Ngwenya Central Primary in Mbabane, 239 are orphans or vulnerable children in need of government support to pay fees. At neighbouring Motshane Primary School there are 135 OVCs out of 441 students. For this year, the government is promising to pay only a third of the amount as a first-term deposit. Poverty and the AIDS pandemic threaten to make an early mark on the next generation in this Country. (AP) (21/1/2011 Agenzia Fides)