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Statement by Mr. James Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on the 40th Anniversary of UNICEF
at the Special Convocation of the United Nations General Assembly

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Mr. President,
Distinguished Representatives,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Honored Guests and colleagues -
including particularly our young friends holding the two banners:

Mr. Secretary-General, UNICEF accepts the responsibility for the custody of this precious flame that has encircled the globe.

40 years ago, as nations emerged from the ravages of World War II, the world community for the first time embraced an ethic of mutual responsibility on a global scale: an ethic of responsibility for those in desperate need as a result of the War; a responsibility for those in a position to do so to help those whose lives and well-being were in jeopardy.

The General Assembly, on 11 December 1946, created UNICEF to take responsibility for rebuilding the lives of the millions of children in Europe and China who were crawling from the rubble of the war.

Four years later, when the emergency was over, the General Assembly appreciated that there was a larger challenge - the challenge of building lives for the hundreds of millions of children of all the other countries of the world. And UNICEF was charged to continue its work.

Mr. President and distinguished delegates: we have done our best to do so. Under the creative leadership of, first, Mr. Maurice Pate and then Mr. Henry Labouisse (who is with us today) through 1979, the Children's Fund of the United Nations has done what it could to tackle monumental challenges with modest resources - helping to eradicate yaws and small-pox, helping to reduce the plague of other diseases, of lack of sanitation, of malnutrition, of illiteracy and ignorance. World death rates for children have been more than halved.

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Very importantly, today we can predict that wherever there is a great disaster, world public opinion will encourage - and insist - that their governments respond to save lives.

But still, this week, more than 250,000 children are dying. Fourteen million children this year - dead. Unnecessarily. Unnecessarily because, now, through the low-cost approaches known as the "Child Survival and Development Revolution", the majority of those deaths need not occur and equal numbers of children need not suffer growth-stunting, maiming, mind-numbing disabilities from the same preventable causes - malnutrition and disease.

Country after country, in Asia, Latin America and Africa, Mr. President, has proved in the past few years that these deaths and suffering need not occur. We are no longer helpless in the face of needless waste of children.

The only question, Mr. President, is whether we shall put an end to it. If the world, forty years ago, determined that what can be done should be done for the child victims of World War II - that children caught in disasters should not suffer and die if that suffering and death can be reasonably avoided - then has not the time come to end this world-wide waste from the "silent emergency"?

In helping countries to reach the threshold of the capacity to eradicate the mass waste of their children, UNICEF has pursued the mandate with which the General Assembly charged us.

But even if their health is protected, children cannot survive in a world at war. And today, much of the world is at war. In scores of places, between and within countries, war and the preparations for war are the rule of the day. And when adults do battle, children suffer most.

And thus, Distinguished Representatives of the Member States, the appeal which you have received here today initiated so admirably by the First Earth Run organization with David Gershon and Gail Straub in the lead and with UNICEF as co-sponsor.

Millions and millions of people have embraced the torch which has returned here this afternoon. Millions and millions of people have joined in the appeal that the Nations of the world give their children a world in which they can live, can grow, and can build their happiness.

The peoples of the United Nations cry out to you: Protect our world from the violence which rends our nations; Protect our children from the violence which rends their lives. Children Need Peace.

Mr. Secretary-General, UNICEF accepts custodianship of this flame. Not as a monument to 40 years passed, but as a reminder of the work ahead. And, especially, as a reminder of the founding purpose of the United Nations itself: "To save succeeding generations".