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DRAFT Speech by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Meeting of Central American First Ladies

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Hon. JAMES P. GRANT SPEECH TO MEETING OF CENTRAL AMERICAN FIRST LADIES

8-9 SEPTEMBER 1988
SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA

On behalf of UNICEF and the millions of children it represents, I would like to thank the First Ladies of Central America, not only for their kind invitation to myself and to our Regional Director, Dra. Teresa Albanez, to participate in this important meeting, but also for their recognition of the plight of children affected by violence. UNICEF was born as a consequence of the Second World War - - the greatest period of violence in human history. Since its inception as a relief agency for the children of Europe, UNICEF has continuously sought to alleviate the effects of war on children in Palestine, in Cyprus, in Korea, in the Congo, in Biafra, in Bangladesh, in Vietnam, in Cambodia, in Afghanistan and in Lebanon, while at the same time giving increasing attention to addressing, through developmental means, the silent emergency causing an even larger number of deaths and thecrippings which result from underdevelopment linked to poverty, lack of health facilities, clean water and schooling.

Children as Victims of War

It is estimated that some nine million children have died in wars and other conflicts world wide since 1945. Another 27 million have been maimed or otherwise injured. In Central America alone, in addition to the many children who have died, at least 100,000 are orphaned and 1.5 million displaced from their homes. In Angola and Mozambique, countries trapped in the consequences of the conflict over apartheid, more than 150,000 children died last year as a direct or indirect result.

It is all too sad to note that, during the 1980s, it is the children who have become the primary victims of the war games of adults. In World War I only 20 per cent of the casualties were civilians. By World War II, it had risen to 50 per cent, and by the 1980s to 85 per cent. Children account for a majority of the civilians who have made up 85 per cent of the victims of war in the 1970s and 80s. Children are the most vulnerable. Children are the most affected by disruption of social services. Children suffer the deepest psychological scars as a result of war. And children are left to inherit the devastation that war leaves behind it. If wars are fought to protect national security, and if

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security is nothing more than the protection of our most precious assets, is it not ironic that children should be the primary victims of those wars?

Children need peace.

Children as Victims of the Silent Emergency

As Dona Mayantz has said

Children also need development, particularly development which specifically addresses their needs for health facilities, clean water, schooling, good nutrition and for knowledgeable healthy mothers. This is because children are the principal victims of the silent emergency which is the result of the gross poverty and underdevelopment. Tragic as are the consequences of war, more than nine tenths of the 14 million small children under 5 that died ^{would have} last year, (some 38,000 every day), died because of the consequences of this silent emergency. And as Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, the new Director General of the World Health organization (WHO), said last week, two thirds of these deaths (and a comparable number of children who are crippled for life) could be avoided in the future through effective, low-cost means now available.

The tragic situation in Central America can be seen from the fact that of the approximately one million children born in 1983, nearly 100,000 are now dead and a comparable number crippled or disabled in some way. Costa Rica provides a good example of a different situation for children where there is peace and where special attention has been directed to meeting the needs of mothers and children. With a per capita income roughly comparable in real terms to that of the United States at the start of this century, the health of it's children is comparable to that of children in the United States of America in the 1960s. If all of Central America had Costa Rica's child mortality rate in 1986, under-5 child deaths in Central America would have been reduced from 93,000 to 24,000, a saving of 190 child lives a day.

A majority of these child deaths andcripplings in 1986 were the result of four causes, all of which, fortunately, are far easier to attack nowadays than when Costa Rica achieved it's health breakthrough in the late 1960s and 1970s. These four main causes are diarrhoea, principally through dehydration now readilypreventable by oral rehydration therapy; six killer diseases - measles, tetanus, whooping cough, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and polio for which effective

vaccines now exist (costing only 50 cents); acute respiratory infection which can be effectively treated through early use of low-cost antibiotics; and malnutrition resulting from poor nutritional practices remediable through better breastfeeding, better weaning practices and dietary supplements such as Vitamin A, Iodine and Iron.

Other Kinds of Violence

The problem of violence as it affects children is no, as we have seen, limited to the organized horror of war. The resources spent on war or on so called "defense" each year far surpass the total of all expenditures on health, education and other social programmes. The diversion of funds from improving life towards its destruction will go down in the annals of history as one of the greatest profanities of mankind. I have pointed out many times that the cost of then F14 fighter planes is more than the total budget of UNICEF. A similar situation exists with respect to military and social expenditures within many individual developing countries. But which expenditure better serves the cause of peace and contributes to global and national security? Perhaps all nations should look more to the example of Costa Rica in determining their budgetary and social priorities.

Children are also the victims of violence wholly unrelated to war. Is the child crippled or killed by the polio virus not also a victim of violence? Is the young boy who is beaten by a drunken father for not making enough money shining shoes not also a victim of violence? Is the teenage girls, still a child, giving birth to another child as a result of rape not also a victim of violence? What difference is there between the malnutrition caused by war and that caused by ignorance and poverty?

In fact, given its often tragic physical and emotional effects on children, should underdevelopment, particularly that linked to poverty, also be considered a form of violence? Whether caused by a land mine or by polio, a twisted leg is still useless to a child. Death from whooping cough, a slow, racking process, might be considered more violent than a quick death by a bullet. Every year 14 million children die of preventable causes and another 14 million are maimed. The fact that the majority of these deaths and injuries are the result of underdevelopment and poverty rather than war does not make them any less

violent, and today any more excusable.

A Convention for Children's Rights

One step that is being taken on behalf of children is the drafting of an international Convention of the Rights of the Child. Beginning during the International Year of the Child in 1979, the international community undertook to formalize the rights of children to assure them a name, a country, a home and protection from all forms of violence. That Convention has now been completed and will be debated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in the next three months. The Convention represents, not a solution, but the framework of a solution. It codifies the norms and values of the international community, but national compliance is dependent on national will. I urge the countries of Central America to press for the adoption of the Convention at the General Assembly of the United Nations next year, and when adopted, to sign the Convention and to honor its provisions. The jury who will really judge our compliance with the Convention is not UNICEF, the United Nations, nor any other institution. It is the children who will either survive and be protected or who will perish because of our failure to honor our promises and look to our future.

UNICEF's Role

As in the case of other conflicts, UNICEF in Central America has been working to alleviate the impact of civil strife and the silent Emergency of children. However, in Central America, UNICEF has gone farther than just providing the food, blankets and other physical necessities of children whose families and homes have been disrupted or destroyed. Together with the Pan American Health Organization, UNICEF in 1985 worked with the Central American Ministers of Health to establish the concept of "Health as a Bridge for Peace", with the goal of reducing child deaths by half within five years to less than 50,000 by 1991. It is out of this programme that the El Salvadorean "Days of Tranquillity for Vaccination" developed.

For those involved in the El Salvadorean "Days of Tranquillity", the event in each of the last four years represented much work and many lives saved. For the world community, the events represented that and much more; in each of the last four years, the civil war in El Salvador has come to a halt for three days,

a month apart, to permit the vaccination of hundreds of thousands of children against the killer diseases which take more lives each year than the fighting. For twelve days, the war stopped — stopped completely — in order to help ensure a healthy future for the children. Nothing of the kind had ever happened before in history. For at least those twelve days, children became the arbiters of peace rather than the victims of war. Today the levels of immunization of under-15s in El Salvador are comparable to those of New York and Washington and well above those in Latin America as a whole. The example of El Salvador has now been replicated in Lebanon and stimulated comparable measures in other countries, and will serve as a model of concern for children in countries afflicted by war around the world. Nicaragua has also achieved excellent progress in immunization coverage despite conflict.

UNICEF and PAHO have taken the responsibility for raising the additional external resources required for their five-year collaborative child survival effort and the \$30.5 millions required has been secured from the EEC, Italy and Sweden.

The return of democracy in Guatemala is bringing new energy & concern for children, and I look forward to seeing further progress in the next year. Honduras has been a part of this work of URT.

Child Survival as an Alternative to Violence

UNICEF, as the international agency charged with monitoring and improving the lives of children, has issued a challenge to the world to cut in half the number of unnecessary child deaths by the year 2000. Success in this would save the lives of more than one quarter of a million children in Central America alone. The keys to this battle are not rifles and tanks but, rather, syringes, growth charts and, above all, the empowerment of mothers and families with the knowledge and skills to save and improve the lives of their children through such simple techniques as washing hands and boiling water to protect against diarrhoea, mixing salt, sugar and water to feed to a seriously dehydrated child, thus saving his or her life from the dehydration, which, as I noted earlier, is the greatest killer of children in Central America. Child survival interventions not only help ameliorate the violent impact of poverty on children; they also aim at convincing families that they can improve their own lives, an improvement that is necessary to breaking the cycle of violence in the region.

Basic Services for Peace

UNICEF is also formulating an approach of providing other basic family needs in the belief that these, too, can help alleviate the impact of violence and contribute to peace and development in the region. The provision of safe drinking water, health facilities, schools, and food supplements such as vitamin A, are crucial both to alleviate the impact of war and to ensuring the prosperity which is the best guarantee against violence and conflict.

Education for Peace

A crucial service that must be provided to our children is education — both in academic and moral terms. Clearly, education is also related to child health: A child whose mental capacity has been damaged by malnutrition will be unable to learn as rapidly in school. And children who cannot read and write will be much harder to reach with the life-saving messages of child survival I mentioned before. If children are viewed as the human resources of the future, our failure to properly educate them does not even make economic sense.

But perhaps most importantly, children must be taught that violence is not the best or only way to resolve differences of opinion — among their peers or among their countries. Perhaps many of the conflicts raging in the world today might have been avoided had we and our generation learned how to cope peacefully and to better manage conflict.

Some Signs of Hope

There are signs of hope in a number of recent political events. The inclusion of a call for increased international efforts to assure Child Survival in the text of the final communique from the most recent Reagan-Gorbachev summit may be a most significant milestone for the children of the world. For the first time, two super powers who have been primarily concerned with the issues of war and peace, defense and disarmament, have explicitly recognized the connection of Child Survival to these critical issues. The success of the United Nations Secretary-General in bringing conflicting parties to the negotiating table in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and Namibia bodes well for the early resolution or better yet, prevention of conflicts (a central theme in the United Nations Charter). The concern of international parliamentarians, as expressed in meetings of the South East Asian Parliamentary Group and the 1988 meeting of the

International Parliamentary Union in Guatemala also gives hope that children's welfare is being given increased priority on the political level.

Central America, which during the 1980s became almost synonymous with conflict, also offers examples of the best that concern for children can achieve. Perhaps most significantly for us gathered here, (the Preamble to the Esquipulas I) peace accords signed in Guatemala just over a year ago also specifically mention devoting peace efforts "to the Central American youths, whose legitimate desires for peace and social justice, for freedom and reconciliation have been frustrated for many generations". Esquipulas II and the activity it has generated — including this gathering of the First Ladies of Central America — also offers hope that the children of Central America may one day soon be freed from war.

These efforts have been recognized by the world community as evidenced by the Nobel Peace Prize presented to President Arias in 1987. As President Arias noted in his acceptance speech, the Nobel Prize in a very real sense belongs to all the governments and peoples of Central America. UNICEF, the winner of the 1965 Nobel Peace Prize, believes that the link between peace, development and the welfare of children is undeniable and that it is folly to strive for one of these elements while ignoring the others.

The steps taken by the Governments of Central America are very positive. It is also heartening that the Conference of Latin American Bishops, meeting in El Salvador in December 1987, specifically spoke of child survival as a necessary element of peace and that Archbishop Rivera y Damas, a true pastor of children, asked what we can do to teach peace to our children.

More can and must be done. Children are still recruited to fight adult wars in Central America. Children are still the targets of torture and intimidation. Children still suffer the loss of their parents. A majority of parents do not yet practice simple oral rehydration therapy to protect their children from the biggest killer in Central America — the dehydration from diarrhoea that still takes the lives of more than 50 children each day. More than one-third of under-ones are not yet fully immunized against the six killer diseases. The damage to our collective future is incalculable. As Pope John Paul II has noted, no country of the world, no political system can think of its own future if not

through the image of these new generations which will receive from their parents the multiple inheritance of values, of duties, of national aspirations which belong to them, together with the whole human family.

A New Ethic

There is no reason that we must accept high rates of child deaths and disability and the high level of violence against children as an inevitable part of the human condition. At various times in the past we have seen that seemingly unchangeable evils such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid have been changed or are being changed, because public and political opinion have eventually reached the point where they deprive such ideas of the oxygen of tolerance. I would urge you, as leading citizens of your countries, to help cut off the oxygen which feeds the idea that it is acceptable for children to die or suffer from the violence of war or the violence of gross underdevelopment. It is surely intolerable — as intolerable as slavery or colonialism or apartheid — that nine million children should have died in wars in the last forty years, or that 38,000 children should die every day — nearly 100,000 in Central America in 1986 — from the violence of underdevelopment — from lack of primary health care, from lack of basic education, and from lack of clean water. We have both the knowledge and the resources to prevent these tragedies, and the countries of Central America have launched a collaborative effort to halve child deaths within five years, which cannot be allowed to fail, and which would benefit greatly from your strong public commitment to its success. Your success in Central America would be a powerful message to the whole world, and a message which UNICEF would proclaim as an encouraging example for every region of the world.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement of this "new ethic" for children is contained in a poem by another Nobel Prize winner, the Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral. Her few lines have probably done more to raise awareness of the vulnerability and needs of children — and of our responsibilities towards them — than all the speeches and meetings that have taken place:

We are guilty of many errors and many faults,
but our worst crime is abandoning the
children, neglecting the fountain of life.

Dora Margueta

Many of the things we need can wait.

The Child cannot.

Right now is the time his bones are being
formed, his blood is being made and his
senses are being developed;

To him we cannot answer "Tomorrow".

His name is "Today".

Thank you again for your invitation and for your kind attention.