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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Special Meeting on Assistance to Bangladesh

New York
16 November 1988

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Year in, year out, there is a silent emergency in Bangladesh that is UNICEF's continuing concern.

The infant mortality rate is among the highest in the world at 121 per 1000 live births. Each day over 11,000 babies are born, of whom approximately 900 die within the first 28 days of life.

Maternal mortality is very high, estimated at 6 per 1000.

The rate of acute malnutrition averages 8.1 per cent of children under 6 years of age. The rate is five times higher among the poorest. Only 5 per cent of the population consumes an adequate quantity and quality of food. Half the 4 million children born in Bangladesh every year weigh under 2.5 kg, the WHO standard for low birth weight.

Only a fraction of the population use tubewell water for all their water needs. Only 2-4 per cent of households have sanitary latrines. And maybe a third of Bangladesh is inundated every single year by monsoon waters.

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Thirty per cent of the country's primary schools are physically unusable during the monsoon. Drop-out rates of 50 per cent in the first five years of school are not unusual.

I would like to stress that these are only selected facts that happen under so-called "normal" circumstances.

Certainly no one was prepared for the magnitude of this year's floods and the further havoc which they wreaked on the Bangladeshi people, and especially on the most vulnerable segments of the population, including the women and children of Bangladesh.

Although precise data are not available at the present time, the evident, immediate effects include homelessness, hopelessness, hunger, disease and unemployment. Diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, and severe Vitamin A deficiencies are dramatically worse than even the already unacceptable "normal" levels. Numerous handpumps and latrines are inundated, water sources are consequently contaminated, tubewells eroded. Many primary schools and health centers have been damaged.

We anticipate increased mortality among children under five years of age - possibly an extra 100,000 child deaths over the next 6 to 9 months.

The picture right now in Bangladesh is a grim one indeed. However, the other side of the coin is that this year the social response to the crisis has

been more effective and of a greater magnitude than in previous years of less severe flooding. New patterns of responsiveness have emerged. Bangladesh has annual experience with floods and famine of varying severity and this experience has given rise to food monitoring and assistance policies of some maturity. Many hundreds of NGOs have organized relief on different levels, according to their resources. Social mobilization efforts have mushroomed compared even with last year, and the responsiveness of government offices has corresponded more than ever before to the self-help initiatives of local communities.

UNICEF's response to the emergency began soon after the Government of Bangladesh appealed for international assistance on 1 September 1988. Within days, UNICEF launched an additional US\$5 million appeal for support toward accelerating the renovation of tubewells, assisting NGO relief work, spreading information and simple preventive health measures, and bridging local resource gaps during the weeks of the flooding. A booklet available here today, "Children in Flood Conditions in Bangladesh", describes response to the effects of flooding and places it in the context of UNICEF's ongoing development work, and it offers a breakdown of the US\$5 million appeal. I invite you to take a copy.

UNICEF's Bangladesh office, in cooperation with the government, is now assessing the extent of rehabilitation needs and is responding accordingly in collaboration with other U.N. agencies, such as UNDP, UNDRO, and WFP, and with USAID, CIDA, CARE, and Grameen Bank. The role of the government of Bangladesh

in these efforts has been exemplary. At the same time we are already looking at measures that could be taken now to prepare for any future crises of this type and at how to reduce the risk of such crises being repeated.

Country programme funds were diverted to meet immediate needs. UNICEF has so far received some US\$1.5 million of the US\$5 million identified to meet emergency needs. This money has already been programmed and I appeal to the donor community to provide the balance of US\$3.5 million requested to meet critical needs. The country programme funds will need to be reimbursed by donor funding if the regular activities are not to suffer. This regular programme itself covers key areas of relevance to the conditions of children in flood and post-flood conditions such as control of diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory infections, immunization, nutrition, blindness prevention, essential drugs, maternal and neonatal health care, and safe water supply and sanitation for which funding assistance will be required.

On behalf of UNICEF, I thank the several donors who have already pledged and given generously to this appeal, but urge you to continue efforts, together with the Government, to assist the women and children of Bangladesh.

Thank you.