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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the National Conference on
The Future United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
"Putting into Action a 'New Ethos' for Children

Alexandria, Egypt
21 November 1988



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"Putting into Action a 'New Ethos' for Children"

Mrs. Mubarak,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants in the Conference on
the Future Convention on the Rights of the Child:

I am delighted to participate in this National Conference on the Future Convention on the Rights of the Child, and I extend warm appreciation to Mrs. Mubarak for your gracious hospitality here in Alexandria. I am also most pleased to greet Grand Sheikh Gad El Haq Ali Gad El Haq as well as several very distinguished participants from afar, including Madame Mitterrand and Mrs. Mugabe.

We meet here at an important time for those of us committed to the improved health and survival of the world's children. Our era is the first in human history in which it has been possible to think seriously in terms of bringing the basic essentials of health and nutrition to all humanity. One important sign of this new level we have achieved as a civilization is the fact that the past 40 years have seen more progress for children than the preceding 1,000 to 2,000 years. This is evidenced in global figures which show that in 1950 there were 70,000 children dying every day; by 1980 that toll had been reduced to 43,000. Given the concurrent increase in population, this amounted to a halving of the infant and child mortality rates during that time period: I am sure that never before in history has such progress occurred.

Today, despite severely constrained economic conditions which have, in the 1980s, caused cut-backs and restructuring of many national health programmes, and despite continued population growth, the number of daily child deaths has been reduced to approximately 40,000 - still a terrible figure ... the equivalent of a Hiroshima every four days.

During these same four decades since the end of World War II, the world has begun to experience a dramatic change in global morality. Today, our world no longer allows millions of its children to die in the sudden emergencies of drought or famine anywhere on the planet. Whether the crisis is Kampuchea or Africa, the mass media helps to ensure that people and governments are moved to the kind of action which, at the very least, prevents mass deaths.

Four decades ago, no such ethic prevailed. In the early 1940s, for example, an estimated 3 million men, women and children starved to death in Calcutta and Bengal while food was plentifully available. The world knew little and did less.

But the real emergency facing the world's children today takes a toll far heavier than any famine or crisis: it is the "silent emergency" of frequent infection and widespread undernutrition - an emergency which kills and cripples over a half-million children every week.

There has been progress, yes. But for today, 40,000 child deaths each day is still unconscionable. For today it is becoming increasingly undeniable that we have the capacity to prevent, at low cost, the vast majority of these deaths. As the new Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, told 1,500 health educators last August:

"Parents and families, properly supported, could save two-thirds of the 14 million children who die every year - if only they were properly informed and motivated. Immunization alone could save 3 million lives - and another 3 million deaths a year could be prevented by oral rehydration, a simple and cheap technology."

Both of these means are very well known in Egypt today.

In the past, massive numbers of child deaths have been regarded as acceptable because they have been perceived as inevitable. Today, that perception is simply out of date. In our times, advances in knowledge, and in the social organization to put today's knowledge to use, have brought the silent emergency out from the cold of the inevitable and into the domain of the largely preventable.

As a dramatic demonstration of this new potential in the 1980s, the lives of millions of children - reaching 2.5 million within the last 12 months alone - have been saved, and the crippings of millions more prevented, by nations which have mobilized to put today's low-cost solutions at the disposal of the majority of families. While the means are now proven, hundreds of millions of families remain unreached by this potential for a virtual revolution in child survival and development - a breakthrough which, by the year 2000, could reduce the 1980 child death rate by half, save more than 100 million children from death and disablement, improve the health and nutrition of many hundreds of millions more, and slow population growth as well, as parents gain the confidence that the children that they do have will live.

In any civilization, morality must march with capacity. Today we must assert unequivocally that it is just as unacceptable for so many millions of children to die in the silent emergency of needless malnutrition and infection as it is for them to die in the louder emergencies of drought or famine, which we no longer permit to take place. Morality must be brought into step with our new capacity; the mass deaths of children must be placed alongside slavery, racism and apartheid on the shelf reserved for those things which are simply no longer acceptable to humankind. We must begin to establish that the rights of children extend beyond birth. Children have the right to survive, to grow in health, and to be protected and nurtured in their growth to full potential.

The draft Convention on the Rights of the Child which we are considering here today reflects the new ethic which is evolving within our civilization. You will hear, during this conference, that the Convention, once adopted and eventually ratified, will establish global norms regarding, among other rights, the survival and protection of children.

First proposed by Poland in 1979, the draft Convention appears very likely - with continued strong support of all nations - to be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly next fall, during the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Child. Prospects are also quite promising that the Convention will be ratified within the following year by at least 20 countries - the number necessary to render the new charter into law. The international community and several individual nations have publicly called for such timely action. The calls have sounded from Dakar to Guatemala; from Bangalore, Jakarta, New York, London, Lisbon and Stockholm, to name but a few. They have come in the form of resolutions and declarations.

Heads of State and First Ladies, Ministers, Parliamentarians, religious leaders, international and national NGOs - all have come forward, through support for the draft Convention, to express their determination to address the current needs of all the world's children. Clearly, there is growing political will to find the ways and means to improve the health and well-being of children, our principal building block for the future - of societies, of millions of individuals, and of civilization itself.

We may well ask why such a vast diversity of people have galvanized support around the adoption and ratification of the draft Convention. Among the most compelling reasons are these:

- The draft Convention offers a mechanism through which we can translate our commitment to children into action in a manner that realizes the inalienable rights of the child.
- The draft Convention is a tool which can be used to help carry out our responsibilities toward children - responsibilities which derive from the fact that children - to most families and societies the most precious of human beings, and yet perhaps the most vulnerable - are in need of special care and respect in order to survive and grow.

- The draft Convention is already, even before it becomes law, provoking a process through which an array of nations representing the widest diversity of human culture and customs, find common ground in the universal value of childhood. In activities involving support of the Convention and the rights it upholds, social, economic, religious and racial differences must be set aside or accomodated in order to address the real issues of child welfare. This is particularly critical for the world's poor children - those most likely in any country to be abandoned, abused and neglected and who therefore are in the greatest need of society's protection.

- The Convention offers the opportunity to establish global norms to discern children's rights and how to ensure them. It will establish a set of minimum criteria which will form the basis for regional charters for children, national plans of action, and programme coordination at the community level. The 1990s will be a critical decade for children, and the Convention, as an expression of consensus about our responsibilities toward children and about their legitimate expectations from society, will offer crucial guidance in planning.

Adoption and ratification of the Convention will not, in themselves, mean that children's rights will be met nor that our responsibilities toward children will be fulfilled. Rather, such action will mark a milestone in the journey toward these ends - a milestone along the path toward honouring child rights for all peoples. We in UNICEF believe that during the 1990s, people - working together to ensure that the norms established in the Convention are realized - will be capable of making significant changes in the situation of children throughout the world.

Advancing the draft Convention to its current crucial status at the verge of adoption and ratification has been a truly remarkable achievement by the United Nations Human Rights Commission. In the coming decade - and already - the challenge will be ours: nations and people throughout the world will be challenged to put into action this expression of a new ethos for children.

Egypt has already made exemplary advances acting out of an encouraging "new ethos" for children, and has taken a leading role in advancing such an ethos worldwide. Egypt is at the vanguard because - in action, not just in rhetoric - it has put children first in a number of significant areas. For example, Egypt is really the first country in the world to break through for children simultaneously with two powerful engines of child survival. First, immunization against the six main child-killing diseases, and second, oral rehydration therapy (ORT), the use of a simple inexpensive sugar and salt remedy to combat the lethal effects of diarrhoeal dehydration. After President Mubarak endorsed the goal of Universal Child Immunization by 1990 during the autumn of 1985, he worked in this country to achieve that goal by the 23rd of June 1987 - the 35th anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution. Of course, he did achieve it, and an estimated 24,000 fewer Egyptian children died from immunizable diseases in 1987 than in 1984 as a result - a tremendous accomplishment.

Egypt has gained world renown for its progress on the oral rehydration front. In 1982, diarrhoeal diseases were the leading killer of young children in Egypt, causing the death of more than 100,000 under-tuos every year. And although oral rehydration salts (ORS) were available at government health centres and private pharmacies, fewer than 2 per cent of Egyptian mothers had even heard of it, and fewer than 1 per cent had used these packets. Yet by the end of 1986, 96 per cent of mothers with young children had heard of ORS and 82 per cent said they used it when their children had diarrhoea. This is an historically unprecedented advance for any major country in the world, and Egypt is to be commended for the vision, determination, and hard work which made it possible. The new approach began, in fact, in this governorate of Alexandria, where, for example, ORS packets were scaled down to 5.5 grammes to fit the common size of drinking glass, and various campaign messages were targetted on the mothers of young children in this region. The national mass media campaign that followed, which received key support and credibility from health professionals, is largely responsible for the tremendous success Egypt has achieved in this vital area. As a result of the work on immunization and oral rehydration therapy in this country, more than 100,000 children have not died in the past twelve months. The challenge at this stage, of course, is to sustain the momentum in the areas of immunization and control of diarrhoeal diseases while expanding both the scope of maternal and child health activities and the base of involvement and support.

Egypt is expanding to encompass still broader concerns related to children, as evidenced by the pioneering action of President Mubarak in declaring 1989-1999 a "decade for the protection and welfare of Egyptian children". I might add, and underline in fact, that Mrs. Mubarak has been a dynamic force in keeping a sharp focus on a broad spectrum of issues related to children, not only in Egypt but also in the Arab world generally - as Vice Chairperson of the Arab Council for Children and Development, and more broadly, in her participation in the Lignano Conference in 1987 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Furthermore, El Azhar has also made a major contribution to child survival efforts through its landmark scholarly work identifying passages in the Koran and Sunna which are relevant to children's issues, and we are appreciative of the leadership of Grand Sheikh Gad El Haq Ali Gad El Haq in making this possible. The results of his work are being felt in all parts of the Islamic world today.

In all of these efforts, our host country offers, in the 1980s, a dramatic illustration of morality catching up with capacity.

The convening of this conference on the future of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has the potential to define Egypt in an even stronger role of moral leadership in moving to advance our capacity to meet the needs and rights of children. For we live in a global society, and not all nations nor all peoples have been as successful as Egypt in putting children high on the political agenda and on people's agendas-for-action.

We will hear during this conference from Dr. Mamdouh Gabr, Secretary-General of the Arab Council for Children and Development, of prospects for strengthening the stand on ensuring child survival (which the Convention aims to support) through accelerating the fight against tetanus, acute respiratory infections and diarrhoeal diseases throughout the Arab world. And we will hear of the Convention's relevance to the plight of children in difficult circumstances, of working children, and children whose lives are affected by narcotics. We will hear several perspectives on how the application of legal mechanisms to issues related to children has the potential to unleash powerful but still inadequately-tapped resources on children's behalf. Progress in all of these issues either hinges on or will be vastly bolstered by adoption and ratification of the Convention.

But, adoption of the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child by the General Assembly will not occur automatically. There are growing pains involved in advancing as a civilization - advancing to the point at which we acknowledge our responsibilities toward our most vulnerable, and toward the future of our civilization. Adoption of the Convention will require an all-out effort by all of us.

Egypt's leadership is especially needed on two fronts. First, it is essential that in the next major step toward adoption of the Convention - the "Second Reading" of the draft, which will begin next week in Geneva - a strong and satisfactory conclusion be reached. On 28 May last, the Summit of the Organization of African Unity, with 31 Heads of State and Government participating, including President Mubarak, urged the United Nations General Assembly and the international community "to work towards an early completion of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its adoption by the General Assembly in 1989". Egypt's voice of support will be crucial to a positive outcome. On the second front - setting an example through active progress for children - a good start has already been made. In the context of the Convention this will include the application of international law to children's issues.

As we stand at the threshold of the last decade of this millenium, we have within our reach possibilities which have never before existed to make significant improvements in the lives of the world's children. These unprecedented potentials are accompanied by a serious responsibility - and by serious challenge. Egypt is called upon to consider it your own responsibility that the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child is adopted by the General Assembly in 1989. This is a responsibility being taken up here. And you are called upon to redouble efforts for the survival and development of children - for their future - and the future of our civilization.