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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
Turkish Conference on a National Policy for Children for the 1990s

Ankara, Turkey  
26 May 1989

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President Evren,  
Prime Minister Ozal, Prime Minister Bhutto,  
Speaker of Parliament Akbulut,  
Excellencies, distinguished participants,  
Colleagues and Friends:

Gün Aydin. This historic gathering reflects a potential new era emerging for children. The last 24 months have seen a rapid worldwide reduction in military and ideological confrontation - a virtual "outbreak of peace." As you begin your deliberations today, your Congress goal of a comprehensive national child policy for the 1990s can set an example for other countries throughout the world - industrialized as well as developing - as they turn their attentions from the conflicts and fears of the past to their visions and hopes for the future. We are now, as Prime Minister Bhutto said on Wednesday, at an "historic watershed."

Turkey has made great strides in mobilizing all sectors of society to work together on behalf of children in recent years. As Dr. Ihsan Dogramaci told UNICEF's Executive Board last month:

"What started as an internationally acclaimed immunization campaign in 1985 is now completing its evolution into a high coverage system of routine immunization of all children. The success was the result of social mobilization of teachers, religious leaders, village muhtars, as well as media advocacy increasing awareness and motivation of mothers and fathers and the community."

Ten countries sent official delegations to observe that campaign. The pictures they took back of President Evren and Prime Minister Ozal going out to immunize children stimulated leaders as diverse as President Suharto of Indonesia, President Li of China, and President Assad of Syria to take a personal role to ensure that their own countries achieve universal child immunization.

Turkey has gone forward from that campaign with a range of measures for child survival and development, including control of diarrhoeal diseases and of acute respiratory infections. Health Education in Turkey - through your schools and through your mass media - is at the vanguard of international efforts to bridge the vital gap between readily available health knowledge and its actual use by those for whom it will make the life-or-death difference.

Reductions in child mortality rates during this decade will save over 75,000 Turkish children in 1989, compared to the situation in 1980. This reduction in child mortality rates has been accelerating since the beginning of the decade. Assuming that you can reach the target of less than 50 infant deaths for each 1,000 births by December 1990, Turkey will be saving the lives of over 100,000 children each year compared to a decade earlier.

Still, the hard work remains ahead, especially to reach those children who are both especially at risk and hardest to reach. Infant and child mortality must come down further, especially to reduce the nearly 50 per cent of infant deaths which occur in the first 30 days of life. There is need to improve and sustain high immunization rates; to increase the reach of efforts to control diarrhoea and pneumonia; to ensure children - and especially girls - of a basic education; and to ensure that children's rights are met. These actions (to name but a few of the issues involved) clearly can be done. But they will require an all-out national effort, based on the lessons of your successes of recent years, i.e. to muster the political will, vision and leadership required to actually do all that can be done for children.

Turkey has a history of placing an official priority on children, beginning with Ataturk's declaration of April 23rd as a National Children's Day. Turkey's active role in promoting the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child is another sign that the national will, vision and leadership for children remains. The Convention will hopefully - and only with your continued support - be adopted this year by the United Nations General Assembly, and then will be opened for signature and ratification.

The Convention will establish a global standard regarding the responsibility of societies to ensure that the rights of children are protected. However, the real work to ensure these rights and meet these responsibilities in countries throughout the world will continue long after the Convention gains legal status. This Congress and Turkey's leadership in advancing the Convention's adoption by the United Nations General Assembly, along with ratification nationally, are an exemplary start on this work, and a sign of commitment to act on the principles set forth in the draft Convention.

It is also most gratifying that both Prime Minister Ozal and Prime Minister Bhutto have joined more than 45 heads of state and government to express their willingness to participate in a Summit for Children - to make children the starting point for international development planning that emphasizes the human side of development. Such a Summit will raise international consciousness of the basic principle which underlies your Congress - that it is, after all, children whose individual development and social contributions will shape the future of the world.

Your Excellencies; distinguished participants: You - we - have the potential - we have the responsibility - to write an important part of the next chapter in Turkey's history. The vision of what we could accomplish should be reflected in the recommendations of this Congress. Society is judged, as Prime Minister Bhutto reminded us Wednesday, by the way it looks after its weakest members. Your "national policy for children in the 1990s" should set an example for the rest of the world. These goals which you set must translate into action. With the leadership and support of exactly those sectors of the society assembled in this room today, the vision, the policy and the action for children can and will come together to alter the course of history.

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