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Address by Dr. Guido Bertolaso
Deputy Executive Director (External Relations)
of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
First European Paediatric Congress

Paris, France
9 March 1994

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Deputy Executive Director (External Relations)
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Paris - 9 March 1994

It is a great honour for UNICEF to participate in this important conference. I bring you warm greetings from our Executive Director, Jim Grant, who regrets that pressing business at the United Nations prevents his being here with you today. He has asked me to speak on his behalf and to transmit UNICEF's vision of hope for children on the eve of the 21st century. As a medical doctor who has done a great deal of work with poor and neglected children, I am particularly delighted to take part in your conference.

I am happy to report that -- contrary to the conventional wisdom and what we see in the media -- there has been significant progress for the world's children. First, the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- which only came into force in 1990 -- has already been embraced by more States than any other human rights treaty in history. One hundred and fifty-five countries have ratified the Convention to date; only 35 have yet to do so -- although several have ratified at the national level and will soon deposit the relevant formal documents with the United Nations.

We are hopeful that the goal of universal ratification will be reached by the end of 1995, making the Convention the first law of all humankind. Achievement of this goal would be a most fitting gift to the United Nations on its 50th anniversary. It would also send an unmistakable signal to the World Summit for Social Development -- scheduled for March 1995 in Copenhagen -- that the basic needs of each and every individual child must be treated as inalienable rights, as priorities for each and every society and each and every family.

Meeting children's basic needs will help accelerate solutions to the main problems that vex and threaten humankind on the threshold of the 21st century -- the problems of poverty, overpopulation, and environmental degradation that feed off of one another in a downward spiral that brings instability and strife in its wake. We have discovered an extraordinary lever for global progress, and its name is children. No global social agenda will meet the test of time if it does not recognize this.

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Second, a total of 156 heads of state and government have signed the 1990 World Summit for Children Declaration and Plan of Action. No other document in history has been signed by so many leaders. It commits its signatories to radically improving the lives of children by the year 2000, through the achievement of some 20 measurable health, nutrition and education goals. For the first time in history, the world has agreed on minimum standards, strategies and goals for nurturing the young.

Lest you think we are making too much of papers and promises, let me assure you that we are already seeing concrete results in the field. Some 120 countries have issued or drafted detailed National Programmes of Action for reaching mid-decade and year 2000 goals for children and women. And, as we explain at length in the 1994 State of the World's Children report, and our new annual statistical publication, Progress of Nations, most of the traditional enemies of children are now on the run -- vaccine-preventable diseases, malnutrition, ignorance, among others.

The Child Survival and Development Revolution promoted by UNICEF since the early 1980s has saved more than 20 million young lives, and it is now averting the deaths of approximately four million children per year. Prospects have never been better for accelerating this momentum. This task ahead remains formidable -- but a good start has been made. For the first time ever, there is a concerted, global effort underway for the world's children, with common goals and proven, low-cost strategies.

The world leaders who attended the World Summit for Children decided that the annual shame of 13 million largely preventable child deaths must not be allowed to accompany us into the 21st century. As paediatricians, you are on the front line of efforts to ensure that this promise is kept.

Before sharing with you some of UNICEF's thoughts on the role of paediatricians, I want to say a word about this First European Paediatric Congress, as well as about the countries in transition. The growing unity between your countries, the encouraging collaboration between your professional organizations, and the presence here of paediatricians from Eastern Europe and the republics of the former Soviet Union, symbolize the new era -- the post-Cold War era -- in which we are living. I believe that this era has opened a rare "window of opportunity" in history, in which it may be possible to accelerate human progress to an unprecedented degree. UNICEF, and our marvellous National Committees throughout the region, are counting on you and your organizations to continue providing leadership in this process.

UNICEF's International Child Development Centre in Florence recently published the first major study on Public Policy and

Social Conditions in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. As you know, the unavoidable economic and geopolitical transformation that is taking place there has had a drastic effect on social conditions. Although not all, or even most, of the recent developments have been negative, initial hopes for rapid transformation and economic prosperity have quickly been tempered by a considerable and lasting decline in output, employment, incomes, and social indicators.

While the whole region has been negatively affected, the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe have been hit most severely by mounting poverty, an unprecedented fall in births, declining school enrolment rates and escalating death rates. Between 1989 and 1993, for instance, the crude death rate increased by 17 per cent in Romania, 12 per cent in Bulgaria, and by similar amounts in Albania and Ukraine. In Russia, it increased by a truly shocking 32 per cent, accounting for a yearly increase of over half a million deaths. These figures help illustrate the magnitude and severity of the social crisis, which, as all of you well know, always hits the most vulnerable the hardest. Children are paying an especially high price.

In response, UNICEF has gradually extended its advocacy, information, emergency and program activities to the countries in the region. By the end of 1993, UNICEF was providing some form of assistance in 27 countries of the region, whereas in 1990, we had been active in only one. Because of our priorities in the developing world, of course, our assistance to this region is sharply focused and highly selective. But the crisis is grave and it is our hope that Western Europe's paediatricians will help their counterparts rebuild the region's social safety nets, starting with children's health.

Immersed as you are in your daily whirlwind of activity, you many not realize the extent to which what you do sets the pace. The tools you have developed, the experience you have gained over the years, have given us the capacity to radically reduce child mortality and illness.

Where they have already been made, these gains must now be sustained; they must be extended to the places where they have yet to reach. Europe, of course, is fortunate in that most of the World Summit goals for children have long since been achieved, but poverty continues to stunt the lives and rob the potential of children in pockets throughout the region. What you do in your own practices has enormous influence. Your leadership is absolutely critical, not only for reaching those bypassed by progress in your own societies, but also for the children of the developing world. Solidarity in the age of the global village is not charity but an imperative of survival.

What can you do to help keep the great promise of the World Summit for Children?

* Last year, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on all member and non-member governments to subscribe to the principle of "first call for children", endorsed at the 1990 World Summit for Children. According to this principle, the essential needs of children must become a top political priority when resources are allocated and policies are devised. Paediatricians and their professional organizations are in an excellent position to see to it that this principle is translated into reality. Your advocacy has weight thanks to the respect and prestige you have earned in your societies.

* Second, although the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by most European countries, some countries have not yet done so. Paediatricians must be a leading voice calling for universal ratification and, most importantly, application of the Convention. The Convention safeguards the rights of all children, and you can help see to it that no child is neglected or abused because of their race or their religion, or because they come from a poor family. Taking a stand against hatred and intolerance is not to politicize paediatrics but to take seriously the healing mandate of our profession. Taking a stand against sexual exploitation and economic exploitation of children is another way of defending their essential human rights and dignity.

* Third, with a major war underway in the heart of Europe, and numerous conflicts raging in many parts of the globe, your voices must be added to the outcry against the obscene victimization of children and other innocents. You must remind the world that where children are concerned there are no "sides" -- no child can be counted as adversary. There are any number of practical and morally symbolic ways you can help the children of war; many of you are already helping. As one example, this conference might consider calling for a complete ban on the production, use, stockpiling, export and import of anti-personnel mines -- cruel weapons that keep on taking lives (including children's lives) long after the guns stop firing.

* Fourth, to the extent that all of you use and promote universal immunization, use ORT instead of IVs for diarrhoea, promote breastfeeding, growth monitoring and other basic interventions, you will be setting an example that will be taken seriously in the less developed countries. And the medical students and practitioners from the Third World who are in your countries will return home

with the understanding that technologies do not have to be elaborate or expensive to be effective. You can help the world toward the goal of Health for All.

In short, there is a role for each and every one of us, in our own spheres of specialization and as advocates for children and human development. Together, we can go beyond child survival to all round development in a more caring world.

But let us not forget for a single instant that 13 million children will die again this year -- 35,000 again today -- of causes that are now largely preventable. Let us not forget this obscenity as we go about our daily lives, as we set our priorities, as we allocate resources, as we relate to our neighbours and families, as we relate to ourselves in our quiet moments of self-reflection. The world's children are looking to us for something better, something that will give them -- and us all -- a better future.