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Message from Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
National Maternal and Child Health / Family Planning Congress

Lahore, Pakistan  
25-27 April 1994

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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
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I am delighted to send greetings to the important Congress you are holding on the theme: Safe Motherhood and Sustainable Development -- Maternal and Child Health and Family Planning as Basic Components of Primary Health Care.

In the Alma Ata Declaration on Health for All, issued in 1978, the nations of the world dared to define health as a fundamental human right and embraced a strategy -- primary health care -- and even a deadline -- the year 2000 -- for guaranteeing health not for a few, not for a privileged minority, not for the industrialized countries alone, but for all. I believe it is no exaggeration to say that the Declaration represented a great intellectual and moral leap forward for humankind.

The history of these past 15 years since the Alma Ata Conference sponsored by WHO and UNICEF is one of spectacular, if uneven, achievement. In little more than one generation, malnutrition rates have been reduced by about 30 per cent in the developing world; life expectancy has increased by about a third; the proportion of children enrolled in primary school has risen from less than half to more than three quarters; and the percentage of rural families with access to safe water has risen from less than 10 per cent to more than 60 per cent. Average family size is now falling in almost every country.

In 1978, two out of every ten children died before their fifth birthdays. Today that number has been cut in half, and child death rates due to largely preventable malnutrition and disease are continuing to decline, particularly in Asia, Latin America, North Africa and the Middle East.

Over 20 million deaths of young children have been averted since 1983 through low-cost interventions and mass mobilization, backbones of what we at UNICEF call the Child Survival and Development Revolution.

Still, 13 million children die each year, the vast majority of them of causes that we can readily prevent at low cost -- this is an obscenity. And far too little progress has been made in reducing maternal mortality -- the half million deaths of women each year due to pregnancy and childbirth-related causes are simply a disgrace to contemporary civilization. We must greatly strengthen

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the "M" in MCH programmes, step up support for the Safe Motherhood Initiative, and use every opportunity to stress the fundamental importance of maternal health -- not only for women -- but for their children.

Overcoming the major diseases, drastically reducing maternal and child deaths, ensuring that every community has safe water supply, providing at least a basic education for every child (with special emphasis on the girl child), making family planning universally available -- these are some of the most effective and affordable ways of helping people to lift themselves out of absolute poverty, to slow population growth, and to ease the pressure on the environment.

At the 1990 World Summit for Children, most of the world's political leaders agreed that advances in knowledge and communication have made it possible to achieve most of these goals by the year 2000. Specific targets were set building on success in reaching the 80 per cent immunization goal and, to date, some 120 developing nations -- accounting for nearly 90 per cent of the world's poorest children -- have now drawn up or are near to finalizing national programmes of action to reach the new targets.

Ten priority mid-decade goals have been agreed upon by the Executive Boards of WHO and UNICEF, as well as most of the political leaders of the developing world. These 1995 targets include the elimination of neonatal tetanus, a 95 per cent reduction in measles deaths, an 80 per cent use rate for the oral rehydration therapy that can prevent death from diarrhoeal disease, the elimination of guinea worm disease, the eradication of polio in selected countries, an end to vitamin A deficiency on today's scale, the universal iodization of salt supplies, and the achievement of 80 per cent immunization in all countries that have not yet reached that goal.

WHO's Director-General, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, and I have written to all heads of state and government urging them to ensure that every effort is made to achieve the mid-decade targets. Reaching these goals would prevent the deaths of over two million children a year and protect millions more against the major causes of child blindness and mental retardation.

Rarely does humanity get the chance to do so much good for so many, in such a short time, and at so little cost. We owe it to our children -- and to ourselves -- to make achievement of the goals a top priority of every society.

Success in Pakistan will be critical for global achievement of the goals for children. But if Pakistan is to achieve its goals, the pace of progress in most areas of human development will have to be significantly increased. Many of the benefits of economic growth over the past decades have been outstripped by high

population growth and undermined by inadequate investment in social development. Over the next period, Pakistan will have to revitalize and decentralize its health system, mobilizing the population itself to ensure broader coverage and more equitable access. Primary education needs to be made universally available and relevant to the lives of the poor. Development as a whole will stagnate unless deeply entrenched discrimination against girls and women is ended in all spheres of public and private life.

Advocates for children's well-being and human development in Pakistan have powerful tools for accelerating progress in the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- ratified by Pakistan in 1990 -- and in its National Plan of Action for children. These must become the heart of a partnership between government and civil society -- above and beyond political differences or any other consideration -- to benefit the nation as a whole. Children, Pakistan's future, can be a launching pad for broader social progress and national unity.

Your Maternal and Child Health/Family Planning Congress is, therefore, extremely timely and can help accelerate the momentum of progress in your country and the region. I wish you the best of luck in your deliberations.