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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Opening of the 1994 Annual Session
of the
UNICEF Executive Board

New York
2 May 1994

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UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
1994 Annual Session

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New York - 2 May 1994

I would like to open my remarks at this Annual Session on a note of celebration -- celebration of the all-race elections held last week in South Africa. The holding of these elections marked the passing of an era of shame -- the shame of Apartheid -- and the beginning of an era of dignity for all South Africans. This note of celebration is in marked contrast to the Regular Session, which opened one week ago with a moment of silence for our staff members slain in the current tragic situation in Rwanda.

The children of South Africa stand to benefit most from the transformation of their country. It was in recognition of this that Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk spoke in their Nobel Peace Prize addresses of South Africa's children in Oslo last December, and followed it by jointly signing the Declaration and Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children in Stockholm. The first time the two signed a document together. In so doing, they sent the unmistakable message that children should be put first - ahead of politics, ahead of race, ahead of class, ahead of all other considerations. The signatures symbolized not only the commitment of the two leaders to build a better future for their country, but also the world's growing acceptance that each country's future depends upon its children and that we all need to do better by them to achieve the future we seek.

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Reuters reported that the first three babies born on the first day of South Africa's post-apartheid era were named by their euphoric parents: Freedom, Happiness and Thankful -- which, I'd say, sums it all up very nicely...

So once more, we meet under the sign of change -- major change that has reshaped the world in a few short years and made change inevitable, and necessary, here at the United Nations as well. And UN reform has led to changes in the composition of the UNICEF Executive Board, in the schedule and format of our meetings. It may take a while to get used to these changes, and here and there we might have to make some adjustments to get the arrangements just right... but one thing we can say from the outset is that having more frequent meetings will give us -- Secretariat and Executive Board together -- the opportunity to discuss in greater depth the policies and strategies that guide UNICEF's programmes of cooperation and our advocacy work on behalf of the world's children.

Having dealt with the bulk of programme items at our regular session last week, we can now turn our attention to matters of policy and strategy that link concerns for children's well-being to all the burning issues of development that challenge us as we approach the 21st century.

My statement today is meant to highlight and complement key themes and issues contained in the cluster of reports scheduled for discussion today and tomorrow:

* Report of the Executive Director (E/ICEF/1994/2 -- Part I, Part II, and Add.1);

* Medium-Term Plan, including the financial medium-term plan, for the period 1994-1997 (E/ICEF/1994/3);

* Progress report on the follow-up to the World Summit for Children (E/ICEF/1994/12); and

* Ensuring child survival, protection and development in Africa (E/ICEF/1994/L.4).

In particular, I invite you to closely consider Part I of the Executive Director's Report, several of whose themes I will be stressing in my statement today. Let me emphasize at the outset that we look forward to hearing from members of the Board, Observer delegations, National Committees for UNICEF and the NGO coalition, on the critical issues raised in this cluster of reports. Periodically during the discussion and on Wednesday, I will respond as best I can to your concerns and suggestions.

The first is that we are clearly in the midst of an historic breakthrough in the way the world regards and treats its children. When UNICEF was first accepted as a global organization, in 1950, children were still a highly marginalized part of society, with limited rights only in a handful of countries, and staggering death tolls -- some 75 thousand per day -- more than double today's toll in a world with 50 per cent more births than in 1950.

1990 was the year that most visibly manifested the mammoth shift that occurred during the intervening decades. That great "children's year" began with the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All -- the first serious global effort to address the need to achieve a basic education for everyone.

Then the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force following the first 20 ratifications, which had come in an unprecedentedly short time after its adoption by the General Assembly in November 1989.

This was followed a few weeks later by the World Summit for Children, which not only articulated this historic shift but also set out a specific Plan of Action for what should actually be accomplished during the 1990s, including some 20 quantified goals for children and women.

And the year ended with the achievement of the largest peacetime collaborative effort in history -- universal child immunization (UCI), reaching virtually every hamlet in the world with the latest in science and medicine in this critical area.

But skeptics were justified in asking: will these ambitious promises be kept? The promises did call, after all, for all countries to ratify the most complex and far-reaching human rights convention in history; and achievement of the World Summit year 2000 goals would mean nothing less than overcoming most of the worst aspects of poverty for children -- worldwide.

The second general point I would like to make is that this breakthrough for children is not an aberration. It is part of a tectonic shift we've been experiencing over the past fifty years. In recent decades, there has been a sea-change in the relationship of the individual and society. From historical acceptance of the notion that people exist to serve their State and its elite -- that under conditions of scarcity, the vast majority must labour to support the privileges of a relative few -- we are gradually, painfully, zig-zaggingly and bravely moving toward universal

acceptance of the idea that the State exists to serve its people -- to help to achieve freedom from want, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom from fear.

Powered in part by the technological and information revolutions that have so vastly expanded our capacity to extend the benefits of progress to all, this new concept has completely changed what we expect from development.

When UNICEF was founded, the focus was on post-war relief and reconstruction -- centered in Europe. As the notion of development emerged in the 1950s, the emphasis was on how to bring economic growth to countries and how to achieve freedom from want -- how to overcome poverty -- through economic growth. How differently we see development today! Recently, UNDP's new Administrator Gustave Speth offered a splendid definition of sustainable human development that all of us might well consider adopting:

"Sustainable human development is development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities, and provides for their participation in decisions affecting them. It is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs, pro-democracy, pro-women and pro-children."

This, then, is the new context in which we are working. And the documents before us provide a reassuring response to the skeptics of 1990; they begin to answer the question: are the promises being kept?

First of all, there has been a worldwide response to the World Summit's call for rapid ratification of the Convention. In the past two weeks alone, Japan and Mozambique have ratified, bringing to 159 the number of States Parties -- more than for any human rights treaty in history. Only 31 countries have not ratified, including three on this Executive Board -- two of which have already signed their intention of early action. Universal ratification, a mid-decade goal called for by this Board last Spring, now looks like a real possibility.

Secondly, ratification is being accompanied by vast actions to implement important areas of the Convention -- the best example being actions to achieve the goals of the World Summit for Children which essentially address the rights of the child to health, nutrition and education.

Follow-up to the World Summit for Children is, in fact, quite substantial, as you see in the progress report before you. The great majority of the world's children are now covered by national programmes of action (NPAs), as called for by the World Summit. And in scores of countries, for the first time in history, provinces and municipalities now have programmes for children coordinated with national plans to achieve concrete goals.

Third, consensus has solidified around a set of targets for the end of 1995 which will demonstrate the seriousness of the world's commitment to the decade goals. This consensus, derived from regional assemblies such as the OAU and SAARC Summits and the Asia and Pacific Ministerial Consultation on Goals for Children in the 1990s and, most recently, the Second Meeting on Children and Social Policy in the Americas chaired by the First Lady of Colombia, was given visible manifestation on 30 September 1993, the third anniversary of the World Summit for Children. At the Round Table on Keeping the Promise to Children, a mini-summit convened by the Secretary-General, held at the United Nations, seven heads of state or government, along with special envoys and ministers from another 17 countries, reaffirmed the commitment to the mid-decade goals. The co-chairpersons of that Round Table, Prime Minister Zia of Bangladesh and President Chamorro of Nicaragua, in their summation of the day's events said:

"It is our collective opinion that these mid-decade goals...can be achieved in most countries with national will and a modicum of international support."

Essentially in the same vein, WHO Director-General Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima said in his statement at the most recent meeting of the Joint Committee on Health Policy:

"At this stage of implementation, it may appear that these [mid-decade] goals, by and large, remain inspirational, particularly in countries where health infrastructure is weak. Yet these goals are technically feasible. They require political will and solidarity, both at national and international levels, translated into concrete commitments and supported by good public health planning and management."

I am glad to report that encouraging progress toward most of the mid-decade goals -- particularly those related to health and nutrition -- is being achieved in many countries with a majority of the world's children. And I am pleased to report signs that the logjam in the area of basic education has begun to break up over the past few years. At the Education For All Summit of Nine High-Population Countries in New Delhi last December, we saw a renewed

determination to reach the education targets; more countries are showing a willingness to modify conventional approaches so that education can reach and become more relevant to the lives of deprived and marginalized sectors; there is increased awareness of the need to prioritize access of girls and women to education, and we are encouraged by evidence of increases in the amount and proportion of national and international funding now going to basic education. This new impetus must be accelerated. Gains in basic education -- of inestimable value in their own right -- will help us achieve goals in every other area of development, and enhance their sustainability.

Achievement of the mid-decade goals by the end of 1995 will mean saving an additional two million young lives every year as compared to 1992, and largely remove the vitamin A and iodine deficiencies that are, respectively, the main causes of blindness and mental retardation affecting millions of children. It will also mean that the Convention on the Rights of the Child will have become the first truly universal law. It will mean greater confidence to reach the year 2000 goals.

I cannot emphasize enough the need to you distinguished delegates for each of you to return to your capital urging full support to the achievement of the mid-decade goals.

In Part I of my report I have raised the major issues which I believe the Board should address. The first of these is under the heading: "The Critical Element", in which I note that the most critical element needed to sustain the momentum for children is for the industrialized countries to show the collective resolve to provide the modest level of additional resources needed to sustain their part of the effort. Most developing countries have demonstrated their commitment to this enterprise. They have not sat back waiting for donors to put up more money. They have gone ahead with the resources at hand and many have shown extraordinary political will to improve the lot of their children. The industrialized countries, which also pledged at the World Summit for Children to reexamine their development assistance budgets "to ensure that programmes aimed at the achievement of goals for the survival, development and protection of children will have a priority when resources are allocated", have not -- with one or possibly two important exceptions -- yet shown the same degree of political will.

As U.S. President Clinton said in his address to the General Assembly last September: "We are compelled to do better by the world's children."

Many delegates may feel that they have little if any leverage over existing constraints on mobilization of new and additional resources. One area, however, over which they can exercise influence is the allocation of those resources which do exist. Perhaps the most promising avenue in the short run is through adopting the concept of "20/20". As you know, this UNICEF initiative, building on ideas first presented in UNDP's 1991 and 1992 Human Development Report, is aimed at assuring that developing countries devote at least 20 per cent of government expenditure to investment in human priority concerns -- primary health care including family planning, nutrition, basic education, low-cost water and sanitation -- supported by a commensurate level of ODA for these same priority areas. Prime Minister Brundtland of Norway, in her Rafael M. Salas Lecture at the United Nations on 28 September, 1993, has called the allocation of 20 per cent of government expenditure and 20 per cent of development aid to priority human concerns "a minimum requirement".

This concept now needs to become far more widely accepted and applied. Under the new arrangements for Executive Board deliberations, the Board may wish to consider devoting all or a portion of one session later this year to what Board members themselves can do to implement 20/20 in both developed and industrialized countries.

Another issue raised in Part I that I wish to bring to your attention is that of emergencies. We are privileged that Mr. Peter Hansen, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, will be addressing us this week. UNICEF is strongly committed to system-wide collaboration in emergencies under the leadership of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

In 1989, UNICEF devoted 9 per cent of our expenditures to emergencies; last year, it increased to 28 per cent. We welcome the thoughts of delegations regarding the proliferation of emergencies, many of them complex emergencies, which are not only absorbing a greater percentage of our resources than ever before, but are also placing increasing demands on staff and management time -- time that normally would go to dealing with the "silent emergencies" of largely preventable malnutrition and disease that kill and maim far more children, 30 times more children, each year than do emergencies and wars.

UNICEF will be supporting the Secretary General's preparations for the report he will issue on protecting children in situations of armed conflict. I know you agree that there is an urgent need to come up with better ways to shield the most innocent and vulnerable members of society from the kind of unspeakable and

callous brutality we have witnessed over the past few years, and I invite delegates to suggest ways of providing them with special protection. And more generally, how can we enhance the important role that UNICEF and the entire UN system play in addressing humanitarian needs in the increasing number of situations where the UN has a central political and peacekeeping role with military forces. And is it not time to support those working for a total ban on anti-personnel landmines, whose toll among children is absolutely unconscionable?

Two years ago before this Executive Board, Dr. Sadako Ogata, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, raised the issue of the impact of sanctions on children. This is an area of increasing concern. We recognize that sanctions are a necessary tool for international action, occupying the middle-ground between rhetorical resolutions and the use of armed force. Sanctions must, however, be applied in a manner in which children of poor families -- the most vulnerable and, I might add, the most innocent in a society -- do not suffer most cruelly. Without renouncing the non-military mechanisms of international pressure wisely provided in the Charter, it should be possible to refine our existing tools -- or to develop others -- so that children are not major and unintended victims of particular sanctions. The ethical-legal environment in which we are operating must ensure that the situation of children under sanctions' regimes remains in the forefront of our concerns.

I invite the members of the Board to discuss this issue and consider the following: might it not be required that any proposals for sanctions include a "child impact statement", describing the expected impact of the proposed sanctions on children, and detailing the offsetting measures proposed to be taken?

A third issue identified in Part I of my report -- Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic States -- was largely covered during last week's Regular Session. The Board approved a modest increase in resources for several country programmes -- primarily from sources that do not represent diversions from assistance to the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America -- as well as a new regional structure for UNICEF encompassing all 27 countries of the region. The social crisis of these countries is a very serious one, and there is need to give the transition a more human face.

A fourth issue that calls for discussion is the priority on Africa that your Secretariat feels is more important than ever. As you will see outlined in our report on Africa, far more needs to be done to support the valiant efforts of so many African countries to meet the goals for children and women, in many cases amidst

emergencies or following devastating wars. Let me give you two very different kinds of examples of why we are concerned. UNICEF's total supplementary funding income in 1993 for the countries of West Africa -- one of the poorest regions in the world -- was lower than that for any other region. This is particularly disappointing in view of donor commitments to maintain support for the Least Developed Countries. Second is the fact that sub-Saharan Africa continues to suffer a debt burden that is proportionately by far the heaviest in the world -- at a time when the debt crisis is over for most of the developing world.

A fifth issue before you is Executive Board action on UNICEF's Medium-Term Plan best overview of what UNICEF does. You will observe that we have reduced our income projections as compared to the last medium-term plan. Income growth is still projected -- but not at the same rate as recent years. This is, of course, related to the larger issue of ODA for meeting priority human needs. If our conservative projections of slowed income growth are correct, and emergencies continue to absorb a higher proportion of UNICEF resources, it will become more difficult not only to effectively support achievement of the year 2000 goals, but also to achieve some indicative planning goals approved by the Executive Board in the past. How, for example, can we achieve the critically important goal of devoting fully 20 per cent of programme expenditure to basic education by the end of this decade, without reducing our ongoing commitments to the health sector? We look forward to hearing your thoughts on the implications of possible reduced income growth for UNICEF's future. I also draw your attention to the emphasis given in the Medium-Term Plan to sustainability, capacity-building, empowerment and accountability - vital areas identified in the Multi-Donor Evaluation completed last year.

Lastly, Part I of my report deals with UN reform and Executive Board restructuring. Reform of the United Nations means more than making the system more efficient on the economic and social front from the operational point of view; it must also mean turning it into an effective instrumentality for seriously addressing the global policy issues of our time, for articulating a common vision for progress in the global village.

The past year has seen considerable progress on reform of the United Nations system. UNICEF is fully committed to the implementation of General Assembly resolution 47/199 and has played a crucial role in that process, applying its experience as chair during 1993 of the JCGP, the body responsible for implementing important elements of resolution 47/199. Much progress has been made on the harmonization of cycles, the development of a common

manual, resolving issues around the establishment of common premises, the development of system-wide training programmes, establishing criteria and methods of selecting resident coordinators and supporting the implementation of the country strategy note. Practical country-level actions have been taken in many countries to make the guidelines and procedures developed within the JCGP framework a reality.

As you will see reflected in several of the documents before you, we already have a degree of cohesion in working toward the goals for children and women that is really unprecedented. Inter-agency collaboration was critical to the success of the immunization effort in the late 1980s; but that was on a single front. Now we are beginning to see it make a difference on a much broader range of activities.

This came to the fore recently when the UNDP Administrator instructed all UNDP field offices to:

"support and build on the goals for health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation agreed to at the World Summit for Children. These goals form part of Agenda 21, agreed to at UNCED, Rio, June 1992. Your UNICEF colleagues are actively supporting national efforts toward these goals, as are other UN agencies and NGOs. But, there is room and need for support from other parts of the system. As UNDP representatives, I ask you to play an especially creative role, both to explore ways to strengthen linkages with other parts of the UNDP country programme and, as UN Resident Coordinators, to encourage other UN colleagues to play their part in strengthening linkages with their own activities."

It is clear that together, Executive Board and Secretariat must continue to support the process of UN reform on the operational side, and I believe that our recently-launched Management Study can make a useful contribution to this important ongoing effort. But how can the Executive Board also contribute more to the discussion and decision-making on major policy issues? I would hope that under the new Board format and arrangements we find time to address the implications of alternative policies for children for the burning global issues of our time. Actions for children can do far more than just benefit children. We are learning that policy-makers are often prepared to take innovative actions first under the name of children; these initiatives frequently serve as forerunners of similar actions in other fields.

It is, after all, no accident that the first global summit ever held was in the name of children. Nor was it an accident that the most wide-ranging and universally-accepted human rights instrument is that for children. Collaborative actions for children can be the cutting edge for addressing many global problems, from population and environment, to poverty, gender equity and democracy.

What this means is that this Board is the fulcrum of one of the most powerful levers of progressive change of our time, and we must make optimal use of our restructuring and UN reform to enhance the contribution we can make.

Guidance from delegations will be crucial for UNICEF's effective participation in the upcoming global conferences on population, social development and women. It seems to me that in all of these critically important gatherings we need to get across the message that children and women can "jump-start" the broader process of sustainable human development.

I believe that the policy review on women and girls that you will consider during this session (E/ICEF/1994/L.5) is a real contribution to the Beijing and other conferences. And it is noteworthy that the draft declaration for Cairo stresses the need for progress on four fronts if global population is to be stabilized at a relatively low level and at an early date:

- 1) progress on education, particularly of girls;
- 2) progress on child health;
- 3) progress on gender -- women's rights; and, of course
- 4) progress on access to family planning information and services.

-- all of them areas where UNICEF is making a unique contribution or complementing the work of others. These four together hold potential for stabilizing population at an acceptable level and an early date.

So I am especially delighted that Dr. Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of UNFPA and Secretary-General of the upcoming International Conference on Population and Development, and Ms. Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, will be addressing this Annual Session of the Executive Board.

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At the Roundtable for the 3rd Anniversary of the World Summit for Children, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali articulated the centrality of children in the development process as follows:

"Of all subjects of development -- he said -- none has the acceptance, or the power to mobilize, as does the cause of children. Our children are our future."

History has nominated us -- Secretariat and Board members, Observers, National Committees for UNICEF, NGOs, and each of us as individuals -- to help shape the 21st century through our actions on behalf of children. This is the ultimate meaning and purpose of our deliberations here this week. We can make a very great difference. Thank you.