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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
"Youth United for Peace, Reconciliation and Development" Rally

Soweto, South Africa
16 June 1994

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Soweto - 16 June 1994

As we meet here today in Soweto, June 16th is being commemorated around the world as the Day of the African Child -- at the United Nations in New York, in public rallies, in sporting events, in schoolrooms, in places of worship, in musical performances and street fairs in dozens of countries, with the participation of the Secretary General of the United Nations, heads of state and government, ministers, first ladies, the media, NGOs, and, of course, children and youth. Tonight, at the United Nations General Assembly Hall, Archbishop Desmond Tutu will speak to the world on behalf of the people of South Africa. CNN is providing world-wide TV coverage, including special features.

In response to the call of the Organization of African Unity, UNICEF has worked hard to make this yearly commemoration a global mobilization of solidarity with Africa's children and youth. In past years, celebrations have been marked by the solemn remembrance of the young people who were tragically slain, right here in Soweto, on June 16, 1976, and by an acute awareness of how terribly South Africa's children and youth suffered during the long night of apartheid.

Today, the world stands up and salutes you -- the youth of South Africa.

The fact that, for the first time, South Africa's youth organizations and children's movements publicly joined together to hold this rally, and others around the country, sends a powerful message to the entire world: that the energy and commitment of youth that helped bring an end to the apartheid era can be maintained -- but channeled now into nation-building. Your unity behind the banner of "peace, reconciliation and development" sets an invaluable example for young people everywhere -- especially at a time when young people in many countries are being marginalized, set against one another and pulled into conflicts ripping apart the social fabric.

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I wonder how many of you had the sort of childhood that you dream of for the children you will have some day? So many of you had your childhoods taken away from you by a cruel system that denied your right to grow and plan, to health and education, to family and peace. So many of you had to grow up too soon, assuming the heavy responsibilities of adults and fighting for survival and dignity when you should have been studying or playing. We know that democracy cannot give you your childhoods back; but with your active participation democracy certainly will present opportunities to help you make up for lost time.

You have won the right to basic opportunities for education.

You have won the right to equal access to employment.

You have won the right to equal access to health care.

You have won the right to be heard, the right to participate and the right to make a difference in your country.

In few countries have youth carved themselves as central a space in public life as you have done.

We all know that the poverty which is children's worst enemy will not disappear overnight, as hard as this country's committed new leadership works to eradicate it. The new government's Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) puts the country on a path of transformation, but evening out economic and social disparities will necessarily take some time. However, there are a number of important ways in which the RDP can make a difference to improving your families' lives in a very short time. There are readily doable goals for the end of 1995 and the year 2000 -- in health, education and nutrition -- that, if achieved, will constitute the first major tangible fruits of democracy in the social and economic sphere in South Africa.

The young people and children of this country -- and indeed of the world -- are most fortunate to have a President like Nelson Mandela, whose concern and love for children is being demonstrated in concrete actions, rather than just words. But President Mandela will need your help, your strength, your enthusiasm and your intelligence to get the job done. As respected members of the community, youth and young adults can -- and must -- play a crucial role in seeing to it that the new generation of children can have a childhood. Your younger brothers and sisters do not have to suffer the way you have suffered.

You may not realize it on a day-to-day basis, but what you have accomplished here -- what the South African people and youth have accomplished -- has reawakened hope for all of Africa. I saw this new hope this very week in Tunis where 42 African leaders, including President Mandela, were meeting at the OAU Summit. With

the great material wealth and vast human potential of South Africa, progress here can accelerate progressive change and development throughout the continent. Even as we rejoice here today, let us remember the children and youth of African countries torn apart by war, wracked by famine, assaulted by poverty and injustice. They, too, have a right to peace, reconciliation and development -- and to a childhood.

During the dying years of apartheid, UNICEF was exempted from UN sanctions in order to provide modest support to NGOs working heroically to help the country's children. Now that a legitimate government has been elected and sanctions have been lifted, our principal programme of cooperation will be with the government -- as in all countries where UNICEF works -- but we will continue our vital partnership with NGOs. Just last month UNICEF's Executive Board gave the green light to our first full-fledged country programme in South Africa. We look forward to being a long-term partner in the transformation of this great country, and to strengthening our partnerships with the youth and children's movements.

The presentation today to President Mandela of a National Programme of Action for Children Framework, and the commitment of the education sector and students to return to a culture of learning, are major steps forward along the path to human development. But in pursuing a better future for all in South Africa, we should all keep problems in relative perspective. The world may continue to see Africa as an underdeveloped continent with all the woes possible. But Africa, South Africa included, is not alone:

In the USA - every 35 minutes a child dies from poverty;

In the USA - every 12 seconds of the school day a child drops out;

In the USA - every 26 seconds, a child runs away from home;

In the USA - nearly every minute, a teenage girl has a baby

...and so on.

And the USA is seen as a model by many other countries of the world!

But the USA is now doing something about changing this trend. Along with Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and other industrialized nations, the United States now has submitted a National Programme of Action for Children and is pursuing the process of improving conditions for its children.

Now that South Africa has achieved universal adult franchise through the ballot box and is now in the 100-day honeymoon period - it is my hope that you will conceive universal programmes for children. After all, children and youth are the largest population group in the New South Africa. Yet children have no vote -- they have no economic power. That is why we call on the youth to speak not just on your own behalf, but also for your younger brothers and sisters. After all, as President Mandela has previously stated, "adults do not own the world, they simply borrowed it from the children".

In closing, let me say that Hector Peterson and his fallen brothers and sisters did not die in vain. Their sacrifice and the heroism of generations of South Africans -- and the wisdom of your political leaders -- have made this great day possible. As Reverend Martin Luther King, the great American civil rights leader, reminded us shortly before his tragic death:

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

Congratulations, South Africa! May your future be as bright as your children's eyes and as beautiful as their faces!