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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
in Acceptance of  
the 1994 Human Rights Award  
of Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights

Minneapolis, Minnesota  
26 July 1994

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I am delighted to be back in Minnesota among so many friends and advocates for human rights. I am deeply honoured by the award you have bestowed on me. I hope you will not be offended if I accept it, as well, on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund and its 7,000 staff members in over 120 countries; what we in UNICEF are doing is a collective undertaking that dwarfs the contribution of any one individual. The "1994 Human Rights Award for Outstanding Work Protecting the Human Rights of Children" will inspire all of us at UNICEF to do more for the world's children -- and do it better. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Let me take this opportunity to commend Minnesota Human Rights Advocates, its hard-working staff, volunteers, and supporters -- and, in particular, its Executive Director, Ms. Barbara Frey -- for the exemplary work all of you have been doing to promote human rights around the world. What impresses me most about Minnesota Advocates is the fact that you are combining pioneering human rights' investigation and advocacy with education of your State's youngsters about their own rights and the importance of public service.

Too often, human rights activism has left children entirely out of the picture -- which doesn't make sense, of course, since the future of human rights depends on what we teach (or don't teach) children today. This Fall, the General Assembly is expected to proclaim the period 1995 to 2005 as "International Decade for Human Rights Education", so you are ahead of the game and it looks like you will have many opportunities to share your valuable experiences with others over the next ten years and beyond.

Let me also thank Ambassador Arvonne Fraser for her kind words; she, too, is an outstanding human rights advocate and leader in the movement for women's rights, as well as a friend of more than 30 years. She is one of the movers and shakers behind the progress now being made toward United States ratification of the

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U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was signed by President Carter but has still not been acted upon by the Senate. I would like to ask her to extend my warm regards to her husband, Don Fraser, a longtime friend of UNICEF and outspoken defender of human rights, who first contacted me about the Minnesota Advocates award. Greetings, also, to Mayor Sharon Sayles-Belton of Minneapolis; like Don Fraser when he was mayor, she has made children a special focus, and I would like to take this opportunity to invite her to join the new international mayors movement for children that UNICEF has been promoting. And lastly, I am especially pleased to see that my old boss Harold Stassen is here with us tonight. He must be tired of people saying that he is the oldest living signatory of the United Nations Charter -- nobody wants to be the oldest living *anything* -- but perhaps he will forgive me for repeating it tonight if I add that his ideas for United Nations reform, and for improving international life in general, are those of a young and vital mind, and are a most welcome contribution to the ongoing debate on reform of the international system.

I would also like to take a moment to praise the work of tonight's co-honoree, the National Street Children's Movement of Brazil. We know the organization well -- it grew out of the Alternatives for Street Children Project jointly sponsored by the Brazilian government and UNICEF in the early 1980s. It is richly deserving of your 1994 Human Rights Award. As you heard from Ms. Cristina Franco, the National Street Children's Movement has been able to put the issue of street children solidly on Brazil's political agenda; tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Brazil's poorest children have benefitted from the Movement's efforts.

What she didn't say is that her organization has also been an important catalyst for international awareness and action for street children. What is more, Brazil's street children's movement has helped build what is known as the Pact for Children -- an extraordinarily broad and active Brazilian coalition that brings together politicians and officials from national, state and local government with non-governmental organizations of all kinds, ranging from the Catholic Church to corporations, from trade unions to educators, from the media to grassroots activists, on the entire gamut of child-related issues. So I would suggest that the National Street Children's Movement of Brazil can teach us a great deal not only about street children, but also about creating the kind of social movement that is needed everywhere to push children's needs to the top of political agendas -- and keep them there. UNICEF warmly congratulates the National Street Children's Movement and we are proud to share the 1994 award with them!

In the time I have remaining, I would like to put forward a single proposition and pose a single challenge. The proposition is this:

in spite of Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and all the rest of the terrible violence, misery and injustice that monopolize the headlines, we are living in what may be the most hopeful time in human history, in which the world is readying itself to make a quantum leap of progress. What has been happening over the past few years in the area of children is the leading edge of human civilization's potentially greatest advance.

That is the proposition; I will get to the challenge a bit later.

As human rights advocates, you naturally probe and uncover the dark side of the human drama, so my proposition might sound pollyannish to you. I suspect that many of you may feel that things are worse now, in the post Cold War era -- more violent, unpredictable and unstable -- than they were before. Certainly we are witnessing many intractable conflicts borne of hard-to-comprehend hatreds and misery on a scale that beggars the imagination.

But from my vantage-points as Executive Director of UNICEF, where we must deal with both the darkness and the light of our times, and as a veteran of some 50 years as a participant on the world scene, I see something far more hopeful emerging as the fundamental trend of our era. Even as we struggle to respond adequately to the proliferation of humanitarian emergencies, I see multiple factors converging to bring humankind together for its most historic advances.

In order to see this convergence more clearly, we need the perspective of history, and I would like to review some of the extraordinary changes that have taken place over the past 50 years. This is, by the way, a useful exercise since the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations is coming up next year and it will be an opportunity to reflect on the role of our global institutions over the next 50 years.

It bears remembering that when the United Nations and UNICEF were established nearly half a century ago, it was still a world of empires. Even India was still a colony. Voices for women's rights were barely audible -- the women's movement had not yet been born in its contemporary incarnation. Racism was flagrant -- Martin Luther King had not yet made his mark. Apartheid was just being institutionalized as a State system. Environment was not an issue -- Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" was yet to be heard from. Hundreds of millions still accepted the concept that authoritarianism was a necessary transition stage to freedom from want.

Today we live in an entirely different world. British historian Arnold Toynbee understood the implications of the extraordinary scientific, technological and communications advances of the past century. He said:

"Our age is the first generation since the dawn of history in which mankind dared to believe it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the whole human race."

In essence, thanks to this change in capacity brought about by the industrial revolution, the world is undergoing a tectonic shift, a shift from a world characterized by scarcity to one characterized by ample productive capacity. We can see this shift in so many spheres: in politics, in the area of human rights, in our understanding of development, in the way we respond to crises, in our approach to meeting human needs and preserving the environment. Let me outline some of the changes.

First, the very notion of the State has changed. 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 few -- (I myself was born the "subject" of the King of England) we are gradually, painfully, zig-zaggingly and bravely moving toward universal acceptance of the reverse, the idea that the State exists to serve people and communities.

That is why we have all these global human rights conventions today. There were none 50 years ago.

Second, as "subjects" refuse to remain "subjects" of "masters", the world map looks entirely different. Thanks mainly to the end of colonialism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the family of nations has grown from 51 -- the number of States that founded the UN -- to 185 at present. No matter how small or poor they may be, all nations now have sovereign rights and in many ways are increasingly entitled to sit as equals at the world's table.

Third, there is a change in the way we respond to emergencies around the world. With the Rwandan tragedy at the centre of our concern these days, it is helpful to recall that the kind of massive international humanitarian response we are beginning to see now was absolutely unheard of only a few decades ago. How far we have come from the days when the world routinely closed its eyes or turned its back on massive suffering in other countries!

I was in Calcutta at the tail end of the 1943-44 Bengal famine when well over 2 million people starved to death (including more than a million on the streets of Calcutta) in a purchasing power famine -- i.e., the grain stores were full but landless labourers who had lost a season's wages due to floods simply could not pay the war-inflated prices for food. The British Raj did little and

people dropped like flies, as they did in a very similar famine in Ireland a century before, when the same happenstance that brought blight and starvation to subsistence potato farmers brought bountiful corn crops to neighbouring landlords.

Much has happened along the road from Calcutta in 1943-44 to Rwanda and Bosnia today. The technological and communications revolution has gradually transformed the world into an increasingly interdependent global village in which it is no longer possible to conceal large-scale famine or violence.

The "loud emergencies" which are now brought live into our homes through the magic of tv satellite links, create an inescapable compulsion on governments to act, at a time when there is a vastly increased capacity to act. This is most welcome. Morality does march with perceived changes in capacity.

Our new communications capacity has also permitted deprived and oppressed populations everywhere to see how much better people live just around the corner in the global village, and this awareness has powered both the end of colonialism and the new concern with global human rights, and more recently has powered movements for democracy that have overthrown authoritarian regimes and torn down the walls of the Cold War, transforming international life completely.

Our new capacity to meet the essential needs of all people is beginning to displace forever the age-old notion that mass poverty and human suffering are somehow inevitable. Although the "loud emergencies" of famine and war dominate the headlines, there is also a growing consensus that we must give priority to addressing the "silent emergencies" of massive malnutrition, disease and illiteracy, affecting mainly the world's one billion poor, who in numbers are a multiple of the refugees and displaced combined, and whose plight is often at the root of conflicts and emergencies.

Let us not forget that, of the 35,000 children who still die each and every day of the year in the developing countries, some one to three thousand are victims of the "loud emergencies" of violence and famine; the rest succumb, quietly but just as terribly, to largely preventable malnutrition and illness. No earthquake, no flood, no war has taken the lives of a quarter million children in a single week; but that is the weekly child death toll of the "silent emergency" associated with poverty and underdevelopment.

As the world community's capacity to meet the essential needs of all people grows, we expect so much more from development than when the UN was founded. In the post-World War II period, our focus was on how to bring economic growth to countries and how to overcome poverty -- in essence, how to address freedom from want through economic growth.

Development, if it is to be sustainable today, must not only be sustainable in the environmental sense -- protecting nature and conserving scarce resources -- but it also must break the grip of poverty on the bottom half or third of society and slow population growth, while sustaining democracy, human rights and people's participation in the development process.

This is really a far cry from the general perspective on development that prevailed when the UN was founded.

I have experienced this tectonic shift most powerfully from where I stand as Executive Director of UNICEF. It's almost as if the world "decided" to first try out its new capacity -- and exercise its new morality -- in relation to the world's future, its children. When UNICEF was established, 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.

A great deal has changed since then. The global effort we called the Child Survival and Development Revolution starting in the early 1980s, has saved some 25 million young lives and spared hundreds of millions more from lives of disability and thwarted potential. Today, many of the traditional enemies of children are on the run -- vaccine-preventable diseases, malnutrition, ignorance, legally-sanctioned discrimination and neglect, among others. As a result of the largest peacetime collaboration in history, the world is now immunizing some 80 per cent of its children, some 110 million infants, on four to five occasions before their first birthday. Vaccines and oral rehydration therapy against diarrhoea are now saving five million lives a year.

The encouraging results of the Child Survival and Development Revolution in the 1980s simultaneously encouraged and spurred action on the coming into force of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and made possible the World Summit for Children -- both in September 1990. As you know, the Summit brought together more heads of state and government than ever before -- 71 heads including President Bush -- and produced consensus not only on a set of principles and strategies, but also agreement on an action plan to meet 27 concrete health, nutrition, education, gender and rights' goals by the year 2000. Achievement of these goals, which include early action by all countries on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, would, in effect, overcome most of the worst aspects of absolute poverty for the world's children.

About 120 countries -- including the United States, and with more than 90 per cent of the world's children -- have issued or drafted National Programmes of Action to implement the goals. For the first time since the dawn of human history, humankind is making -- and now implementing -- comprehensive, long-term plans for improving the lives of the young.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its sweeping provisions that translate children's most essential needs into rights, has rapidly been embraced by more countries than any other human rights treaty in history. A new ethic of caring is gradually, inadequately still but steadily emerging onto the stage of human history. All of us must nurture this trend along, fending off the many powerful negative currents of our times.

Strong international leadership and cooperation -- facilitated enormously by the end of the Cold War and the expansion of democracy -- could leverage this momentum for children into wide-ranging social progress for all. Our tectonic shift can be made irreversible, but only if we work together to make it happen.

And this is where the specific challenge I want to pose comes in. As advocates for human rights whose organization initially came out of the legal community, you are well-positioned to tell the Clinton administration and the Senate that you expect the United States to quickly sign and ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. One hundred and sixty-three countries have ratified the Convention to date. Only 27 have yet to ratify, and of those, 11 have already signed their intention to move toward ratification.

The United States is now the only major country -- the only industrialized democracy -- that has neither signed nor ratified the Convention. Only Haiti is in a similar position in the Western Hemisphere. Ratification by the U.S. would not only help America's children -- and God knows that with 20 per cent of our children now living below the poverty line, twice the percentage of the next-highest industrial democracy, that help is needed! -- but it would also send an important message to the world about the centrality of children to overall social progress. And it would bring the Convention within reach of becoming humanity's first universal law.

Both as part of UNICEF's Executive Board and at the June 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the United States joined in calling for universal ratification of the Convention by the end of 1995, year of the United Nations 50th anniversary. But as we know, the U.S. is traditionally slow to ratify international treaties. For example, it took the U.S. almost 40 years to ratify the genocide convention. But in this case, with a President in the White House who has begun to provide real leadership on a range of children's issues, and with half the Senate (including both of this State's Senators) already publicly committed to ratification, I am certain the process can be accelerated.

So the challenge is this: after ensuring that the next Senators you elect are strong supporters of ratification, can Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights go on to become a national player in the effort to win speedy ratification of the Convention, much as you have become respected and well-known activists for



international human rights? With your legal expertise and your distinguished track record in defense of human rights, I believe you will be listened to on this issue. You can make a real difference, as you already are doing in the field of human rights. You are helping to build a social movement for *caring* in this country and the world.

Let me close by thanking you again for the award and for this wonderful evening.