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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
in acceptance of a
Special Award from the
World Academy of Art and Science

Minneapolis, Minnesota
28 September 1994

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It is a great honor for me to accept this Special Award from the World Academy of Art and Science. The Academy's distinguished fellows -- and here permit me to single out its President, Harlan Cleveland -- are genuine role models for all of us who are dedicated to putting knowledge to work for the benefit of all humankind.

Receiving recognition for lifetime achievement is a humbling experience, as I discovered the day after President Clinton pinned the Medal of Freedom -- symbolized by an eagle -- on me in June. The next morning a friendly lady in an elevator saw it on my lapel and said: "Oh, you work for American Airlines too!"

The trouble with awards for lifetime achievement is that they can lead to two wrong impressions: the first is that the achievement is solely one's own. In expressing my deep gratitude to the Academy I must stress that any achievement on my part has also been the result of my having always been part of excellent teams -- at UNICEF these past 14 years, and before at the Overseas Development Council, at USAID, the State Department and going back to 1947, at UNRRA in China where Harlan Cleveland, then 29, was my boss as the head of a vast, multi-hundred million dollar China-wide relief and reconstruction effort. So the achievement being recognized is truly a collective one.

The second possible misperception is that the "lifetime" in "lifetime achievement" is pretty much over; and I can assure you on this score that if I have anything to say about it, this lifetime will go on for a good while longer. I have a great deal of unfinished business to take care of -- the same unfinished business, really, that occupies your attention and challenges your intellects and energies. Half a century ago, Arnold Toynbee put it best:

> "Our age -- he said -- is the first since the dawn of history that has dared dream it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to all."

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So we have our work cut out for us, trying to realize that dream, that incredible new potential.

I have recently come back from a journey that included Rwanda and Cairo, and in both places I saw -- in vivid relief -- bits and pieces of Toynbee's dream being realized, as well as the terrible obstacles that still stand in the way of its fulfillment.

I need not recount the horror of Rwanda to this audience; each and every one of you, I am sure, felt in your innermost heart and conscience the genocide committed there so recently, and the massive suffering unleashed in its wake. What I want to tell you is less evident, but nevertheless true and important: Rwanda also symbolizes a relatively new and hopeful development, one that is under-appreciated, I'm afraid, by many thoughtful observers of the world scene.

In Rwanda's capital, Kigali, as well as in the refugee camps in Goma, Zaire, and elsewhere, I saw the deployment of international aid and relief on a scale and of a nature that would have been unthinkable only six years ago. And I say this fully aware that far more should have been done to prevent the tragedy in the first place and that far more still needs to be done to assist the victims of this modern-day holocaust.

But we sometimes forget that the international community's capacity and will to act to prevent massive suffering in man-made or natural emergencies is, historically speaking, a new phenomenon.

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. A very similar famine hit Ireland a century before, when the humidity that spread the blight which brought ruin and starvation to subsistence potato farmers also brought bountiful corn crops for export to landlords in adjoining fields.

Much has happened along the road from Calcutta in 1943-44 to Rwanda today. Just one aspect of UNICEF's effort there is particularly illustrative. Together with the International Committee of the Red Cross, and thanks to Kodak's generous donation of thousands of rolls of film, we are photographing some ten thousand Rwandan children -- the number may go as high as 80,000 -- who have either been orphaned or separated from their families. With these photographs, and a central computerized registry, the hope is that they will be recognized, identified

and reunited with their parents, or if their parents are dead, with extended families or their communities of origin. In the meantime, they are being fed, they are receiving basic health care, and even some basic education with anti-trauma and peace education components.

But the point I want to stress is that, with this new capacity, suddenly these children can be treated as the individuals they are, individuals with names that can be recorded and faces that can be photographed and rights that can begin to be protected. The same with the more than 500 child soldiers -- most of them about 12 years old -- whose demobilization from the ousted (but still largely intact) Rwandan army we were able to negotiate during my visit to the camps in neighbouring Zaire.

Just so long as it was not possible to easily provide large-scale relief, and far-away victims of disaster and war remained faceless, it was possible for the rest of the world to turn its back on them. This was, in fact, the situation that prevailed throughout human history. But 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 or ignore either large-scale famine and violence or the new capacity to respond.

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 -- and I say this knowing full well how often we falter in that march and then, at great cost, have to play catch-up.

The second illustration of how far we have come was what I witnessed in Cairo. The International Conference on Population and Development was much more than a debate over abortion and reproductive rights, although you'd never know it from most of the media coverage it received. The 20-year Programme of Action approved there is a welcome departure from the "blame the victim" approach that regards the population problem as one of numbers that must be reduced primarily through ever more forceful family planning information and services. This simplistic and, quite frankly, dangerous notion leads to population control efforts which -- however well-intentioned -- are often interpreted as thinly disguised campaigns against the poor and to control women's lives. Standing alone, such efforts are never sufficient to achieve the goal of population stabilization.

The message of Cairo is different; it is that only a holistic approach can break the grip of poverty on the bottom third to half of society and slow population growth while sustaining democracy and human rights. It says that aiming

population programs at people's needs, especially those of women and children, rather than at demographic targets will accelerate both population stabilization and a new and more balanced model of development. For the first time, the world community has come together behind a common understanding of the inter-relationships and synergisms between improved family planning information and services; efforts to reduce infant, child and maternal mortality; literacy and basic education; gender equality and empowerment of women, starting with girls -- which are the main factors influencing the choices of individuals and couples regarding family size.

If effectively carried out, this approach can produce results that few envisage today. As noted in its Preamble, implementing the goals and objectives of the Programme of Action would also result in world population growth at levels close to the United Nations lower projections -- that is, peaking in the year 2050 at about 8 billion and declining thereafter. On the other hand, failure to implement this holistic Programme of Action could lead to a doubling or even tripling of world population by the middle of the 22nd century, a scenario that can only be described as catastrophic.

My visits to Cairo and Rwanda only confirmed my conviction that a tectonic shift has been taking place in the world basically since the industrial revolution but vastly accelerating with the advent of the communications revolution. From a world characterized by scarcity, we are moving to one characterized by ample productive capacity. The very notion of the State is changing. 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 George V) -- we are gradually, painfully, zig-zaggingly and bravely moving toward universal acceptance of the opposite, the idea that the State exists to serve people and communities.

The repercussions of this shift are truly mind-boggling and can be observed to one degree or another in many spheres: in the ending of colonialism, 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.

If this new capacity has fundamentally changed the way the international community responds to "loud emergencies" of the kind we've just seen in Rwanda, we are also beginning to see a change in the way we perceive the "silent emergency" facing the world's poor -- the tragedy of daily mass malnutrition, illness and ignorance. The aura of inevitability that has always surrounded poverty is beginning to fade, as the formerly anonymous poor acquire faces, and more importantly, voices and

votes. Voices that demand a fair share of the benefits of modern civilization; votes that can force democracy to deliver.

We are especially seeing this shift in the way the world regards and treats its children. Having demonstrated, in 1990, that we could reach over 80 per cent of the world's infants with life-saving vaccines on five occasions before their first birthday -- an extraordinary achievement bringing, for the first time, the latest in science and technology to virtually every hamlet in the world, in the largest peace time collaborative effort in world history, and that is now saving four million young lives every year -- the international community came together and embarked on a bold experiment: Children as a Trojan Horse for mounting an unprecedented assault against the citadels of poverty and underdevelopment.

In the new atmosphere created by the end of the Cold War, the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- which had been stalled in negotiation for nearly a full decade -- came into force in 1990, turning all children's essential needs into rights that the adult world -- family, community and government -- is obliged, legally and ethically, to respect. The Convention is now the law of the land in 166 countries (but, I am sad to say, the United States is not yet one of them, in spite of the increased concern for children's well-being shown by the Clinton administration).

Right after the Convention came into force, the first truly global summit was held -- the World Summit for Children -- and today over 120 countries, covering about 90 per cent of the world's children -- have Plans of Action to achieve a truly remarkable series of 27 goals, some by the end of 1995 and others by the year 2000. A recent country-by-country review indicates that a majority of developing countries are on their way to achieving a majority of the mid-decade goals.

Pursuing today's low-cost opportunities to protect the health, nutrition, and education of women and children in the developing world is one of the most immediately available and affordable ways of weakening the grip of poverty, population growth, and environmental deterioration, which are among the greatest threats facing humankind on the threshold of the 21st century.

But the tectonic shift that I have described is not taking place in some realm apart from the daily choices and decisions of human beings. It is clear that we must reorganize international, national and community life -- and the life-styles and mindsets of individuals -- to rapidly tap into the new potential we have to meet the basic needs of all. This is becoming an ethical and political imperative. The end of the Cold War and the turn toward more democratic systems in so much of the world have set

the stage for vastly increased cooperation to make accelerated progress on a number of absolutely vital fronts.

In Cairo, our keynote speaker tonight, my friend Federico Mayor, eloquently identified some of the obstacles we are facing:

> "Nationally and internationally -- he pointed out -- we continue to invest in a shortsighted way. Our investments are still geared to past threats or to dealing with the symptoms of problems. We are largely unprepared or unwilling to address present challenges of a non-military nature that constitute actual or potential threats to human security. Every day we witness the tragic result of our failure to anticipate and prevent. Every day we confirm our perverse preference to pay the heavy financial costs of peace-keeping and relief operations rather than make relatively modest investments in the social sphere. We ignore, at our peril, the need to tackle our problems at their source by promoting sustainable human development worldwide."

The chain of post-Cold War global conferences, from the 1990 World Summit for Children to the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna last year and the Cairo conference that just ended, and on to the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen and the one on women in Beijing next year, is humankind's attempt to play "catch-up" with the tectonic shift and invest in sustainable human development.

But programmes of action must be implemented, and if they are to be implemented they must be funded, and if they are to be funded public opinion must be mobilized to influence leaders -- which is where organizations like the World Academy of Art and Science comes in. You are the ones who are generating the new thinking we need -- like the new thinking embodied in Harlan Cleveland's book "Birth of a New World". Your vision and your activism will help create public awareness and social movements without which that New World will not be born.

Our children and grandchildren, an unborn generations to come, depend on the likes of us -- on the likes of the distinguished fellows of the World Academy of Art and Sciences -- to take the wise actions that will determine their future. Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart, for the distinction you have bestowed on me, and best of luck in your deliberations.