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for
Public Health and War

Edited by Dr. Victor Sidel and Dr. Barry Levy
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Children, Wars and the Responsibility of the International Community

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"I have no enemies under seven." -- George Bernard Shaw

Someone once said that the trouble with modern war is that it doesn't kill the right people. I am not certain who the "right people" might be, but there is no question that *children are the wrong people*. If anyone should be spared the violence and terror of war, it is children. Their innocence and vulnerability should place them above politics and its continuation in the form of armed conflict. Under the Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are supposed to receive special protection during armed conflicts.

Nevertheless, in the past decade some two million children have been killed in wars, and dozens of armed conflicts, large and small, continue to claim children's lives around the world. In some cases, children even seem to have become primary targets, accounting for up to half of all casualties. This is a moral abomination, an obscenity that casts a shadow over all human progress on the threshold of the 21st century.

Up until the First World War, the vast majority of casualties of armed conflicts were combatants. But modern warfare and weaponry have made armed conflict increasingly deadly to civilians. Since 1945, more than 20 million people have been killed and 60 million wounded in armed strife, and over 80 per cent of these casualties have been civilians -- mainly women and children. Since the end of the Cold War there has been a proliferation of civil wars and inter-ethnic conflicts whose primary battlefields are densely-populated neighborhoods where almost all casualties are civilian.

Because monitoring systems are generally weak in developing countries and records are poorly kept or hidden in wartime, we lack accurate global statistics on child casualties. However, rough estimates compiled by UNICEF and NGOs offer a sense of the

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magnitude of the direct impact of war on children over the past decade:

* two million children killed;
* four to five million handicapped/disabled;
* 12 million left homeless;
* more than one million orphaned or separated from parents;
* 10 million psychologically traumatized, or one child in every 200 worldwide.

Reports from a number of recent conflicts cite acts of unspeakable brutality, including cases where women and children are deliberate targets of mass slaughter, torture, rape and violent assaults. "To destroy the big rats, you must kill the little rats," was a message repeated over and over again by an extremist radio station during the ethnic genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

Shocking as casualty rates are, they do not reflect the full magnitude of the problem. The massive uprooting and displacement of people -- as refugees in other countries or internally displaced within their own -- is a tragedy not to be underestimated. Forced emigration, break-up of families and communities, hostile new environments, the lack of security and provisions for survival continue to take a devastating toll on people affected by war.

Children constitute between a third and half of the world's 20 million refugees and 24 million internally displaced people. The lack of health care, food, water and shelter, resulting from the effects of armed conflict is often just as lethal as bullets and bombs. Many millions more have had their educations interrupted -- or ended forever. For six years, at least 20,000 Sudanese children and youth have trekked long distances, back and forth over national borders, to escape fighting. About 7,000 children live on their own on the streets of Angola's capital, Luanda, surviving as best they can. Generations of children are growing up without knowing anything but the hatred and cruelty of war, thus diminishing the chance for sustained peace.

The effects of war on surviving children are not limited to physical injury or hardship. As resilient as children are, war can leave them with psychological and emotional wounds that never heal. The phenomenon of post-traumatic stress syndrome, first studied in depth during the Vietnam war, has been found to affect children every bit as much as adults.

* A 1991 study of Iraqi children revealed that 62 per cent worried that they may not live to become adults.

* A study of 50 displaced children in Mozambique found that 42 had lost a father or mother by violence, 29 had witnessed

a murder, 16 had been kidnapped, and all had been threatened, beaten or starved.

* A study conducted in September 1994 by UNICEF found that 50 per cent of the Rwandan children interviewed witnessed the killing of family members, and more than 75 per cent have seen people murdered. More than 50 per cent have witnessed mass killings in churches and schools; 75 per cent have had their own lives threatened. UNICEF is helping to bury the dead killed in massacres in Rwanda because of the effect of the profusion of human remains on young children. We decided to do this after a Rwandan child pointed to a skull and said: "This is my mother."

These children display symptoms and behaviors typically associated with great stress and trauma, ranging from withdrawal and silence to aggression, anxiety, obsessive replaying of violent memories, and guilt. Therapeutic services for traumatized children have not been part of traditional relief efforts until recently, first because the problem was not widely recognized and second, because there was little experience in methods other than slow-moving, expensive counselling of individuals. Over the past few years, however, a number of techniques have proven highly effective in relieving stress and trauma in large groups of children, and UNICEF has now built such actions into all our emergency programes. Simple methods such as children being able to talk, draw or write, act out or otherwise express their feelings about their experiences -- together with even small steps toward regaining a safe and nurturing environment -- can help heal the psychological damage of even severe trauma.

Perhaps the most alarming development in children's experiences of armed conflicts has been their inclusion in actually fighting wars. More than 200,000 children have been recruited into armies over the past decade, according to some estimates. Children as young as seven or eight are often used as soldiers, equipped with fully-automatic assault weapons. These children are sometims forcibly recruited, but more often join warring factions for survival. Many have seen their own parents cruelly murdered. Terrible things have been done to these children, and the children themselves have done terrible things, taking part in the atrocities of war. Reintegrating these children into their communities presents immense problems. All of this lends urgency to the efforts of a number of governments and NGOs to attach an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child setting the minimum age for recruitment into armed forces at 18 -- rather than at 15, as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Childs today.

Related to this is the issue of anti-personnel landmines. Momentum is growing for an international moratorium on the export

of these cruel weapons that have killed over a million people since 1975, and take a disproportionate toll among children, who often constitute more than half of all mine victims. But I add my voice to that of the Secretary-General and urge the international community to go one critical step further and adopt a total ban on the production, use, stockpiling, as well as the sale and export of anti-personnel landmines. For UNICEF, this cause has a very particular force, inasmuch as the presence of landmines violates the most fundamental rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Far greater support needs to be given to mine awareness campaigns, along with deactivation and removal of the over 100 million unexploded mines (one for every 20 children) that continue to wage war against civilians long after the fighting has ended. And certainly, the unimaginably savage use of young boys to clear mine fields must be ended once and for all.

The international community must find ways to provide children with greater protection and assistance amidst and following the wars that victimize and traumatize them. That is why UNICEF welcomes the decision by the General Assembly to implement the proposal from the Committee on the Rights of the Child to undertake a comprehensive study of the impact of armed conflict on children. Ms. Graca Machel, the expert chosen to prepare this important study in consultation with the Centre for Human Rights and other relevant organs/agencies of the UN system, will submit her report in the fall of 1996. The study should be seized by the international community as an opportunity for soul-searching and identifying practical steps to ease the plight of the children of war.

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the situation of children and other civilians caught in contemporary warfare, a longer view indicates that progress has been made in recent decades in the way the world responds to humanitarian emergencies. Today we are seeing the deployment of international aid and relief on a scale and of a nature that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

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

A personal recollection may help to illustrate the point. 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. It was my first encounter with a purchasing power famine and I shall never forget the images of families slowly starving to death a few feet away from overflowing grain stores protected by troops of the British Raj. The problem was that landless laborers who had lost a season's

wages due to floods simply could not pay the war-inflated prices
for food. The authorities did little to help and people dropped
like flies. And the world stood by and did nothing.

This was, in fact, the situation that prevailed throughout
human history. 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.

But much has happened along the road from Calcutta in the
1940s to the present. 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.

Just one aspect of UNICEF's emergency effort following the
genocide in and massive exodus from Rwanda in mid-1994
illustrates, I think, the qualitative change. Together with the
International Committee of the Red Cross, and thanks to Kodak's
donation of thousands of rolls of film, we photographed tens of
thousands of Rwandan children who were either orphaned or
separated from their families. These photographs, and a central
computerized registry, are greatly facilitating efforts to
identify and reunite these children with their parents or
extended families in their communities of origin. In the
meantime, they are being fed, they receive basic health care, and
even some basic education with anti-trauma and peace education
components.

The point I want to stress is that, with this new capacity,
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.

In the past, repressive, authoritarian governments have
slaughtered millions and conducted pogroms against minorities,
religious and ethnic groups, and political opponents behind an
inpenetrable shield of State sovereignty. Until recently,
sovereignty and Cold War rivalries tended to provide ideological
cover for atrocities and systematic violations of human rights.
Basically, the attitude towards the victims of civil conflict was
that it was just too bad, these were internal matters of a

sovereign state and therefore not the responsibility of the
international community. The world's hands were largely tied so
long as the victims did not acquire refugee status by crossing
international borders -- until 1989, that is.

It was in Sudan in that year that the international
community was empowered for the first time, through the U.N.-
sponsored agreement of the two principal parties to the conflict,
to come to the aid of internally displaced people on a massive
scale. The world invested some $400 million in Operation
Lifeline Sudan, a pioneering humanitarian intervention in the
midst of civil war that saved hundreds of thousands of lives.
UNICEF was lead agency during the first phase of the massive
inter-agency effort.

From Sudan, the concept of "corridors of peace" was soon
extended, with the blessing of the Organization of African Unity,
to Ethiopia, Angola and Liberia.

UNICEF also helped to develop an earlier modality of
reaching vulnerable populations caught in civil strife, which
contributed to the "corridors of peace". Since the mid-1980s, we
have worked with governments, armed guerrilla movements, the
International Committee of the Red Cross and the churches to
develop the concept of children as a "zone of peace." In several
civil conflicts -- most notably El Salvador, Lebanon and Bosnia-
Herzegovina -- agreements were hammered out among the parties in
conflict to stop fighting for certain periods of time, known as
"days of tranquillity," to permit the delivery of food and
medical supplies, and in particular the immunization of children,
in pre-defined areas.

These "days of tranquillity" and "corridors of peace" are
now regularly carved out of war to benefit children. In fact,
the concept was formally endorsed at the 1990 World Summit for
Children and is embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the
Child, which entered into force as international law that same
year. Among its provisions relating to the rights of children
trapped in wars, the Convention -- in Article 38 -- states that:

> "In accordance with their obligations under
> international humanitarian law to protect the civilian
> population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall
> take all feasible measures to ensure protection and
> care of children who are affected by armed conflict..."

The World Summit for Children Plan of Action is more
explicit, stating:

> "Recent examples in which countries and opposing
> factions have agreed to suspend hostilities and adopt
> special measures such as 'corridors of peace' to allow

relief supplies to reach women and children and 'days
of tranquillity' to vaccinate and to provide other
health services for children and their families in
areas of conflict need to be applied in all such
situations. Resolution of a conflict need not be a
prerequisite for measures explicitly to protect
children and their families to ensure their continuing
access to food, medical care and basic services, to
deal with trauma resulting from violence and to exempt
them from other direct consequences of violence and
hostilities."

These expressions of concern for children caught in armed
conflict reflect a new ethos that is struggling to take hold in
the last decade of the 20th century -- one that gives children a
much higher priority on the world's agenda and places the human
being at the centre of development efforts. These developments
make it possible, in many cases, to obtain the agreement of
political and military adversaries to cease fire to permit
limited forms of humanitarian assistance for displaced civilians,
particularly for women and children -- instead of having to wait
for them to cross international borders and become refugees
entitled, under international law, to protection and assistance.

But things have evolved even further in the past few years,
to the point where humanitarian action is possible, in certain
circumstances, even when a government does not agree -- or when
there is no government to agree with. The critical step was
taken in early 1991, when the Security Council ordered assistance
and protection to the displaced and persecuted Kurdish population
in Northern Iraq in the wake of the Gulf war. UNICEF became
lead agency, under the Department for Humanitarian Affairs
mandate, for helping the displaced population in the North,
working under international protection, even as we continued to
carry out our country programe to assist all Iraqi children, and
even as we worked to modify an international sanctions regime
that, through direct and indirect effects, has contributed to
increasing the country's child mortality rate.

A further ethical bridge was crossed when the Security
Council authorized armed international intervention in Somalia to
protect an entire people's right to food and survival. Future
historians will judge the wisdom of attempts to pick up all the
pieces of a failed State in the absence of a political settlement
among contending armed factions, but there is no question that
international intervention in Somalia saved the lives of hundreds
of thousands of children and adults who certainly would have
perished from starvation and disease, if not from bullets, had
the intervention not taken place.

The prolonged agony of the peoples of former Yugoslavia may
illustrate the limitations of what the United Nations can do in

certain complex emergencies -- but it must be acknowledged that some measure of international protection and assistance is being provided to many of the innocent victims of this intractable conflict, while the decision to establish an International War Crimes Tribunal (extended, subsequently, to cover war crimes in Rwanda) reflects a lowering of the world's threshold of tolerance toward massive violations of human rights.

As of mid-1994, an estimated 40 to 50 countries were experiencing man-made or natural disasters, of which the United Nations classified ten as "complex," or those involving multiple causes with more than one political entity directly engaged. There are currently 17 UN peacekeeping operations underway. Responding to this proliferation of complex emergencies not only stretches limited UN capacities to the breaking point, but challenges the ability of relief and development agencies to fulfill their humanitarian mandate of strict neutrality and impartiality while functioning under the protection of UN forces with a military mandate or under sanctions regimes that often inadvertently hurt innocent civilians along with -- or even more than -- their intended targets.

Because UNICEF's sphere of development action is children, and because our assistance has been provided in a strictly non-political way, we have enjoyed considerably more "space" than other organizations cooperating with governments. The international community has told us we must not restrict ourselves to providing life-saving supplies, but has given us also a life-saving advocacy role as defenders of children and their rights. We have sought to exercise this special role seriously and responsibly, but it is not difficult to see what tensions can crop up between cooperation with governments and advocacy for the poor and oppressed. As an illustration, in March 1993 UNICEF denounced the systematic rapes and other atrocities against children in former Yugoslavia before the Commission on Human Rights -- even as we continued to work impartially with Muslims, Serbs and Croats throughout the Balkans to gain access to children and their families.

Our work has become easier overall, I must say, as leaders and politicians have understood that helping children can be "good politics" and as the tide of democracy has risen round the globe in recent years. The Convention and the World Summit for Children formalized and further raised the new ethical priority on meeting children's basic needs and respecting their rights.

But the new ethical compulsion to respond to "loud emergencies" threatens our even more urgent response to 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. Of the 35,000 children who die each and every day of the year in the

developing countries, some 2,000 to 3,000 are victims of the
"loud emergencies" of violence and famine; the rest succumb,
quietly but just as terribly, to largely preventable hunger 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. In 1993, the number of deaths of
children under five years of age brought about by "loud"
emergencies, which horrified and shocked the world, was about
500,000, a small proportion of the 13 million children who died
last year and who will die this year. The tragic deaths of 1,000
children per day in Somalia in 1992 captured much more public
attention than the 5,000 children who died worldwide every day
from dehydration caused by diarrhoea, which can be prevented and
treated easily and at almost no cost.

UNICEF emergency program expenditures -- which mainly assist
children affected by armed conflicts -- increased more than
fourfold in the five years from 1989 (when they totalled US$48
million and made up 10 per cent of program expenditures) to 1993
(when they reached US$223 million and accounted for 28 per cent
of program expenditures). *Emergency relief is now UNICEF's
single largest program expenditure sector -- a sad indicator of
the growing toll of armed conflicts.* Because funds for emergency
relief are raised through special appeals, however, they do not
draw funds from regular country development programs.

In emergencies, UNICEF coordinates its actions with other UN
agencies and NGOs and provides assistance in health care,
supplementary feeding for children, nutrition and household food
security, water supply and sanitation services, basic education,
assistance for unaccompanied children, land-mine awareness and
rehabilitation from land-mine injuries, and psychosocial
treatment for traumatized children. UNICEF has always striven to
maintain basic services for children, even in the most difficult
conflict situations, and every attempt is made to provide relief
in such a way as to speed post-conflict rehabilitation and
development.

Unless alternatives to revenge, hatred and intolerance are
taught and effectively opened, cycles of violence will never be
broken. UNICEF is developing educational strategies and
activities for children and parents to explore issues of peace,
sensitize themselves against prejudice and the stereotyping of
other cultures and ethnic groups, and teach conflict resolution
skills.

This is an urgent need worldwide, for we have witnessed in
recent years alarming comebacks of prejudice and intolerance,
along with the spread of violence and anti-social behavior, among
young people in industrialized as well as developing countries.
In fact, many of the problems associated with children caught in

armed conflict can be found, to one degree or another, in violence-ridden communities of wealthy nations.

In the context of evolving international responsibility toward alleviating people's suffering -- be they refugees, internally displaced or simply poor -- the world must rapidly come to terms with the reality of increasing demands being placed on ever more severely limited resources. How many operations can the international community afford to mount to rescue the victims of failed States, as in Somalia, or of civil war, as in Rwanda? I would be the first to say it's worth spending $2 billion to $3 billion or more to save two or three million people -- after all, even a single life is priceless -- and we should be able to carve a progressively larger peace dividend out of the post-Cold War era to cover such eventualities. But it would be naive to expect taxpayers to foot the bill for endlessly proliferating emergencies and conflicts.

The terrible costs of war are paid by countries that are, for the most part, among the world's poorest and least able to afford the toll in lives and the costs of reconstruction and rehabilitation. The per capita GNPs of war-torn countries are revealing. In 1992 they were: Afghanistan -- $280; Angola -- $610 (in 1991); Liberia -- $450; Mozambique -- $60; Somalia -- $150; and the Sudan -- $420.

The effects of poverty in many countries are compounded by the impact of budget priorities. Developing countries as a whole will spend an estimated $118 billion on the military in 1994. Developed countries, as major arms producers, promote and profit from the arms trade. Military spending worldwide in 1994 is estimated to total $770 billion. Such spending legitimizes tools of destruction, giving them value and importance, while devaluing human life by draining scarce resources needed by all countries for social priorities, particularly the needs of children.

This is neither a plea to use the bottom line as an exclusive means of deciding where to put our resources nor a call to turn our backs on the victims of "loud emergencies." What I am saying is that humankind must invest far more than it is today in prevention of emergencies and conflicts, even as we go about the world putting out fires. The Secretary-General's Agenda for Peace stresses prevention and makes the critical link to development and democracy. This investment in prevention will prove far less costly -- and produce far greater results -- than reliance on expensive and not-always-effective rescue operations.

A final word on the relief workers on the front line of emergency operations. As the nature of conflict changes and civilians are increasingly targeted, emergency personnel and peacekeepers themselves face increasing risks. In 1992, seven UNICEF staff members were killed during relief operations in

Somalia and the Sudan, and one staff member in the Sudan has been missing since that year. Three UNICEF staff members perished in Somalia and Uganda in 1993, and in April 1994, at least seven UNICEF staff members and a larger number of their family members were reported killed in the conflict in Rwanda. Many more in the larger UN family and the NGO community have given their lives. The targeting of relief workers and peacekeepers is absolutely unacceptable and a special convention that will bolster their protection is urgently needed.

The world is now challenged to create a permanent zone of peace around children to ensure their safety, to defuse destructive conflicts and to assist fragile societies in efforts to move towards stability and sustainable development.

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