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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the opening of
World Environment Day celebrations

Mexico City, New Mexico
5 June 1990



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Mexico City - 5 June 1990

Your Excellency, President Salinas de Gortari,
Honourable Ministers,
Dr. Tolba,
Respected colleagues and friends:

I am delighted to join in the opening of "World Environment Day" celebrations here in Mexico City. As the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, my own connection to the theme of this day lies in the vital links between children and the environment.

"Children and the Environment" is, as many of you are aware, the title of the joint report of UNEP and UNICEF which my friend Dr. Tolba and I will release later today. It is most appropriate that this groundbreaking work should be launched in Mexico, where President Salinas de Gortari has taken such a strong leadership role in issues regarding both children and the environment.

He has found innovative means to draw out the synergism in people's responses to the two sets of issues. Mexico's massive planting today of 5 million trees, as many as possible by children, is a good example of this, as is the "children's crusade" with its review of the environment of the country's coast by both boat and land expeditions. The ecological education projects in fishing cooperatives, factories and farming communities are further examples.

President Salinas de Gortari has also earned the highest esteem of people worldwide who hold a particular concern for the children of the world, by joining with five other heads of state or government to call for the "World Summit for Children", to be held 29 and 30 September in New York. President Salinas and the other Initiators have shown great vision, I believe, in calling the first ever truly global meeting of world leaders - a North-South-East-West summit - for an agenda devoted solely to issues related to children. Considering the close association between issues related to children and issues related to the environment - an intricate relationship which is elaborated in the report being released today - the World Summit for

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Children could be one of the most significant events of the 1990s toward improving the environment. This will be especially true if it contributes, as expected, to dramatic improvements in child health and reductions in child death rates during this decade - with their corresponding impact of slowing population growth rates as parents become more confident of the survival of their first-born children.

I am also most pleased to join today with my friend Dr. Tolba to mark the new attention to the meeting place of environmental concerns and child-related problems that the report, "Children and the Environment", signifies. The kinship between our two organizations is longstanding, and in fact is currently so close that the UNICEF office in Nairobi is in the same compound as the UNEP headquarters.

Dr. Tolba himself, it is well worth noting, was instrumental in bringing to life the landmark Montreal Protocol to protect stratospheric ozone. As one of the United Nation's senior organization heads, he has presided over UNEP during a period in which environment has risen from an urgent but seriously neglected topic, to an issue at the top of political agendas throughout the world.

The new willingness of people on every continent to take action to protect the environment is surely one of the brightest aspects of the past two or three decades in the development field. It bodes well for the children of the world, since without a life-sustaining environment, clearly there would be no future for children to inhabit.

Similarly, new attention to children's issues bodes well for the environment, as problems related to children can have a negative effect on the environment. For example, while the population explosion is often regarded as the root cause of many of the world's environmental problems, the historical pattern of demographic change in all nations shows that a sustained decline in birth rates will not be achieved without a sustained decline in child deaths. Programmes to reduce infant and child mortality, coupled with family planning programmes, will contribute to population stabilization sooner and at lower levels than either type of activity alone. These and other efforts aimed at improving the health of children ultimately have a positive impact on the environment.

Effective responses to both sets of issues - those concerning children and those concerning the environment - come from a side of us humans that defines the best of what our civilization is and can be. Both the environment and the children of the world are in our care. Neither has much of a say about how we adults fulfill our responsibilities, our obligations - and they are obligations - to them. If either is neglected, both suffer; when either is well cared for, both are nurtured.

The full measure of care that is needed for children and the environment is beyond the scope of any one group, or even any single country, to provide by itself. UNICEF is committed to do all possible within our spheres of responsibility and influence - working together with partners such as the Mexican Government, UNEP, the media, religious groups and non-governmental organizations - to mobilize the action required - for the future of our world, and of the children who inhabit it - the children of the 1990s, who form our precious link to generations of children to come.