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"Taking the First Steps toward a New World Order"

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"Taking the First Steps toward a New World Order"

In his annual Report on the Work of the Organization, United Nations
Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar noted in September 1990 that:

"The period we have entered is Janus-faced. It wears both the aspect of hope and the countenance of dangerous unrestraint. In one major segment of world affairs, we have witnessed political change of a phenomenal character. In large parts of the globe, however, the scene continues to be one of simmering resentments, violent collisions and, at best, a precarious peace. The question whether the more beneficial developments of 1989-1990 will have a healthy impact on the totality of the world situation is still unanswered."

Even that question has, in some ways, begun to be answered -- but the answer, too, is Janus-faced. On one hand, the international community is more united than it has been since World War II, and the machinery of collective security is engaged in enforcing the standards of the United Nations Charter. On the other hand, the world is torn by war ... democratization and openness are in peril in the Soviet Union ... and much of the Third World is threatened with marginalization as the First World turns its attention -- and its investments -- to its east.

When the theme of this issue of Breakthrough -- "children in a new world order" -- was chosen, the dynamic of confrontation in the Gulf was only

beginning to materialize, and blood had not yet been shed in the streets of Vilnius. For a brief, exciting moment, we glimpsed a world which seemed to be putting confrontation behind it ... which was encouraging new collaboration on common problems ... and which offered an enticing promise of substantial resources newly released from the preoccupations of war for attention to the occupations of peace and development.

Is that possibility now dashed? Has the war in the Gulf, with its \$40-50 billion price-tag, given new life to armament budgets and drained life from that ephemeral "peace dividend"?

The President of the United States speaks forthrightly about a New World Order. The theme of this issue of **Breakthrough** suggests that it may be approaching.

The reality is not so clear. The future is not yet here. And the new world order we seek must yet be crafted piece by piece. It is not beyond our reach, but neither will it dawn by the simple turning of the earth on its axis.

Crafting a new order begins with simple visions. We seek a world which places the individual human being at the center of society and at the center of the responsibilities of states. We seek a world in which each human being is assured his or her essential needs for nutrition, health and shelter; a

world in which basic education and community services enable each person to find a productive place in society; a world in which the role of the State is to foster and protect, and not to abridge or neglect, the rights and dignity of each person.

We seek a world in which the human community has found a sustainable balance of its needs with the carrying capacity of the earth. And we seek a world in which nations have found a different way of inter-relating than marching across borders, carpet-bombing, dueling their missiles in the sky, or starving civilians, the great majority of whom are children and their mothers.

Despite the setbacks of recent months, the window of history remains open. Too much has happened in the final years of the 1980s to not have altered the fundamental character of world affairs. The independence and democratization of eastern Europe -- and of many other countries worldwide -- is generally irreversible. Concern for the environment has experienced a new birth, which seems to be far more deeply rooted in both the everyday consciousness of people and the politics of governments and politicians than in the earlier days of the environmental movement. The concept of collective security and international resistance to aggression has been dramatically restored to the domain of the international community, and the Gulf war, as tragic as it is, may stand effectively as a deterrent to future designs of one neighbor against another.

In the field of human development, too, sufficient progress has been made to create a new paradigm for society's understanding, concern and determination to improve the human condition.

The ascendancy of democracy and respect for human rights is an essential dynamic to this new paradigm. With the individual human being established as the central political object of society, it is difficult for anyone to deny that freedom and the franchise are of little meaning to a person who cannot read or understand the world about him, who was stunted in childhood from inadequate nutrition, or who must spend all of her time collecting firewood and hauling water. Or, indeed, died in infancy from readily preventable diseases, long before the right to vote had any relevance.

I think the senior Mrs. Bhutto captured this eloquently when she reminded us, speaking in New York in 1989:

"Development and democracy cannot be severed; they are two faces of the same currency of freedom.

"Our political opposition to tyranny alone will not solve the problems of the people.

"Tyranny stifles freedom, yes. But so does hunger.

"Tyranny chokes creativity, yes. But so does illiteracy.

"Tyranny denies opportunity, yes. But not as much as infant mortality.

"Our political agenda cannot exist for its own end, but rather it must exist to implement a social agenda.

"And at the heart of that social agenda is education, housing and health..."

Political empowerment of the individual ensures that demand for human development is expressed by those to whom the political process -- and political leaders -- must respond. Appreciation of the imperative of ensuring the basic health, strength and capacity of the human being has gained increasing currency among those who, in the decades now behind us, seemed to

understand only the grossest of Gross National Product statistics, and saw even that primarily in the light of the balance of power between geo-political forces.

But the dynamic of democracy and liberties is but one factor in the necessary elevation of human development. Establishing the obviousness of the need to protect and nurture the human being is of little practical meaning to those who make governmental decisions on policies, programmes and budgets, unless the relative capacity to protect and nurture -- with a vivid return on governmental investment -- is decisively demonstrated. Fortunately, during the past decade it has been possible, in many areas, to demonstrate that capacity and return. Prominent among such demonstrations has been the effort in which UNICEF and many other agencies, institutions and organizations have been engaged: child survival and development.

Over the past decade, UNICEF has expounded upon the newly achieved capacity to invest in children at low cost but with high return. This capacity is drawn from the ability to use mass communications and social mobilization to inform and motivate parents and communities to use low-cost technologies and techniques -- like oral rehydration, immunization, return to breastfeeding, vitamin A and other nutritional supplements, etc. -- to protect the survival and health of children. The return on that investment has also become clearer, with authorities like the World Bank affirming that investing in children -- and, especially, girls -- can be among the most important economic investments a country can make.

The child survival and development revolution thus fits the criteria I have already mentioned: it is directed at protecting and strengthening the human being; there is a capacity to make a difference; and the investment produces a substantial return. But these factors alone are not sufficient. The dynamic which has transformed "worthy proposition" into "implemented advancement" has been the synergism between public and leaders...between popular will and political commitment.

In developing and industrialized countries alike, a grand alliance of NGOs, media, parliamentarians, religious institutions, professional associations, leading personalities and others has come together with government to create and deliver the services necessary to protect children...employing their multi-dimensional organizational resources for educating and motivating families and communities, infrastructural support, people-power, etc.

In many cases, as in most great movements, the initiative has come from popular demand, which has compelled government to cooperate. This has been vividly illustrated by the NGOs who pressed for an International Marketing Code for Infant Formula, and by the many advocates who lobbied for a decade in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

But perhaps a unique characteristic of the child survival movement is that, in many countries (more so in the developing world than in the North), the initiative has come from national leaders who have recognized the developmental and political imperative and have mobilized the resources of their governments and have sought public support and collaboration.

Working together, leaders and international agencies and NGOs and media and others have accomplished more progress for the survival, protection and development of children during the second half of the 1980s than in any comparable period of history. Working together, they have broken the backbone of preventable child-killing diseases. They set out to raise the level of childhood immunization from less than 10 per cent at the beginning of the decade to at least 80 per cent by the end -- through the greatest international collaborative effort ever marshalled for any peacetime purpose -- saving the lives of more than 3 million children annually.

People and leaders set out to teach parents how to prevent children from dying from dehydration, and they have succeeded in raising the knowledgeable use of that technique from barely 1 per cent of those in need in 1980 to nearly 40 per cent today. They have helped reverse trends away from breastfeeding -- the superior infant nutrition -- among educated but previously ill-advised mothers, and have thus set the stage for reversing those trends among all mothers.

As a result of these interventions, more than 10,000 children did not die yesterday...another 10,000 have not died today...and 10,000 more will not die tomorrow.

Buoyed by the success of social mobilization in advancing children's health, some 160 governments and 145 major NGOs and other education authorities met together in Jomtien, Thailand, in March of last year, to map a practical plan for replicating those techniques to achieve basic education for all.

Working together, people and leaders have created a momentum of action for children which shall not easily be reversed or even slowed, and which sets a pattern applicable to many other essential challenges for social progress.

The ultimate manifestation of this synergism -- and, perhaps, one of the most promising affirmations that a new world order is yet possible -- came on 29-30 September 1990 in New York. It was a moment which The Nation magazine described as "among the most important gatherings ever called by the nations of the world".

The World Summit for Children was the first truly global summit, in which the leaders of all nations were invited to participate. 71 Heads of State or Government did attend -- by far the largest such gathering in history. And another 88 countries were represented at ministerial or other high level. Not since the 1981 meeting in Cancun had leaders from North and South sat together. Never before had leaders from West and East allowed the poor of the world to sit with them at a single table.

Cynics, of course, will say that this first World Summit was possible because the issue was so insignificant, but a useful opportunity for a political show. They will say that nobody can be against children, and that it is an easy subject for meaningless platitudes and empty promises.

It would be hard to have been present for those 24 hours of unprecedented history and say that it was a meaningless show. Few who heard those 71

leaders speak -- each limited to just 3, 4 or 5 minutes (in itself an historic accomplishment!) -- could doubt that most were learning their subject and had come to understand the fundamental insecurity of nations rooted in undernourished, diseased, uneducated, unstimulated, neglected children. No one who participated in the preparatory process of twelve months of hard negotiation, education, persuasion and policy development -- and had seen Governments set in their ways yield to new appreciations of what works and why and how -- could question the depth of serious engagement within governments and their policy establishments.

And no one who has read the Declaration and Plan of Action signed by leaders of 156 countries -- the largest high-level commitment ever promulgated -- could fail to see the risk which those leaders have undertaken: They have set specific, measurable goals; they have defined a timeframe of a single decade, with performance markers at the one, five and ten-year points; they have asked international organizations, NGOs and others to work with them to achieve those goals; and, most self-threatening, they have asked us to monitor, assess and report on their progress...thus inviting the world and their publics to hold them accountable annually for keeping their promises.

The World Summit also served as accelerator for a major human rights convention -- the first global codification of the rights of every child, and of the legal obligations of society and adults to protect those rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child entered into force on 2 September 1990 -- less than eight months after being opened for signature and ratification by States, and having been ratified, by the time of the World Summit, by 50

States. No other human rights convention has ever before achieved so rapidly the requisite 20 ratifications to enter into force. At this writing, 73 governments have accepted the Convention as the law of their lands, and another 60 have signed their intent to ratify.

The rights of the child are surely the most basic of all human rights, for their observance is the ultimate prerequisite for the enjoyment of virtually all other adult human rights.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child stands not only as a legal obligation, guiding the laws of States Parties and being enforced by their courts and legal systems, but it is the manifesto of a new ethic for children, shared by nations throughout the world. "Ethics" -- common understandings of what we agree is right and ought to be -- are the essential foundation for any world order. And if the world is prepared to make such promises to its children -- to assure children, as the Summit's Plan of Action commits, a "first call" on resources to meet their essential needs ("in bad times as well as in good times") ... then has the world not taken the first step toward establishing the well-being of all people -- of grown-up children as well as children -- as the central objective of development in a new world order?

I suggest that that first step has been taken ... that the World Summit for Children was not merely a good political show, a one-time/one-shot spectacle of platitudes and empty promises, but was the coming together of

several forces that can be, are being, and will be carried forward into a new order for the world...an order which begins with humanity's most essential, most vulnerable, and most promising citizens, our children.

Those converging forces include liberation from the old order of East-West confrontation and war preparations ... the global flowering of democracy and resumption of history's march toward the centrality of the human person ... new understandings of our capacity to ensure all people a sharing of essential resources for their basic needs ... and an infectious common purpose among leaders and people (with people often in the lead, making leaders appreciate the political imperative) to get about the business of making this a decent world for all of us.

First steps are difficult and unsteady, and it is easy to stumble before the second or third. We have seen that vividly in the USSR's perestroika and in our now-dimmed hopes for a great and early peace dividend. If the world's commitment to children is, indeed, the first step toward a new world commitment to the human future, I trust that each and every reader of **Breakthrough** will appreciate his or her essential role in keeping the promise to children by making it a part of each of their personal and organizational agendas.

A World Summit for Children was possible because world leaders felt confident they could accomplish something useful; they had seen the results of the past decade, and they had experienced their own involvement in making

that progress possible. Yes, children can be perceived as an "easy" issue. But it is because the issue appears "easier" than most -- certainly less fraught with complications and competing interests than global warming and acid rain, than debt repayments or debt relief -- that a significant commitment was possible. So if we now fail to keep what appears to be an easy promise, what chance have we to move forward toward the harder ones?

Keeping that promise requires the grand alliance of all sectors of society -- leaders and citizens, government and public -- to which the Summit Declaration appeals. Surely all who seek a new world order -- an order of primacy for the human being -- must be in the forefront of the daily effort to keep that promise to children.

We in UNICEF worked for the World Summit for Children -- for the Declaration and Plan of Action which it adopted, and for the Convention on the Rights of the Child which it advanced -- not simply because of the direct impact which they might have on children, as worthy a purpose as that would be. We worked for the first World Summit because we believed it could be the first collective step toward a new ethic for humanity ... and a "Trojan Horse" for a new order to the world. That first step must now be steadied and secured.

Success in this effort -- in keeping the promise of the Summit -- will mean that by the end of this decade (among many other improvements):

- ... some 50 million child lives will have been saved over present trends;
- ... the incidence of child malnutrition will have been halved;
- ... illiteracy for girls and women will have been more than halved;
- ... polio and guinea worm will have been eradicated from the face of the earth;

and, as we've learned from the most successful newly industrialized countries in the Pacific, economic progress will have been considerably accelerated, and population growth will have been significantly slowed.

What a tremendous encouragement successes in these efforts would be for tackling the more difficult challenges of the environment, the debt crisis, international trade, among others!

The world should feel confident and satisfied with the first step it has taken even as it is prodded by all of us to take the second and third.

This article is adapted from an address by James P. Grant to the 1991 International Development Conference in Washington, D.C., on 24 January 1991.