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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Organization of African Unity (OAU)
Twenty-seventh Ordinary Assembly of OAU Heads of State of Government
"Africa in the 1990s: Out-smarting History"

Abuja, Nigeria
3 June 1991

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Twenty-seventh Ordinary Assembly of OAU Heads of State and Government

Abuja - 03 June 1991

"Africa in the 1990s: Out-smarting History"

Thank you for the privilege of addressing you briefly on Africa's children. Since I had the honour to speak at the OAU Summit three years ago, the two most important specific advances for children in this century took place. Neither of these advances of world-wide significance would have happened in 1990 had it not been for the early active support of OAU Summits and African leaders.

First, the entry into international law on 2 September 1990 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ghana was the first to ratify, with 25 African States now constituting the largest contingent of the 85 ratifying countries to date.

Second, the World Summit for Children — so strongly endorsed by the OAU in 1989 — the largest and first truly global Summit. Many of you were there — 18 African leaders spoke at that historic gathering, and 30 of you sent high level delegations.

The children of the world give you thanks for this African leadership for all.

Today on your Agenda is a Resolution pursuant to your commitment to the Summit Plan of Action. It calls for financial allocation, strengthened action in primary health care, basic education, women's development, and celebrating the Day of the African Child on 16 June 1991. I commit UNICEF's full support to each and every one of your countries to ensure preparation and implementation of your detailed Plan of Action for the 1990s and for the proposed meeting of donors in 1992.

The cynics, the self-styled realists, might well say all these documents are only words. They ask how Africa can make more progress for children in the next ten years than any other continent has ever made in a similar period? That is a fair question. How can Africa be expected to outsmart

history, particularly in the face of the serious problems described by every earlier speaker and, I would add, of AIDS?

But it is yet another historic event, culminating in 1990, which convinces me that the words of the Convention and the Summit can and will be honored. It was in 1987 that you, responding to the call of United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, called on Africa to immunize virtually all of her youngest children against diseases which had been taking the lives of more than one million African children yearly. You sought to attain by 1990 even higher levels of immunization than those of North America's today. Impossible, said the cynics.

How did you fare? Well!

Today — just four years after your "call to action" — immunization levels throughout the entire African continent have reached those of North America. The lives of more than 2,000 children are now saved each day by immunization alone. In our host country, for example, Government surveys with WHO and UNICEF show that throughout Nigeria's 100,000 villages, 96 per cent of children received at least one immunization during 1990, and over 80 per cent got all six vaccines.

But I wanted to see for myself, so enroute here I visited the village of Sanni-Ode in Kware State — 200 miles west of Abuja. The dirt road ended in a cluster of mud brick houses — home to 350 people. The traditional midwife, illiterate but trained in proper birth technique, told me she had delivered 15 babies in 1990. I saw from the records kept by the voluntary health worker that today all 15 are alive and well — all of them fully immunized and well nourished. The villagers assured me that a health worker comes at 8:00 a.m. on the first Friday of every month to give vaccinations. I realize Sanni-Ode is only one village, but what I saw there can happen all over this continent — and is happening in Asia and Latin America as well. Africa's intensive participation has made immunization the largest worldwide peace-time effort in history, now saving the lives of 10,000 children daily.

This demonstrates how even in these times of economic distress, the will and capacity can be mobilized to reach out and protect with important doable actions those most in need — young children and women.

But can Africa deliver on the more numerous goals of the 1990s? Can you halve the number of child and maternal deaths and thereby save the lives of more than 20 million African children in the 1990s? Can you halve illiteracy and ensure that most children, particularly girls, acquire the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic? Oral rehydration for diarrhoea, already saving the lives of more than 1,000 African children each day...chloroquine treatment for the fever of malaria...feeding the youngest infants with nourishing mothers milk...learning to read simple useful messages like common posters — these are the readily doable actions that liberate, that strengthen people and nations and will make economic progress come faster while reducing birth rates. Many say, and I agree, that with the important exception of AIDS, which will require an extraordinary special effort, these interventions are easier to do than the complex systems required for immunization.

What, then, did it take to immunize so many African children in the worst of times, in the alleged lost decade of the 1980s? What made the difference?

Most important was political leadership — your insistent leadership that your people do the doable now, your faith in your own people and their willingness to follow your lead. This has been well illustrated in our host country by the actions of President Babangida, who demonstrated his sustained political leadership in so many ways — public pronouncements, personally immunizing children to demonstrate his concern to both families and civil servants at every level, encouragement of NGOs, etc.

This success was also made possible by the significantly increased international support in response to your demonstrated political commitment.

By signing the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children, you endorsed the principle that children's essential needs should have a "first call" on society's resources and concerns, in bad and in good times alike. This was a conceptual and ethical breakthrough of historic significance for children and society.

What was particularly remarkable about the World Summit was that the leaders endorsed a document containing not only lofty principles but also a Plan of Action committing themselves and their Governments to meet more than 20 specific, measurable goals within a time-frame of a single decade, and to specific actions beginning in 1991.

As President Museveni, President Babangida, Secretary General Perez de Cuellar, Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim, and other speakers have emphasized, children of Africa — indeed children everywhere — need the peace of silenced guns. Just as urgently, African children, 10,000 of whom die each day from largely preventable causes, need the peace that comes from having their essential needs solidly placed in the highest rank of society's priorities.

Your success in meeting these goals for children will belie the despair so many express for Africa. Through achieving this near-miracle in each of your countries, you will show clearly where your priorities, your humanity -- your deepest commitment -- lies. African children can become a beacon to the international community, showing that Africa can and will do what is most important.

Under your leadership, Africa has a unique opportunity to out-smart history in the 1990s. The task ahead in "doing the doable" for Africa's children is obviously difficult, and requires your sustained personal leadership. But you are off to a good start!