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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
Conference on Humanitarian Ceasefires: Peacebuilding for Children

“Advocating Humanitarian Ceasefires”

Ottawa, Canada  
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Address by Mr. James P. Grant

Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

to the

Conference on Humanitarian Ceasefires: Peacebuilding for Children

Ottawa - 26 November 1991

"Advocating Humanitarian Ceasefires"

It is a great pleasure and honour to be here this morning to consider with you implementing paragraph 25 of the Plan of Action agreed to last year at the World Summit for Children. I still see vividly the scenes of that Summit, the greatest gathering ever of heads of state and government. What they intended by their Plan of Action was to activate the people of the world, as well as governments, to act on behalf of children.

I remember Vaclav Havel speaking -- he had just become President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, and he still spoke with the eloquence of a playwright. "The international community has achieved something unprecedented", he said, speaking of the Convention on the Rights of the Child he had signed that morning on behalf of his country.

"As with any law" President Havel went on to say, "even this law can only acquire its real meaning and significance if it is accompanied by real moral self-awareness."

Well, I think that the moral self-awareness of which he spoke is present here in your gathering to make one paragraph of the World Summit for Children Plan of Action a reality "in situations of armed conflict", in its words, and "to build the foundation for a peaceful world where violence and war will cease to be acceptable means for settling disputes and conflicts...".

Let me share with you some thoughts on where we are right now, slightly more than a year after the World Summit for Children. Much has happened and much is happening even as we talk. The events of this past year and what happens at the United Nations in the next week or two, must all be factored into our consideration of how to make humanitarian ceasefires work, for the children and for the future peace of the world.

"Corridors of peace" and "days of tranquillity" are now beginning to become proven ways of reaching children and their mothers in the midst of war with aid they desperately need. You have already discussed humanitarian ceasefires in El Salvador, Lebanon, Sudan and Iraq. Six corridors were also negotiated while there was still fighting in Angola, and first church agencies and then the World Food Programme finally managed to gain agreements for a land and a sea corridor for relief in Ethiopia. The concept is now being tested in its first European war, in Yugoslavia. It has failed in Vukovar because of on-the-ground difficulties after being accepted in principal in Belgrade and Zagreb, but is succeeding in Dubrovnik. Not only are negotiations extremely difficult, but making such corridors operational is often extremely dangerous. I am sure there are many of you here who know this out of your own experience. Let me just quote the UN Secretary-General reporting to the General Assembly at the time I was serving as his Personal Representative for Operation Lifeline Sudan. (September 1989) He saluted:

"...the remarkable courage and determination of the drivers, their support crews and the United Nations/NGO escort teams. They have been confronted with mines, rocket attacks and automatic weapons fire, all aimed at clearly marked United Nations convoys. The images of drivers killed and wounded, UN escort leaders targeted for assassination, and abandoned, burned-out relief vehicles offer a sobering appreciation of the human cost Operation Lifeline Sudan has incurred in some of its humanitarian efforts."

This reminds us that while these are called "corridors of peace" they are, more often than not, anything but peaceful.

As you well know, over recent decades we have encountered the normal situations where combatants, particularly in civil wars, obstructed the humanitarian relief agencies, blocked them from bringing food or medical supplies into an area controlled by their enemy, prevented them from providing medical care and carrying out their humanitarian work. Attempts to negotiate access to the stricken population -- and nearly always the children were suffering most -- came up against the doctrine of "non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation".

But times are changing. Great changes are coming about, and a new humanitarian atmosphere is emerging. Following on Operation Lifeline Sudan, the leaders of Africa last year agreed to an OAU resolution calling upon all parties in conflicts in Africa to negotiate corridors of peace, for as long as necessary to allow relief workers unhindered access to civilian populations, especially to children and women.

World leaders are making statements we would not have heard just a short time ago. The Secretary-General recently reported to the United Nations: "It is increasingly felt that the principle of non-interference with the essential domestic jurisdiction of States cannot be regarded as a protective barrier behind which human rights could be massively or systematically violated with impunity."

Mr. Perez de Cuellar went on to assert that this traditional claim of sovereignty "...would only be weakened if it were to carry the implication that sovereignty, even in this day and age, includes the right of mass slaughter or of launching systematic campaigns of decimation or forced exodus of civilian populations in the name of controlling civil strife or insurrection."

How has this new atmosphere of readiness for humanitarian action come about? The end of the cold war brought members of the Security Council to work together to make the United Nations effective. At the same time, a series of developments brought a change in the way the world responded to children in need, particularly the victims of armed conflicts.

Television began to bring into our homes the tragic scenes of children suffering in a series of wars. Upon seeing these, the public became outraged and demanded action on the part of their governments. Over the past decade non-governmental organizations have acted to heighten awareness of the destructiveness of modern warfare upon children. They also pressed during the framing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for a number of articles that guarantee children protection, care and rehabilitation -- either within their own countries or as refugees.

The best way to help children would be to prevent wars altogether. Modern wars take a higher proportion of civilian lives than ever before. Children are the most vulnerable. There is need for public education on the effects of war on children and their families. A new ethic is emerging that places human beings at the centre of development and accords a "first call" for children -- placing children at the top of the agenda, in good times and in bad. A heightened concern for children in economic crises, natural disasters or under austerity programmes, leads, in a continuum, toward greater protection and care for children caught in armed conflicts.

When heads of state met at the World Summit for Children last year, the situation of children in armed conflicts was high on their agenda. They declared: "We will work carefully to protect children from the scourge of war." They went on to state that: "The essential needs of children and families must be protected even in times of war and in violence-ridden areas". And the world leaders asked that "periods of tranquillity and special relief corridors be observed for the benefit of children, where war and violence are still taking place."

You know of the commitment they made based on this declaration, for it has brought you together here. The heads of state and government adopted a plan of action that committed them to the protection of children in armed conflicts.

"Resolution of a conflict," they pledged, "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 the trauma resulting from violence and hostilities."

This commitment at the World Summit for Children raised a challenge: how would governments act when next confronted with a war in which massive numbers of civilians -- particularly children -- needed assistance? The Convention on the Rights of the Child created a legal and moral basis for humanitarian action. Now heads of state and government had committed themselves to humanitarian intervention.

They had not long to wait to be tested. This commitment and the Rights of the Child were cited to the UN Security Council as a basis for bringing a convoy of urgently needed medical supplies to the children in Iraq, in February, even while the UN authorized coalition was bombing that country. A corridor of peace protected the convoy and the WHO/UNICEF assessment team from the coalition's bombing.

A more urgent, overwhelming emergency soon followed. When the Kurds fled into the mountains and television brought home to us, literally, scenes of destitute horror, the United Nations could not stand by and allow millions to die. In an abrupt break with the past, the Security Council authorized humanitarian intervention. Resolution 688, passed at the beginning of April, allowed immediate access by international humanitarian organizations to all those in need of assistance "in all parts of Iraq". Following the initial use of coalition forces, it soon led to the introduction of United Nations security guards to reassure the Kurdish population so that humanitarian relief could proceed in a calm atmosphere.

Did it establish a precedent? The heads of the seven industrial nations at their London Summit in July referred to this action and stated:

"We urge the UN and its affiliated agencies to be ready to consider similar action in the future if the circumstances require it. The international community cannot stand idly by in cases where widespread human suffering from famine, war, oppression, refugee flows, diseases or flood reaches urgent and overwhelming proportions."

A number of major powers then brought a proposal to the United Nations to follow up on this declared intention. As the Foreign Minister of France recently remarked to the General Assembly:

"For the first time, through a Security Council resolution, the United Nations affirmed that the sufferings of a population justified immediate intervention....today the foundations of a new right, of a new humanitarian order have been laid. Why not adopt a code of conduct affirming the right to humanitarian assistance every time the integrity and survival of a people is threatened?"

That "new humanitarian order" is now being formulated within the United Nations, and the General Assembly will soon act on a complex proposal for improving the capacity of the United Nations system to meet humanitarian emergencies. The Secretary-General's recommendations for strengthening co-ordination and leadership provide for a high-level official to assist him

personally "on all humanitarian emergency situations, including their political dimensions". I am quoting: "The leadership of the Secretary-General is critical in mobilizing the political, humanitarian and development capacities of the United Nations" if there is to be a coherent and effective response in large and complex emergencies.

We must wait to see whether this will in fact follow out of the precedent of Security Council resolution 688. Clearly many nations are apprehensive about establishing exceptions to the traditional doctrine of strict non-interference in their sovereign affairs. But the new initiative has as proponents some of the principal nations contributing to humanitarian relief in emergencies. Here is what the Foreign Minister of Italy said to the General Assembly:

"...the right to intervene for humanitarian ends and the protection of human rights is gaining ground. This type of intervention has become an *idée-force*, and the most truly innovative concept of the remaining decade of this century....Intervention that is primarily aimed at securing protection of human rights and respect for the basic principles of peaceful coexistence, is a prerogative of the international community, which must have the power to suspend sovereignty whenever it is exercised in a criminal manner."

At the same time we must be aware of the concerns of nations that fear their sovereignty will be infringed. The spokesperson for the Group of 77 at the United Nations three weeks ago expressed this concern:

"Our worry stems out of our history, when many of us, as colonial subjects, had no rights. The respect for sovereignty which the UN system enjoins is not an idle stipulation which can be rejected outright in the name of even the most noble gestures. And an essential attribute of that sovereignty is the principle of consent, one of the cornerstones in the democratic ideal itself. And to our group, it involves partners, mediations, and in our global context, a fantastic convergence of the burning desire to help, and the wonderful sense of relief in freely and willingly receiving the help. The UN cannot and must not be commandeered into forming an assistance brigade that will deliver its gifts by coercion. That will definitely be unacceptable to us."

So you can see there are strongly felt positions, subtleties and complexities, on all sides of the humanitarian issue now before the UN. In actual situations, all belligerents in a conflict will usually respond to the needs of children when seriously pressed by public opinion. Children have a special appeal, and acting on that appeal we have been able to gain agreement for "days of tranquillity" or "corridors of peace". As the Secretary-General's recommendations for strengthening the UN's capacity state: "These innovations need to be further refined and the capacity of the United Nations in this area should be strengthened by building upon this experience."

In doing so, in building upon the experiences you have been discussing, we need your support. NGOs, the media and public awareness are crucial for achieving access for the humanitarian agencies to bring relief. In my opinion they will continue to be necessary if we are to act effectively in emergencies in the future. Even when the capacity of the United Nations is strengthened, the political will must be there to act. The resistance of a government or other belligerent to allow aid to flow to an enemy will still have to be overcome in many conflicts.

In more difficult situations it may be necessary to have the Security Council act, as well as the Secretary-General and his emergency coordinator, as it did in support of help for the Kurds. We have turned an important corner in humanitarian matters but still have a long way to go.

To build the new humanitarian era in which children are no longer the principal victims of warfare, a series of related issues should be addressed. At a recent workshop of UNICEF staff members working in countries at war, one of the conclusions they put forward urged the international community "to ban the production, sale and use of anti-personnel mines which kill, maim and disable thousands of children every year."

At that same time, as it happened, Prince Sihanouk speaking to the UN General Assembly stated:

"For years, I have been deeply disturbed by the almost saturation of Cambodian soil with land mines. These land mines have already handicapped a great number of our compatriots...and pose a permanent threat to our existence. I wish today to call for a worldwide ban on mines, beginning in Cambodia."

Well, the UN force that has now begun to administer Cambodia does have as one of its first tasks the clearing of land mines. But there are other countries, long after wars are ended, where mines are blowing the limbs off children or killing them. Worse, there have been instances of booby-trapped toys aimed specifically at children, and boys only eight or ten years old have been used to walk ahead of tanks to clear the minefields by blowing them up with their bodies.

These are what I call preventable acts of warfare that take a particularly heavy toll of children. Now that the momentum is building we must scrutinize how wars are being fought and call belligerents to account. If we do not insist that they abide by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it will fall into disuse. We must insist that governments and other combatants implement all the articles that provide protection, care and rehabilitation of children.

Article 39, for example, provides for all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims of war. Psychological recovery. We now know that many children are severely traumatized by warfare, and we have begun to do something about it. In

Lebanon, Kuwait and Sri Lanka we are assisting programmes for training health workers, teachers, parents and other caregivers in simplified measures that can help children recover from the traumas they have experienced. It is important to bring this understanding to those in contact with children even when war is going on. It must become an essential part of humanitarian relief, as important as food or medical care.

In Lebanon and Sri Lanka we have begun to assist programmes that follow through on the World Summit Plan of Action's assertion that: "To build the foundation for a peaceful world where violence and war will cease to be acceptable means for settling disputes and conflicts, children's education should inculcate the values of peace, tolerance, understanding and dialogue."

In the very midst of war, in early 1989, children in Lebanon made it known they would like to attend summer camps with children of other ethnic communities, who they had never met but whose parents had been fighting with their own parents throughout the children's lives. Shelling had closed the schools in Beirut, and boys and girls huddled in the basements of buildings or other bomb shelters. Their parents welcomed the opportunity to get their children to a safe place.

Some 20,000 children attended the peace camps that first summer. The 140 NGOs that helped organize the camps carefully mixed the children together, and they got along very well with each other. The following year, 40,000 attended the summer camps.

Now that the war in Lebanon has ended, UNICEF is supporting a greatly extended programme, bringing together nearly three-quarters of a million children in Education for Peace. You may have seen the film produced by UNICEF staff in Lebanon; it is joyous to watch these children playing together, dancing, singing and learning respect for each other and to respect each others' differences -- learning to solve problems through non-violent means.

Similarly in Sri Lanka, we are organizing Education for Peace, even as violence continues between ethnic factions. Instead of learning that violence is the way to settle disputes, children are acquiring understanding that non-violent ways can overcome personal differences. A series of vignettes on radio and television, as well as classroom materials and lessons for primary schools, aim at strengthening children's conflict resolution skills and helping them to live in harmony with people of other ethnic groups.

We are moving into a new era in which the United Nations and governments will take greater responsibility than before for humanitarian action. You may have read of the meeting in the Horn of Africa coming up in January at which the UN will meet with countries in that area to devise a plan for drought and famine relief without the political difficulties that have hampered such operations in the past. An agreement would help establish the principle that governments must cooperate with, or at least not hinder relief operations or use emergency relief as a weapon against their enemy.



In the realm of humanitarian action, events are moving fast, but we should not expect that all governments at war or their political-military adversaries will suddenly behave well toward civilians. Outside pressure or humanitarian intervention may at times be necessary; the international community appears to be moving toward limiting sovereignty in specific circumstances where combatants block humanitarian aid to people desperately in need of help.

What you are doing here is part of that change, and we will continue to need your support. Political resistance to renewed humanitarian activism will need to be overcome by an aroused public, organized effectively to press for humanitarian action.

We are also moving in myriad new ways toward peacemaking. The Education for Peace programmes I have described are part of this movement. We will need all the innovation and humanitarian will we can get, from every quarter, if the momentum is to increase and be sustained.

It is intolerable that the things that happen to children in wars should continue, and we must mobilize to bring an end to the idea that governments can carry on wars in whatever way they choose or do whatever they want to their own people. The idea of humanitarian ceasefires is now abroad in the world and needs all the support you can give.