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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Coordinating Conference on Assistance to the New Independent States

Washington, D.C.
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May I say at the outset, as the first commentator from the United Nations, that we in the UN welcome this meeting and the opportunity to participate. The statement of Mr. Antoine Blanca, the UN Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation and the chairman of our delegation, as well as the UN inputs to the working groups, have been distributed to all delegations.

As you might expect, the UN and many of its agencies are deeply involved at this very moment in many of the republics. Just today, there is a high-level UN delegation in Moscow discussing the human dimension of the transition. In the health field, WHO and UNICEF are already working to a limited extent and the WHO Director-General, Dr. Nakajima, has stated very clearly WHO's readiness to bring to bear that agency's full scientific experience and operational mechanisms both for the immediate and the medium-term needs. We in UNICEF expect, by the end of February, to have made an on-the-ground, preliminary assessment of the situation in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the other republics and the Baltic states. We've already had the experience of participating in limited distribution of medical supplies.

I'd like to stress several points, if I may, very briefly at this point, Mr. Chairman. First, we couldn't agree more fully that there is an emergency in the health field and it is worsening rapidly. There are already significant shortages of certain key drugs and vaccines. Perhaps even more serious, a significant proportion of the hospitals today are running without any or only intermittent water and electrical supplies. They are also having staffing problems. We also expect the production problems of their existing vaccine and pharmaceutical industries to worsen very rapidly in the next several months.

Second, we believe that we must learn from the experience we have had in developing countries and most recently with the transition now underway in Eastern Europe. As Mr. Blanca's distributed statement points out, one key lesson is the need to include the human dimension as an integral part of transition policy. This transition must have a human face, with particular reference, as Secretary Baker has said, to the most vulnerable -- especially children, for whom there is a long-term cost to be paid for harm that takes place now, as well as to the aged. Fortunately, at the World Summit for Children on September 30 at the UN last year, we had a very good spelling out of the key elements that ought to be addressed in working under circumstances such as these. These measures already enjoy an international consensus.

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Third, many parts of the existing medical system in the CIS and the other republics are inadequate, lacking sufficient emphasis on preventive primary care. For the short-term, we will have to concentrate on supporting those elements that are most directly relevant and not get caught up in supporting the high-cost, irrelevant parts, of which there are many. For the medium-term, as Foreign Minister Watanabe has indicated, attention needs to be given to restructuring the system, not only to put more attention on primary health care but also to bring in the private dimension and new cost sharing mechanisms.

With respect to drugs and vaccines, the need is to focus on the high-priority, low-cost items. I must say that WHO has had a long, exceptional experience in sorting these out. Their politically difficult job of sometimes saying no to some requests and yes to others has become a pattern of doing business which is accepted by all countries. For pharmaceutical products, there needs to be an emphasis on somehow getting local production back on stream. If the international community could provide substantial foreign exchange to procure within the former Soviet Union -- and I would add in Eastern Europe -- significant restoration of capacity can be done.

Fourth, we agree that the logistics and delivery systems are the most difficult immediate challenges. Fortunately in the health field, in so far as drugs and vaccines are concerned, they are high-value, light and susceptible to direct air delivery; but in any case, over the next 12 to 18 months, the intra-state delivery systems need to be restored.

Fifth, in the next two or three months, internationally accepted, rapid assessment procedures need to be developed that allow monitoring to determine which are the most suffering and vulnerable groups.

Sixth, special arrangements will need to be worked out in the next two months to give hospitals priority access to fuel for heating and operating emergency equipment.

Seventh, we very much welcome the collective involvement of the CIS states in the next meeting that has been mentioned. I think we all remember one of the highlights of General Marshall's original statement, when he said he made an offer and the ball then passed to the European states for their assessment and their participation. On the health side, we believe this is broadly applicable.

Eighth, and finally, as we organize to push forward on this great challenge and this opportunity, obviously we can't forget the developing world. Some 500 children died yesterday in the Soviet Union. If things get worse, that number may double or triple. I would say that yesterday another 200 or 300 children died in the entire industrial world. However, yesterday 39,000 children in the Third World died, including some 12,000 in Africa. Somehow we must keep that imbalance in mind.

In closing, may I say that many of the challenges facing the CIS and other republics will require large sums of money and considerable time. However, in the health field, experience has shown that we can move quickly with relatively modest amounts of money and make a very significant, real as well as psychological impact. Health could very easily be a leading edge in which, within three or four months, using existing mechanisms and knowledge with modest amounts of money, the international community could establish its collaboration and partnership with the CIS and remaining republics.