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Statement by Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali
Secretary-General of the United Nations
before the
Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

New York
17 June 1992



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It is a pleasure for me to address the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund for the first time. For many years, I have followed from afar what UNICEF has done on behalf of the world's children -- in particular, the world's poor children -- and my appreciation for its work has only been confirmed as a result of the close contact I have maintained with the organization since taking office as Secretary-General. I look forward to working with you in the years to come in that noblest and most rewarding of undertakings: that of securing a better tomorrow for children, who are the future.

The Executive Board is to be commended for the excellent guidance it has provided to UNICEF over the years. During the days of the cold war, when ideological conflicts hampered international co-operation on a whole series of fronts, you managed to deftly steer UNICEF through the geo-political obstacle course -- through the mine-fields of war, when necessary -- in order to get to the children and women most in need. During times of acute economic crisis -- most notably, the 1980s -- UNICEF found ways to help governments stretch limited resources and reach the unreached by relying on low-cost, high-impact interventions and mobilizing communities to improve conditions for children. The "adjustment with a human face" approach you promoted beginning in the mid-1980s, aimed at sparing children the worst effects of austerity measures, helped build the broad international consensus we have today regarding the need for human-centred development, poverty alleviation and the importance of safety nets in times of crisis and transition.

You have also kept UNICEF at the ready and at the forefront of UN responses to emergencies. The new instabilities and conflicts of the post-cold war period will require even closer co-operation and greater effectiveness on the part of the UN system, under the leadership of the new Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Jan Eliasson. But unquestionably, the greatest demonstration of what can be accomplished through global co-operation was the success of the WHO/UNICEF-led effort to immunize, by the end of 1990, 80 per cent of the developing world's children against the foremost childhood diseases, saving 15 million lives to date and, in the process, writing one of the most outstanding chapters in the history of the United Nations.

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As the cold war was ending -- almost as if the world wanted to waste no time getting its priorities re-ordered -- global efforts on behalf of children were accelerated. After a decade of making scant progress toward passage, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was approved by the General Assembly in November of 1989 and quickly received sufficient ratifications to enter into force in September 1990 -- record time for a human rights treaty. Today that milestone instrument of international law, which for the first time treats children's essential needs as rights, has been ratified by 117 States. Its universal ratification and application must be seen as key tasks of this era of democratization.

On the heels of the Convention's entry into force, the World Summit for Children -- the first summit gathering of heads of state and government from North, South, East and West -- was held. Its participants endorsed the compelling ethical principle that children's essential needs should have a "first call" on society's resources, in bad times as well as in good times, in war as in peacetime. But they showed themselves willing to go beyond enunciation of lofty principle by committing themselves and their governments to an action agenda for significantly improving the lives of all children by the year 2000.

I am most gratified to see that the World Summit for Children Plan of Action is now being translated into National Programmes of Action (NPAs) in over 120 countries in both the developing and industrialized world. The United Nations system -- with UNICEF as its lead agency for children -- is assisting developing countries in the critical follow-up process and will help monitor progress toward meeting the agreed on goals. I am looking forward to issuing -- as requested by the General Assembly -- a comprehensive World Summit for Children progress report later this year. I am confident it will reflect the accelerated pace of actions in all countries and the re-ordering of priorities that will be needed, in most cases, to reach the year 2000 targets. I trust the NPAs will also address the critical issue of additional financial resources, without which the promises the world has made to its children cannot be met. The International Conference on Assistance to African Children, to be held in Dakar in November, presents an important opportunity for mobilizing resources where the need is greatest.

The experience of the World Summit for Children was a useful contribution to the just-concluded Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This progression of international concern from children to the environment obeys an impeccable logic, for we cannot nurture our children without preserving our planet, and we cannot preserve our planet without nurturing our children. Civilization is at last lowering its threshold of tolerance both for the largely preventable deaths of almost 14 million children each year, and for the thoughtless contamination of our air, land and water.

As you know, it is my goal as Secretary-General to fully employ the machinery of the United Nations system in the prevention of crises. In this pursuit, I am not referring only to matters of peace and international security, but to the economic, social and environmental spheres as well. On the eve of the 21st century and the third millennium, we can do far more than we are doing today to prevent armed conflicts, to prevent hunger and disease,

to prevent environmental degradation. This will require increased global co-operation, vision and leadership such as that exercised these many years by UNICEF and its Executive Board. It will also require greater efficiency on the part of the United Nations system. We should learn why UNICEF has garnered the widest public recognition and support of any UN agency and then use what we learn, as appropriate, to further the reform process. Your work exemplifies what those who framed the Charter meant by "We, the peoples...", rather than just "we, the states or governments," and you are working to fulfill the original purpose of the Charter "to save succeeding generations". I commend you once more and urge you to redouble your efforts in the critical years ahead.