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Opinion to the Editor by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

"We Must Do More for the Children of War"

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"We Must Do More for the Children of War"

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A week of tranquility, a truce for children during the first week of November. Leaders of the political factions warring in former Yugoslavia agreed to this when I met with them recently in Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo. Now we must hold them to their word and take advantage of the opportunity it affords us.

Understandably many people are cynical about promises of another truce. Each agreement for a cessation of hostilities has soon been broken by one of the belligerents in this war-torn land. But a truce for children could be different. In past conflicts we have succeeded in getting days of tranquility and corridors of peace to allow humanitarian workers to aid the children. The special appeal of children can cause even the most hardened combatants to withhold their fire when asked by the international community to do so.

The recent proliferation of ethnic and civil strife -- in former Yugoslavia, Somalia, southern Sudan, Afghanistan and elsewhere -- challenges the post-cold war world to find new and better ways to protect innocent children -- all children -- caught up in the violent conflicts of the adult world. We have begun to find those ways, but much more needs to be done, now.

I need not recount the estimates of those who will die in former Yugoslavia during the frozen winter months ahead if we do not soon reach children with warm clothes, better shelter, fuel for warmth and cooking, food and medical care. The situations facing us in Bosnia and Somalia are as desperate and difficult to deal with as any we have faced in decades. At the same time, they, and the many other emergencies going on simultaneously in the world, represent an enormous draw-down upon staff energies and funds available to UNICEF and other agencies and voluntary organizations. We want to continue our development assistance to meet the "silent emergency" for children that is taking place every day in developing countries, but we are struggling to keep that focus in face of the pressure of a growing number of "loud emergencies".

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Jan Eliasson and I went about Somalia recently to assess the needs of the people and see how we can best proceed to meet them. He is the new high-level coordinator of relief efforts in disasters, a new United Nations post created to work closely with the Secretary-General and Security Council. For months, UNICEF and other humanitarian organizations have been trying to get food to the people of Somalia. Midst a total breakdown of civil order, the men with the guns seize the food and endanger relief workers. A doctor sent in by UNICEF was deliberately killed while sitting at an outdoor table with other relief workers, who were wounded. Just the other day, four humanitarian workers were killed in nearby Sudan.

Now, at last, UN peacekeeping forces have begun to arrive in Mogadiscio to guard the Somalian ports and airports and to protect the truck convoys as they bring food to people in desperate need. The precedent for sending military troops to provide security for relief operations was set last year, in April, when the Kurds fled into the mountains, without warm clothes, food or shelter. The Security Council authorized governments to use their military both to organize the vast operation needed and to give the Kurds protection so they would feel secure enough to come down out of the mountains.

Out of this action came the role Jan Eliasson now plays as United Nations coordinator, but it should be made clear that not all nations welcomed this kind of intervention when it was debated in the General Assembly last year. Many feared it might be used as an excuse for intervening in their internal affairs. National sovereignty must be respected, but in many recent conflicts the central authority breaks down and violence becomes generalized - international humanitarian assistance becomes a moral imperative.

The task confronting relief agencies in Somalia is overwhelming, but now that the UN peacekeepers are beginning to provide protection we should be able to get on with our work.

The situation in Bosnia and other parts of former Yugoslavia is altogether different, though equal numbers of children and other displaced persons are at risk. Interference with relief flights coming into Sarajevo airport is only one problem humanitarian agencies are encountering. Soon the truck convoys we have been sending in from Split on the Delmatian coast will encounter not only indiscriminate weapons fire, as before, but winter weather making the mountain roads all but impassable.

Various estimates of those who will die during the intense cold of winter range as high as 350,000. Many of these will be small children, always the most vulnerable in the chaotic conditions of man-made disasters. They face a harsh winter without adequate warm clothing, shelter, food and medical care.

Further, in visiting the hospital at Kosevo and meeting with children in other places, it was clear to me and the paediatricians who accompanied me into Bosnia that at least half the children have been severely traumatized by modern warfare. Magne Raundalen of Norway, an expert on post-traumatic stress disorder in children caught up in armed conflicts, is preparing a program to teach simplified techniques for parents, teachers and other caregivers to help

these children overcome the severe disturbances resulting from the harrowing experiences they are suffering through. We have learned much from similar programs in Lebanon, Kuwait and Sri Lanka.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force just two years ago. Among the human rights it guarantees children, it both provides for their protection in armed conflicts and for measures to promote their physical and psychological recovery. To implement these rights, I sought from the leaders of the former states of Yugoslavia that they stop shelling hospitals and schools, as well as observe a week of tranquility at the beginning of November.

The warring parties assured the UNICEF team that hospitals and schools will not be targeted from the date UN monitoring takes place. The moral obligation to observe the principle of "first call for children" even in times of war, as proclaimed by the 1990 World Summit for Children, was emphasized during the negotiations, as well as the need for children to return to school as part of a rehabilitation process.

During the pause at the beginning of November, UNICEF and other relief agencies will attempt to reach children and their mothers with urgently needed emergency supplies. The build-up of transport and relief material is underway at the entry-points to the war zones -- the relief agencies will be ready to move in the day that the wheel of tranquility begins.

Will this period of peace for children be observed? In other situations -- El Salvador, Lebanon, Sudan -- "corridors of peace" have been opened and "days of tranquility" observed so that children could be immunized, fed and given medical care.

Somalia and Bosnia are testing the international community to an extreme. The will to aid the victims of these conflicts is there, but the violence of both situations is interfering with the best efforts of UN and other humanitarian agencies to provide relief. The best intentions of humankind embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child challenge us, but the humanitarian agencies must have the full backing of people everywhere and particularly of governments, if we are to succeed in doing our work.