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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Opening of the 1993 Session of the UNICEF Executive Board

New York
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UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
1993 session

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Mr. Chairman,
distinguished members and observers,
colleagues of our National Committees and NGOs,
and friends:

I join our Chairman in welcoming the members of the Executive Board, observer delegations and our colleagues and allies from the National Committees for UNICEF and non-governmental organizations.

Our Chairman has continued the activist tradition of his predecessors. He made very successful visits to China and India, meeting with government officials and NGOs and visiting UNICEF-supported field programmes in several locations, as he has just described to you. Mr. Ward also led the UNICEF delegation to the meeting of the WHO-UNICEF Joint Committee on Health Policy in Geneva earlier this year. At all times throughout the past year, he has maintained a fruitful dialogue with the secretariat.

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Mr. Chairman, I suggest that we pause for a brief moment to silently honour the many and varied advocates for children who have left us in the past year, including, among many others, the six UNICEF staff killed in the line of duty, Audrey Hepburn, and, in recent days, Turkey's President Turgut Ozal.

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Mr. Chairman, this will be an important Board session. We meet at a time of global apprehension over many world events. In many places, including the Horn of Africa, the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, Central Asia and Southern Africa, ethnic and communal violence are ripping apart the fabric of society and killing and maiming children and women. These events surely affect the perspectives and concerns which must be applied to the Board's work at a time when it is making an important contribution to the historic shift in process worldwide in attitudes toward children.

You have a full agenda -- of policy issues, of follow-up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit for Children, of budget consideration, of major management issues, including an important decision on headquarters accommodations, and review and approval of the centre-piece of UNICEF's work, the country programmes. This will amply fill our days in the two weeks ahead...and too many of the evenings as well. I do not need to remind the members of the Board, and the many observers and other supporters, how important will be the views you express and the decisions you take for setting the directions, deciding on the financial allocations and approving the budgetary resources of UNICEF's efforts worldwide.

But I would urge us all -- indeed, challenge us all -- to not lose sight of the full scope of the forest in our specific and necessary attention to the details of each individual tree. Let us lift our eyes, periodically throughout our discussions, to broader horizons and to the sweep of international history of which we all are a part -- with its encouraging and positive trends as well as its remaining challenges and obstacles to remove...and which UNICEF now has a unique opportunity to influence.

Mr. Chairman, a complete and concise review of the issues and concerns facing this Executive Board session is already contained in Part I of my Report of the Executive Director [E/ICEF/1993/2]. I commend this Report to you (a copy accompanies my statement today), and I would just like to briefly review its highlights. However, I would first like to offer a few comments on the unique context in which we find ourselves in our work for children and women at this particular time.

First, we live in a period unique in all history. Many of you have previously heard me speak of Arnold Toynbee's assertion that, for the first time in history, society had the capacity to ensure the basic human needs of every person on the planet. That was a half century ago. It is far more true today...to a degree that would surprise even Toynbee.

In Toynbee's time, the technological capacity to ensure food, basic health services, and basic education to all was just emerging. But it was also a world in which empires were still the rule...and the greatest surge of empire building still lay ahead in World War II and after. Authoritarianism, imperial subjugation, colonial exploitation and racism were the principal order. The vast majority of the world's people -- and women in particular -- had only limited control over their lives, and virtually no voice in their societies or capacity to fulfill their basic needs.

My second comment is that global progress for people since 1950 has been immense -- in many respects, more so than in the previous 2000 years. The great colonial and power empires have collapsed, spawning a vast proliferation of new nation states. Nascent democracy is struggling to take root in virtually all countries emerging from the old order. Three-quarters of the world's population now enjoy the basics of a life of dignity, productivity and health. Since WWII, average real incomes in the developing world have more than doubled; life expectancy has increased by about a third; infant and child death rates have been more than cut in half; the proportion of the developing world's children starting school has risen from less than half to more than three quarters (despite a doubling of population); and the percentage of rural families with access to safe water has risen from less than 10 per cent to almost 60 per cent. In the early 1990s, for the first time, the majority of the world's people now enjoy at least the rudiments of each of Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom from want, and freedom from fear (at least fear of apocalyptic global war).

Third, we've learned how much can be done even in difficult times. Global development is so changing the world that new opportunities constantly arise, often unexpectedly; the challenge is how to become sufficiently aware of these opportunities, and to put them to work for positive change. One early great demonstration of this was the Green Revolution in the 1960s, when much of Asia increased production of wheat and rice at a rate never before seen in history, and which all realists just five years before would have called impossible. The "miracle" wheat seeds at the initial core of this revolution had been developed in the early 1950s, but it was not until the mid- and late-1960s that their use "went to scale". Why? Because by 1965 a new supportive infrastructure of fertilizers, pesticides and controlled irrigation was coming into place. For the first time, pricing structures were supportive. Prior to the mid-1960s, the price of food was kept artificially low for the benefit of the politically unstable cities, and fertilizer and other inputs requiring scarce foreign exchange were expensive. With population growing at 2-3 per cent per year, but grain production increasing at only 1 per cent, political decision-makers were confronted with the urgency of doing something decisive, and garnered the necessary political will. This urgency had been vividly underscored by the South Asian drought of the mid-1960s. As a result of a series of policy changes, abetted by improving technology, much of Asia transformed from "basket cases" to bread baskets and launched the new era of national support of family planning.

Equally dramatic is the recent revolutionary progress which has been made in cutting edge elements of child protection. As members of the Board know, immunization programmes have reached 80 per cent of age-one children in the developing world -- far better rates than in many industrialized countries. Oral rehydration therapy is now being practiced by more than one third of the world's families. Together, these two interventions alone are saving the lives of more than 4 million children annually. These results have been achieved despite the "lost decade" economic conditions of the 1980s for so many countries, despite the tragic -- some would say obscene -- outflow of debt servicing by the poorest countries, and even despite civil conflicts. They have been achieved for the same reasons that the Green Revolution was possible: the availability of new technology, the development progress in the surrounding environment which, with its radios, commercial products, and schools, transformed the capacity to communicate to virtually every village, and a new political will of leadership to seize these new opportunities to deliver low-cost essential services and mobilize those most in need.

Fourth, this progress has accelerated the changing ethos toward children. Even only five years ago, few would have predicted that the first truly global summit would have been convened in the name of children or that the Convention on the Rights of the Child would move as rapidly to General Assembly endorsement, coming into force, and widespread ratification. Within the next weeks, the Convention is likely to become the most widely ratified human rights instrument in history, and it is now possible even to think of its being the first "universal law" by 1995.

My fifth comment is that successful achievement of the World Summit for Children goals by the year 2000 would have repercussions far beyond the quantifiable goals themselves. It would have a profound effect on the population and environmental challenges which threaten to overwhelm the earth's capacity. It would virtually assure that the low projections for population growth would prevail by the middle of the 21st century as basic education and access to family planning information and services become virtually universal and families become confident that their children will survive. The meaningful address of many of their most basic needs and the attendant empowerment of people would strengthen nascent democracies, which desperately must demonstrate benefits to the bottom strata. It would accelerate economic growth, as we learned from the Newly Industrializing Countries which put investment in children as a first priority in the 1950s. And, since ill-health and illiteracy are both symptoms and causes of poverty, the world would have laid the basis for overcoming the worst aspects of mass poverty by early in the next century.

As Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said last month in stressing that the three great priorities for the United Nations -- peace, development and democracy -- are inter-locked: "Without peace, there can be no development and there can be no democracy. Without development there can be no democracy and, lacking basic well-being, societies will tend to fall into conflict. Without democracy, no real development can occur. And without such development, peace cannot long be maintained."

Within the context of this overall progress and the new potential to use achievement of the World Summit goals to give a "jump start" to development, let me call the Board's attention to the more significant developments highlighted in my Report to the Executive Board.

First, despite the new emerging ethic for children, the world has entered a new era of turmoil and wanton disregard for the most vulnerable. National, racial, ethnic and religious conflicts, often unleashed by the passing of the "containing influence" of super-power rivalry, are seemingly indifferent to the consequences for children and mothers. Indeed, children and women have been grotesquely abused as instruments of conflict as well as victims.

UNICEF and the whole international community confront two challenges in the face of these atrocities. We must seek to persuade the conflicting parties to moderate their disregard and abuses so that we may act to protect and assist the children caught in these whirlwinds. And we must struggle to prevent our increasingly successful efforts against the daily silent emergencies afflicting tens of millions of children at horrendous cost in lives lost and wasted from being overwhelmed and neglected by our commendable new responsiveness to the urgent loud emergencies.

It is notable that the world has crossed at least one threshold from being "witness to horror" to asserting that the most vulnerable should not be abandoned to the vicissitudes of conflict. The international community's massive action in Somalia was an unprecedented indication that world public opinion recognizes the need to defend children's, and the family's, right to food.

It is both encouraging and concerning that the United Nations, and the international system as a whole, have been called upon to play steadily increasing roles in addressing the political and conflict challenges now confronting our world. This is the long-overdue fulfillment of the hopes and expectations of those who drafted the Charter nearly 50 years ago. But it is also frightening to those -- within and without -- who are conscious of the limited resources, the limited tools, and the limited capacities of the international system...not just to respond to a score of simultaneous crises, but even to master large-scale individual missions.

Second, as countries prepared their National Plans of Action on achieving World Summit goals, it became increasingly clear that it would be useful to identify intermediate goals, for achievement by 1995, as landmarks on the road to the year 2000 goals. A series of regional conferences last fall in Asia, Latin America and Africa by countries on their NPAs have contributed to identifying ambitious intermediate goals that are achievable by 1995. These were endorsed by the WHO-UNICEF Joint Committee on Health Policy in January, and our country offices are planning our programme inputs accordingly. Their achievement would result in saving the lives of more than one million children annually by 1996 in both South Asia and Africa.

Third, achieving these goals by 1995 and 2000 will require increased resources, but not in amounts that are beyond practicality. It is possible and affordable to provide virtually every household with adequate food, clean water, safe sanitation, primary health care, family planning and basic education by the end of the century. It is estimated, as Board members know, that the additional resources needed would total approximately US\$25 billion per year, two-thirds from the developing countries and one-third from the industrialized countries. If governments of developing countries restructured their budgets so as to assure at least 20 per cent for priority social sector needs, and if donors restructured official development assistance to assure a similar 20 per cent for human priority concerns, the world would be close to providing the needed US\$25 billion. This target is not an impossibility, as was agreed by both donor and recipient countries participating in the Organization of African Unity's International Conference on Assistance to the African Child last November.

It is extremely concerning, however, that rather than moving to meeting these targets, several governments which have traditionally been among the largest and most dependable donors for purposes like these have found it necessary to reduce their ODA as a result of severe economic pressures. We of course hope that these measures are strictly temporary, and will not be imitated by other donors. The principle of a "first call for children", endorsed by the World Summit, which maintains that the essential needs of children should be given high priority -- a "first call" -- in the allocation of national and international resources in bad as well as good times, is particularly relevant when governments must make difficult choices regarding the allocation of resources.

Furthermore, the crushing external debt of African countries cries out for relief. In sub-Saharan Africa, external debt now exceeds the combined gross national product of the countries in the region and is proportionately several times higher than Latin America's debt. Ways must be found to relieve this burden which, together with the continuing decline of commodity prices, is smothering the hope for recovery in many African countries. This is a highly appropriate topic for the next G-7 Summit since 39 per cent is official bilateral debt and 28 per cent is owed to multilateral institutions.

Fourth, the importance of basic education for economic growth is now recognized everywhere and the international financial institutions are increasing dramatically their lending for education. Curriculum reform and other structural changes are on the agenda in many countries. There are promising models, but large-scale change has yet to take place in most countries. A new initiative involving the nine developing countries with the largest child populations is being supported by UNESCO and UNICEF in the hope that a breakthrough on this critical front can be achieved, and a critically important summit of the heads of state or government of these nine countries is now scheduled to be held in India this November.

Fifth, I note the major management issues which require Executive Board consideration during this session. The most immediate is that of the 1992-1993 revised and 1994-1995 proposed administrative and programme support budgets, on which you now have the comments of the ACABQ. These budgets were developed according to the specifications established by the Board last year as a result of the Reference Group's work. The second is the implementation of General Assembly resolution 47/199 of 22 December 1992 on the operational activities for development within the United Nations system. The third is the recent multi-donor evaluation of UNICEF on which members may wish to comment.

A fourth issue is the question of an overall management survey of UNICEF. It may be that decision on this should be deferred in order to take into account the forthcoming General Assembly decisions on reform of the structures and governance of UN organizations.

Finally, a fifth major management issue must, of course, be added: that of headquarters accommodation. Manhattan, New Rochelle, or both! You have my recommendation that we accept the major financial concessions offered by the UN Development Corporation and the City of New York with their twin headquarters proposal. The ACABQ has proposed we prepare an assessment

of a split option for your consideration, which should be available to you today, together with further last minute major inducements by New York City. I might add that the Mayor of New Rochelle has invited all Executive Board members to a reception and tour of New Rochelle next Sunday afternoon.

Finally, I remind you that if we are to continue and accelerate the progress and breakthroughs which we have experienced in the past decades, we must all be advocates for children. Most of you are also members of governing bodies of other United Nations agencies and/or officials of development institutions and leading NGOs. You have voices which can be raised, and lessons which can be shared. The world must develop a broad understanding of how goals for children complement with so many other human objectives: they are a major contribution to a better environment, including the reduction of population growth ... the promotion of children's rights is a fundamental part of the movement for democracy and human rights ... the goals for children are empowering to women ... and the achievement of health, education, water and sanitation and adequate nutrition for all would go a long way towards eliminating the worst aspects of poverty and contribute to economic growth and democracy.

Mr. Chairman, as I look around this room, I see scores of faces of individuals who I know to be leading advocates and activists for children on an on-going basis, whether that is their profession or simply a tangential activity. I speak not only of members of delegations of members of the Board, but also the Observer delegations, and also, especially, the observers from the NGO community. Little of our progress would have been made without their constant engagement and experience and advocacy. A defining character of UNICEF -- unique among all United Nations agencies -- is that we are a grand alliance of the world's governments and of leading non-governmental activists for children. Together, we have made children a cutting edge for progress extending far beyond children alone.