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Statement by James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
World Conference on Human Rights

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The notion that major transformations can come out of even the smallest changes, if conditions are ripe, has always struck me as compelling. I remember being fascinated, as a schoolboy, when I first learned about what physicists call phase transitions. I was impressed by my science teacher's demonstrations of the fact that -- once you reach a certain point in the process -- only a very small change in external conditions (a degree of temperature, an ounce of pressure) is required to suddenly transform a liquid into a solid, say, or vice versa.

History doesn't work according to the laws of physics, of course, but I would argue that something broadly analogous to a phase transition is taking place in this decade of unexpected, dizzying change. The situation today may not be unlike that which prevailed on the eve of the Green Revolution in Asia in the mid-1960s or that led to the crumbling of the Berlin Wall at the end of the 1980s; a series of conditions, long in gestation, have rapidly coalesced in an environment increasingly ripe for (and in urgent need of) major social change. We appear to have reached the point where relatively small actions can bring about accelerated progress on a variety of global fronts. As much as they have already changed the global scene, the end of the Cold War and the shift toward democratic systems we have witnessed in recent years may turn out to be a prelude to even more sweeping changes in international life and the lives of present and future generations.

This conviction flows directly out of UNICEF's experience as the embodiment and guardian of the world's concern for its children. But I confess that it is also born of my personal experience: first, as a child, a period which makes us all authorities on childhood if we dare recall what it was like being a child; and secondly, my experience as a father -- a parent like any other whose perspective is shaped by caring terribly about the happiness and well-being of (in my case) three wonderful sons and, more recently, five extraordinary grandchildren! I trust you will indulge me if I draw upon both well-springs of experience -- the professional and the personal -- in my remarks here today.

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Leap-frogging ahead and stumbling backwards

In the few short years since the end of the Cold War, humankind has leap-frogged ahead and stumbled backwards simultaneously. New possibilities for cooperation, community and well-being have been opened. In spite of the proliferation of conflicts and the unleashing of centrifugal forces pulling apart the very fabric of nations and communities, the end of East-West ideological polarity and the spread of democracy around the world have set the stage for making greater progress than may now be apparent.

At the same time, we have witnessed an upsurge of intolerance and hatred -- callous abandonment of the most elemental notions of human rights and human dignity. These dark forces turn neighbour against neighbour...set majority against minority, and minority against minority...they pit national against foreigner, have against have-nots, one religious group against another...they threaten to pull us back from our leap into a better future. Over the past year, on several visits to Somalia and former Yugoslavia, I have personally witnessed intolerance and hatred at work; these are, undoubtedly, the most vivid examples of what one historian called the "New Barbarism". But I would be less than candid if I told you I do not also see it, in one form or another, every day, in the streets of New York where I live and work, and on my travels to other proud cities of modern civilization.

This Conference must send a clear, unequivocal message to the forces that would deny us the dramatic, progressive transformation that can be ours. With a single voice celebrating a diversity of tonalities and timbres, we must reject hatred and barbarism, and affirm the vast potential we glimpsed particularly at the start of this decade. And we must not despair, for as intractable as many of the conflicts and problems confronting us may seem, they do not represent the fundamental trend or tendency of our era, which is leading us -- I am convinced -- toward greater tolerance and cooperation, greater freedom and well-being.

Because the outcome of the struggle between the forces of progress and those of retrogression will depend, in large measure, on the world's ability to ensure the rapid expansion of human rights, this World Conference on Human Rights has come at just the right time. Like the other historic gatherings in the series of global conferences and summits held since 1990 and scheduled to take place over the next few years, it can help to find solutions to the burning issues of our time and change the direction of history.

There will be a temptation at this Conference, arising from the righteous indignation of peoples everywhere, to focus almost exclusively on the most flagrant, the most visible atrocities, the violations of civil and political rights born of war and hatred,

repression and intolerance. And certainly, this Conference must speak out loud and clear, and take concerted action in defense of these rights. We must draw a line in the sand and say that "ethnic cleansing" and rape and the slaughter of innocents are utterly unacceptable to humanity on the threshold of the 21st century.

Taking action on the "silent emergency"

But it would be an unforgivable mistake -- a tragically missed opportunity -- if we do not also thoroughly and conscientiously address, with as much passion and outrage, the less visible obscenities symbolized by the largely preventable deaths of 13 million children each year, victims of that everyday violation of social and economic rights known as gross underdevelopment and abject poverty. If we ignore or downplay or fail to take action on what we call the "silent emergency", then we ourselves will be surrendering to the past just when it has become possible to embrace the future.

I am known for my rather hopeful world-view, but experience and common sense tell me that the tragic, mind-numbing holocausts and hiroshimas of the 20th century could be re-enacted in the 21st -- in the lives of our children and grandchildren -- if we do not act now on all aspects of human rights.

Act now...but in the face of so many daunting problems and emergencies clamoring for our attention, what actions? That is the question. We have the beginnings of new and hopeful answers in the international community's efforts to transform the United Nations into the powerful instrument for peace, human rights and development envisioned by the framers of the Charter. We have the Secretary-General's *Agenda for Peace*. We have the Department of Humanitarian Affairs coordinating the entire UN system's response to emergencies. We have the moral breakthrough represented by the Somalia operation -- the first-ever international military intervention mounted solely to secure a people's right to food. We have UN-assisted elections and nation-rebuilding in Cambodia. Human rights monitors in Haiti. A Truth Commission in El Salvador. The Security Council -- and the attention of the world -- focused on ways to protect civilians in cities and tiny towns in Bosnia. A UN War Crimes Tribunal being established.

All of these initiatives are hopeful beginnings. We must support and nurture them, perfecting our new mechanisms for preventing, predicting and responding to emergencies, for providing humanitarian assistance, for monitoring and promoting human rights, for responding to crises of massive human suffering. Even acknowledging their shortcomings, it is exhilarating that all these things now exist; so many were unthinkable only a few years ago.

But our fundamental goal cannot merely be to improve our handling of crises. We cannot endlessly rush around the world

putting out fires; we must learn to prevent them. But how? Is there something we can do now, something feasible and affordable, to help secure many of the major changes we are seeking?

Children as a cutting edge of human rights

This leads me, Mr. Chairman, to the single appeal and the single proposition I would like to put forward to this World Conference on Human Rights. The appeal is this: let us agree that ending the massive violation of children's rights still taking place around the world today is one of the central moral imperatives of our time. Let us agree, at a very *minimum*, that the rights of the 35,000 children who die daily of largely preventable malnutrition and disease, are every bit as precious and inalienable as our own. We can secure the rights of those who, in the words of Coleridge, will merely "die so slowly that none call it murder"; for it is now unquestionably a kind of murder, and we *must* secure their rights.

And the proposition I offer is this: using children as a cutting edge of human rights generally, and of our many ongoing efforts in diverse fields of development, would contribute more to international peace and security, and more to democracy, development and the environment -- more to preventing crises and conflicts -- in a shorter period of time and at a far lower cost than any other set of doable actions aimed at remedying global problems on the threshold of the 21st century. I know that this is a large claim, but I do not make it lightly.

UNICEF is obviously not saying "drop what you are doing" to work on children's issues. What I am saying is that children provide a privileged political and practical entryway to addressing many of the core concerns and problems of our times, and that raising children to a much higher level of priority will make a difference across the board. I am suggesting, then, that we embark together on what could be the boldest experiment ever undertaken in international life. And the good news is that we now have excellent road maps and guidebooks for such a journey, thanks to a series of rather extraordinary developments for children that have taken place over the past few years.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of them. The Convention's adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989, after a full decade of intricate negotiation, was one of the first demonstrations of the potential for global cooperation opened up by the end of the Cold War. Even so, skeptics predicted that few governments would go on formally to embrace the Convention, much less live up to its comprehensive standards. But the skeptics were wrong. By September 1990 -- record time in the history of human rights treaties -- the Convention obtained the 20 ratifications required for its entry into force as international law, and it has gone on to become the

"most nearly universal" international human rights instrument. In little over three years, 141 countries have ratified and made the Convention the law of their lands -- recently, at a rate of 3-4 ratifications a month -- a process one would ordinarily expect to take one or more decades. Fully ninety per cent of the world's children now live in countries whose governments have ratified the Convention.

This rapid, widespread acceptance of the Convention leads us at UNICEF to hope for something that has never been accomplished before, something skeptics will again say is impossible: achievement, by the year 1995 -- in time for the UN's 50th anniversary -- of universal or near-universal ratification of the Convention, making it the first truly global law of humankind. We are convinced it is indeed possible; the process toward signing and/or ratifying the Convention is underway in most of the 50 countries which are not yet States Parties, among them the United States, a number of Arab nations, and several republics of the former Soviet Union.

In short, we fully expect that with stepped-up advocacy -- including, hopefully, a call from this World Conference -- the Convention on the Rights of the Child will become, by 1995, the first legal code adopted by the human family in virtually its entirety, covering 99 per cent if not 100 per cent of the world's children.

Such an achievement would not merely be symbolic; it would give a major boost to ongoing efforts to reach concrete, global goals for improving children's lives, goals emanating from the 1990 World Summit for Children (about which I will have more to say shortly). At the same time, I am convinced that attainment of universality would mark a watershed in the historic struggle for human rights and social progress in general. It would give a much-needed "shot in the arm" to the entire body of international human rights law and practice -- and, specifically, to efforts to obtain universal ratification of the other basic rights treaties by the year 2000. More broadly, it would signal the beginning of a fundamental shift in laws, attitudes and behaviour toward children that would inevitably affect the lives of families, communities, nations and the world in profound ways.

Empowerment of the whole child and all children

I say this because of the revolutionary nature of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Let us not forget that, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international community was able, for the first time, to lay a bridge across the ideological gap that has traditionally separated civil and political rights, on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights, on the other. In the interest of children, East-West and North-South differences regarding these two sets of

rights were overcome, and consensus language found to accommodate different views regarding the responsibilities of the State, the community, the family and the individual toward the young. I would like to think that in its support, protection and empowerment of the whole child -- and all children -- the Convention heralds a growing willingness on the part of the international community to recognize the indivisibility of all rights, as well as their universality.

This may sound like philosophizing, but it is, in fact, a matter of the greatest practical import. I am convinced that if the world does not rapidly extend to adults the broad political consensus that has now been achieved regarding the essential indivisibility and universality of *children's* rights, the recent advances that have been made toward greater democracy will surely falter, and sustainable development and peace will remain elusive.

In a rather crude insight, someone once defined democracy as "liberty plus groceries"; we have seen in recent years -- and we are seeing today -- the awful consequences for individuals and societies when either or both sides of this equation are systematically neglected or denied. The U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. eloquently illustrated the connections between the two sets of rights in a comment he made shortly before he was assassinated: "What good is it to be allowed to eat in a restaurant -- he asked -- if you can't afford a hamburger?" One does not have to subscribe to a particular model of government to affirm the indivisibility and universality of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Our children and grandchildren will surely judge us severely if we continue to engage in the sterile ideological debates of a bygone era, or if we fail to achieve consensus on basic principles because we fear their mis-application in practice.

Regarding needs as rights

What the Convention does, essentially, is to regard children's essential needs as rights, codifying them along with adult society's responsibilities to ensure they are respected. The Convention recognizes the particular vulnerability of children and insists that the "best interests of the child" be a primary consideration in all actions and decisions affecting them. It rejects in no uncertain terms all forms of discrimination based on the "race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" of the child or of his or her parents.

What the Convention does not do -- nor could it -- is dictate the specific modalities by which States Parties must guarantee the observance of children's rights. Within the framework of its universal standards and precepts, there is ample scope for a variety of approaches rooted in national culture and local

conditions. The important thing is to translate the Convention into national legislation and practice that push each society to do more -- to do its best -- for children.

Can anyone doubt that this represents a major legal-ethical breakthrough for humankind? After all, not very long ago in the sweep of human history, children were considered to have no inherent rights whatsoever, not even the right to live. The notion that the State has a legal obligation to protect the young and help parents and communities provide for their well-being is a modern concept. That the welfare of each individual child should be the subject of a binding international treaty -- under which States voluntarily surrender some small portion of their sovereignty -- well, this is an advance whose ultimate benefits will become evident only with the passage of time.

Narrowing disparities with a "jump-start"

We are all interdependent neighbours in a global village now and it would be foolish -- to say the least -- to believe that we can continue to live indefinitely, side by side, amidst the kind of obscene disparities in wealth, health, and in levels of freedom and participation, that persist today. People will not stand for it; the environment will not stand for it. Radically narrowing those disparities is not only an ethical priority of the highest order, it is increasingly a question of global survival.

I am suggesting that we can now make remarkable progress in that direction, starting with children. This assessment is based, first and foremost, on the new capacity we have developed to extend the benefits of modern science and medicine to people everywhere, through the mobilization of people-power and the power of modern communications.

We can now "jumpstart" the process of narrowing these disparities by breaking what we call poverty's "inner cycle" early in the lives of its victims, whose frequent illnesses, poor growth and illiteracy are some of the most fundamental causes as well as some of the most severe symptoms of poverty and underdevelopment. Our capacity to place a bubble of protection around the most vulnerable months and years of millions of children has increased exponentially over the past decade -- and as this capacity has increased, it is gradually becoming unacceptable ethically not to use that capacity, or to exclude nations, communities or individuals from the benefits of progress.

When nothing could be done about polio, humankind lamented its losses but nobody pointed the finger or assigned blame for this terrible scourge. Today, if someone were to argue that a certain mountain hamlet or jungle village is just too far away or too difficult to reach with polio vaccine -- or any of the

high-impact/low-cost life-saving tools that have been developed -- we would answer that to deny any of these things to the blameless inhabitants of that remote settlement would be to deny what has become a basic right.

Our warehouses are now well-stocked with new technologies and rediscovered practices which are powering a genuine revolution for children around the world today:

* The universal child immunization (UCI) effort -- the largest peace time collaborative undertaking in world history -- has established systems which now reach virtually every hamlet in the developing world, routinely immunizing 80 per cent of all infants four or five times during their first year of life and saving the lives of some 8,000 children a day -- some 3 million a year.

* Oral rehydration therapy (ORT) is now making important inroads against the single greatest historical killer of children -- diarrhoea that takes the lives of some 8,000 children every day, down from 11,000 daily a decade ago. This simple, low-cost technique is now saving the lives of more than 1 million children per year, a figure which could easily more than double by 1995 with increased national and international leadership.

* The simple iodization of salt -- at a cost of five cents annually per consumer -- would prevent the single largest cause of mental retardation and goitre, which affect more than 200 million people today as a result of iodine deficiency.

* Universal access to vitamin A through low-cost capsules or vegetables would remove the greatest single cause -- about 700 cases per day -- of blindness, while reducing child deaths by up to a third in many parts of the developing world.

* The scientific rediscovery of the miracles of mother's milk means that we now know that more than a million children would not have died last year if only they had been effectively breastfed during the first two years of their lives, at far less cost than for infant formula.

* Even in the more problematic area of education, we are learning from the experience of a diverse group of developing countries that it is possible to get virtually all poor children, including particularly girls, through basic education at very low cost.

* Recent advances have shown how to halve the cost of bringing safe water and sanitation to poor communities, to less than \$30 per capita.

In short, families, communities and governments now have the means to give every child something of the protection and nurturing which is provided as a matter of course to children fortunate enough to be born into affluence -- we are learning how to "outsmart" poverty at the outset of each new life. We estimate that the Child Survival and Development Revolution of the past decade or so -- employing the technologies and know-how I just enumerated -- has saved some 20 million lives and made living something more than mere survival for another 100 million children.

This has taken place amidst the rapid -- albeit too little heralded -- progress of the past 30-40 years in most of the developing world, where average real incomes 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 children starting school has risen from less than half to more than three-quarters; and the percentage of rural families with access to safe water has increased from less than 10 per cent to almost 60 per cent. All of this despite a doubling of population and prolonged economic crises, as in the 1980s.

World Summit Plan of Action

This tells us something fundamental about the character of our times, and the inescapable moral obligation we have to do the good we are now capable of doing. The Convention on the Rights of the Child could not have come into being 30-40 years ago, before this capacity existed and was massively tested, and before the world had overcome the fundamental ideological divisions of the Cold War. The Convention is the world's way of playing ethical "catch-up" with the liberating potential of technology and scientific progress, and as I mentioned earlier, the World Summit Plan of Action provides many concrete ways to tap that potential over the decade of the 1990s.

The world leaders who attended the historic children's summit agreed on a remarkable package of strategies and goals that represent what the world's leading experts and development agencies believe can be accomplished for children and women in this decade. Most of the targets are quantified and are to be reached by 1995 or the year 2000. So when States Parties to the Convention report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child -- as periodically they must -- they can report meaningfully by pointing to progress they are making toward meeting concrete goals, particularly in the critical areas of health, nutrition and education, with special emphasis on empowering girls and women. Just about the same number of countries that have now ratified the Convention (140) have issued -- or are preparing -- detailed National Programmes of Action to implement the commitments made at the World Summit. In

country after country, a sense of mission, a campaign spirit, is being generated around these plans. Diverse sectors inside and outside of government -- even political adversaries -- are collaborating.

Most of the goals agreed upon at the World Summit for Children relate to social rights, in a framework that explicitly recognizes the economic rights of children, women and families to a decent standard of living. Until recently, the world -- through its inaction -- has said that the children of the "silent emergency" do not matter, simply because they are largely the sons and daughters of the poor. This is beginning to change. At least in the case of children, poverty and social injustice have begun to matter. The new ideological environment permitting broad consensus on the entire range of children's rights opens the way for unprecedented progress.

But civil and political rights are as important as economic and social rights. They are as important for children as they are for adults. I believe that the Convention's articles on children's rights to participation and freedom of belief can be used to strengthen and enrich democracy, both where it is new and fragile and where it is venerable and stable. Although children do not have the right to vote, we all know that young people can be powerful agents for social change -- just look at their role in overthrowing repressive regimes and in the movement to preserve the environment. Surely their opinions deserve a more central place in modern society. Failure to cede them that place often means surrendering them to disillusionment or apathy, or to extremist movements, to crime and the drug culture, to the lures of selfish consumerism and nihilistic philosophies.

Protecting children in armed conflicts

There is also an urgent need to put to use the several articles of the Convention aimed at protecting children in armed conflicts. Day after day, television brings into our living rooms scenes of famine and war -- children reduced to skeletons, rapes of girls and women, the shelling of soccer games, snipers firing at buses of refugee children -- and we run the risk of becoming accustomed and hardened to these atrocities. We must not allow this to happen; at all costs, we must hold accountable those who have decided children are legitimate targets, that killing and maiming children is a good way to punish or demoralize their parents and communities.

At the same time, we must build on the experiences of countries like El Salvador and Sudan, where "Days of Tranquillity" and "Corridors of Peace" silenced the guns for specific periods and in specific areas to get assistance to children and civilians; and we must find better ways to help children who have been orphaned, uprooted, maimed or emotionally traumatized by war. Here again,

morality must play "catch-up" with our growing capacity to provide assistance and relief. Of course, at the other end of the violence spectrum, there is the invisible atrocity of child abuse in the home which, together with the battering of women, are symptoms of social and cultural crisis crying out for new and creative solutions.

In this context, we are greatly encouraged by the increased prominence children's rights are receiving at the annual sessions of the Commission on Human Rights. At this year's meeting, six important resolutions were passed on different aspects of children's rights, mainly in the area of protection from violence and abuse. We at UNICEF urge stepped-up action by governments to ensure their implementation.

At the same time, we salute the work carried out by the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and urge this audience to read and make use of his latest report. Such degradation as he describes must not be permitted or condoned on the eve of the 21st century. Greater efforts are also required to assist children and teenagers who, by the millions, are driven by poverty and abuse into the streets or into sweatshops where they are bitterly exploited. We must see to it that the children of the AIDS pandemic -- orphans and those who are themselves infected -- receive the care to which they are entitled, and that their rights are respected. Children and youth need to be educated and empowered to prevent the transmission of this scourge. And we must use the opportunity of this International Year of the World's Indigenous People to redouble our efforts on behalf of indigenous children and the children of other particularly vulnerable minorities.

Relying on the constructive voices of NGOs

As you know, there is no mechanism -- no international human rights police -- to enforce compliance with the Convention (or any other human rights treaty, for that matter). States Parties are required, however, to make a progress report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child two years following ratification and every five years thereafter, and this process has already gotten off to a good start. We must encourage submission of serious and detailed reports, with significant input from NGOs. Governments stand only to gain from openness in reporting, since it can bring recognition of the social progress they have made and attract international support for areas in need of improvement. To the extent that governments rely on and involve a variety of sectors, both public and private, the information presented in their reports will be more useful and have greater credibility. The Convention empowers the Committee to draw on documentation and testimony provided by NGOs. We at UNICEF feel strongly that the constructive voices of

NGOs -- particularly those which have staunchly defended children's rights and provided leadership for adoption of the Convention over many years -- need to be heard.

In reporting to the Committee, governments should supply, wherever possible, disaggregated data revealing the disparities that national averages tend to hide. In addition to knowing how children are faring in health and education on a national level, for example, we need to know how girls are faring relative to boys, and how children in the poorer areas of the country are faring compared to those in better-off areas. This data will be of crucial importance for designing much-needed affirmative action programmes to make up for legacies of discrimination against girls and women, indigenous populations, minorities and other disadvantaged groups. Perhaps the greatest single thing that could be done to advance the cause of human rights -- and general well-being -- in the world today would be to improve the status of women, focusing our efforts early in the lives of girls.

Exploiting the potential of children's issues

The revolution that is underway for children can surely serve as a cutting edge of global and national efforts to address the burning issues of our era. It can be leveraged into a global movement capable of dealing a death blow to many of poverty's worst manifestations during the 1990s, it can help spur economic development, bolster democracy and human rights, improve the status of women, dramatically slow population growth and ease the stress on the environment. It can strengthen world peace. It can be the "small change" needed to get us the major transformation we are seeking.

Let us use the extraordinary potential of children's issues to unite and mobilize political will to accelerate progress on all these fronts. We must not allow ourselves to become so distracted and frightened by the emergencies and conflicts and hatreds dominating the headlines that we renounce our chance at making a phase transition to a better world for all. I am convinced that if we undertake this bold experiment, we will be able -- at decade's end -- to welcome in the new millennium with a new ethos toward children -- toward the human family -- firmly in place.

In closing, permit me to reiterate our appeal to the 50 countries that have yet to become States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child: by taking prompt action to embrace this historic "Bill of Rights" for children, you can make it possible for the world to say, in 1995, that all humankind had decided, at long last, to put children first. I cannot think of anything else that would give more meaning to the World Summit on Social Development or of a better way to celebrate the U.N.'s first half-century.