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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
National Advocacy Meeting to Eliminate
Iodine Deficiency Disorders
in the People's Republic of China by the Year 2000

Delivered on his behalf by Dr. Antonia Novello
UNICEF Special Representative
for Health and Nutrition

The Great Hall of the People
Beijing, People's Republic of China
21 September 1993



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Good afternoon. It is a great honour for me to be here today representing UNICEF's Executive Director James P. Grant. Mr. Grant has asked me to express his deep personal regrets at not being able to participate in this historic event for both the people of China and the entire world; prior commitments related to the UN General Assembly require his presence in New York. It is with great pleasure that I will now deliver the statement the Executive Director would have made had he been able to attend.

Forgive me if I start on a personal note. I was born in China -- here in Beijing in 1922 -- at a time when this great country was struggling to overcome the legacies of feudalism, foreign domination and backwardness. The vast majority of Chinese were bitterly poor, something that left an indelible mark on me during my most impressionable, formative years. My father, John A. Grant, worked with Chinese pioneers in the field of public health, not only to bring relief to individuals, but also health and development to the nation. As a child, I remember him talking about China's extraordinary potential -- in the health field as well as in all aspects of development -- and he instilled in me a deep confidence about this country's future. I can say in total candor that one of the greatest satisfactions of my life has been to witness -- and, in some small measure, support and collaborate with -- the remarkable transformation, the tremendous human progress China has made over the past 40 years. For example, the infant mortality rate in Beijing is now lower than that for Washington, D.C. The International Monetary Fund recently placed China third in the ranking of world economic powers -- the latest indication of how far you have come in the blink of an historical eye.

Now China is poised to make progress on yet another front; you are preparing to vanquish yet another enemy of the people and of development: iodine deficiency disorders (IDD), which today threaten over 1.5 billion people around the world, nearly a third of them -- some 425 million people -- in China alone. The sponsorship of this meeting by the State Council... the presence and involvement of so many top national and provincial political leaders... the participation of so many ministries and non-governmental sectors... the choice of the Great Hall of the People for this gathering and its live broadcast to the entire nation -- all eloquently attest to the seriousness with which you are undertaking this new battle, this peaceful battle against an ancient foe.

In fact, there is nothing strictly new about efforts to combat iodine deficiency disorders in China. Chinese physicians and healers were the first in the world to identify iodine-rich seaweed as a remedy for goitre -- reportedly some six thousand years ago! And a much more up-to-date understanding of the range of iodine deficiency disorders and how to prevent them has informed your efforts since 1949, and particularly since the mid-1970s.

Proof that you have made significant progress in recent decades is the sharply descending incidence of cretinism among new generations of rural villagers. In some iodine-poor areas, 20 per cent to 30 per cent of people over the age of 30 are cretins, a shocking statistic that indicates just how severe the iodine deficiency problem was up until 30 years ago. Today, in those same areas, as a result of increased salt iodization and improved diet over the past decades, the percentage of cretins among ten year olds is down to between three and five per cent. This is undeniably dramatic progress, laying the foundation for the sustainable elimination of IDD.

But a fuller understanding of the nature and magnitude of the IDD problem has emerged in China only in the past 5-6 years, in step with new scientific developments permitting finer measurement of this malady's ravages on the physical and mental development of its victims. The Ministry of Health and many of the country's leading scientific and medical institutions have -- with assistance from international agencies and experts -- defined the true dimension of the challenge. It is now estimated that in rural areas where the goitre rate is ten per cent or more among school children, the average intelligence of the entire school-age population is lowered 10-13 per cent. And improved monitoring reveals that fully 40 per cent of the Chinese population live in areas that place them at risk.

What is more, recent biotesting indicates that the problem is not confined to rural areas and remote, mountainous regions. In a number of major cities, some 20-40 per cent of newborns show

signs of marginal iodine deficiency -- a warning that the problem may be considerably more widespread than previously thought. Looking at the country as a whole, of the 20 million babies born each year in China, over six million will be born in areas that place them at risk.

The implications of this new data are clear: given an average 10 per cent lowering of intelligence per child, IDD may be responsible for a loss of up to 60 million IQ points each and every year in China. This is above and beyond the broader range of physical and neurological disabilities affecting the lives of additional millions. Clearly, this is a major development problem, a major educational problem, a major health problem facing China. And certainly, as is reflected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is the right of every single child to develop to his or her full genetic potential. It is the right of the Chinese family -- increasingly a single-child family -- to have access to the iodated salt that is so crucial to the full intellectual and physical flowering of their offspring.

What is so encouraging is that within only 12 months of iodine-fortified salt becoming universally available and used in a community, no more babies will be born cretinous or with retarded mental and physical development due to iodine deficiency. Goitres in primary school children will have started to get smaller and some will have already vanished. Children will have more energy and perform better at school. In young adults, goitres will also shrink and further enlargement of the thyroid in adults will be prevented. And this is precisely what you have set out to do, with your goal of iodating all alimentary salt by mid-decade.

Given the excellence of the plan that you have developed... given the high-profile leadership being provided by the State Council and the involvement of no fewer than 17 Ministries... given the multi-sectoral, decentralized strategy you have designed -- I would venture to say that your goal could be achieved a year earlier, that is, by the end of 1995. Universal iodization of salt toward elimination of IDD is one of the year 2000 goals set at the World Summit for Children, and again by the International Conference on Nutrition. Subsequently, because it is one of the more doable of the goals, it was decided at a series of high-level regional gatherings that the universal iodization of salt should be reached by the end of 1995. We respectfully urge you to push for 1995 attainment of universal salt iodization, not only because it would solve the IDD problem in China that much sooner, but because it would mean solving a third of the global IDD problem and set a powerful example for other countries to follow.

In pursuing your IDD elimination strategy, there are several lessons from UNICEF and international experience that I believe are worthy of special attention:

* The role of the salt industry is especially important. China's exciting process of market reform must not mean that the country's many salt producers will each "go their own way", supplying iodated or uniodated product as they see fit, or that the quality of iodated salt and its storage and distribution will suffer. A government-private sector partnership is required if universal iodation of salt is to become a reality. Strong government regulation, quality inspection and training of salt industry engineers and workers will be needed more than ever. China already has a unique advantage. You must preserve central mechanisms to keep tabs on the process of salt iodation throughout the country; many other countries do not have such an advantage and must now invent such mechanisms if they are to effectively combat IDD.

* Monitoring and evaluation of progress are essential. At all levels, systems need to be solidly in place to track progress toward universal iodation of salt, maintain the required quality of iodated salt, assure delivery to all consumers, and provide biological measurement of health outcomes. This will greatly facilitate attainment of IDD elimination.

* Leadership at the national level is of great importance, but only wide decentralization of IDD elimination efforts will bring success. That is why your plans to empower the provincial governors, the salt industry, regional and village authorities, and local communities, are so appropriate in this endeavour. This is not an undertaking for the health sector alone, but an undertaking for the entire nation. Therefore, may I suggest that multisectoral meetings such as this one be held soon at the provincial level, so that the political momentum is maintained?

* The solution through universal iodization of salt is simple and sustainable. Once the programme is established, the additional cost will be minimal. At the same time, national savings will be immense. As an example, it was reported recently that the cost of treating goitre in Germany -- a country that still does not iodize all its salt -- is some \$800 million every year! China will also save many millions as a result of this programme.

Eliminating IDD will serve to strengthen your overall efforts to reach the full set of year 2000 goals for children and women, as set forth in your excellent National Programme of Action to keep the promise of the World Summit for Children.

On behalf of UNICEF, I want to congratulate China, its leadership and people, for taking the lead in the struggle to eliminate the most important preventable cause of mental retardation in the world today. Frankly, it does not surprise me that you are doing so, given China's enviable record of recent decades in actions for children's well-being. I am happy to announce that in UNICEF's new annual publication, *The Progress of Nations* (launched globally this week from London), China's national performance vis a vis child survival -- compared to that of other countries at similar levels of gross national product -- is given a rating of "plus 95", placing you among the three developing nations with the best overall record with respect to child survival. Our wholehearted congratulations!

It is inspiring to see this great nation hard at work not only to save those precious lives, but to ensure that each and every child who survives can fulfill the intellectual potential with which he or she is born.

Allow me, then, to thank you for helping the world develop a "children first" ethic; thank you for leading in efforts to reach the World Summit for Children goals; thank you for your efforts to vanquish IDD; thank you for showing what can be done with true leadership and vision!

It has been an honour for me to deliver Mr. Grant's statement. Let me simply say in closing, *Ju ni men cheng gung* [we wish you great success].

Thank you once again on behalf of UNICEF.