

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1993-0047

Message from Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Sixteenth World Law Conference

Manila, The Philippines
24 October 1993



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



Rcf00071UV

Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01138

ExR/Code: CF/EXD/SP/1993-0047

XVI World Law Conference. Message from Mr. James P. Grant,
Date Label Printed 21-Aug-2002

cover + 3pp + øb



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

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Message from Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
XVI World Law Conference

Manila - 24 October 1993

Most regrettably, I am unable to be with you for the XVI World Law Conference. I do, however, hope that you will allow me to share a few reflections on how this important event -- and each one of you personally -- can make a real difference to the world's children ... indeed, to the future of the world ... at this critical moment in history.

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 many 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, no one can deny that we have witnessed a callous abandonment of the most elemental notions of human rights and human dignity in many parts of the globe. These dark forces turn neighbour against neighbour ... set majority against minority, and minority against minority ... they pit national against foreigner, haves against have-nots, one religious group against another ... they threaten to pull us back from our leap into a better future.

That is why this World Law Conference is so timely. With the moral authority that comes with being respected members of the legal profession, you must take an unequivocal stand against the upsurge of lawlessness, hatred and intolerance we have witnessed in recent years. This is the time to draw a line in the sand and say that "ethnic cleansing" and rape and slaughter of the innocents are utterly unacceptable to humanity on the threshold of the 21st century.

We must not despair, however, for as intractable as many of the conflicts and problems confronting us may seem, they do not represent the fundamental trend of our era which is leading us -- I am convinced -- toward greater tolerance and cooperation, greater freedom and well-being.

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This trend that is struggling to assert itself needs nurturing. It needs encouragement. It needs the world's lawyers. It needs each and every one of us. It has already brought us a number of breakthroughs of truly historic dimensions. 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 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.

In less than four years, the Convention has been ratified by 151 countries, making it the "most nearly universal" international human rights instrument. Fully ninety per cent of the world's children now live in countries whose governments have ratified the Convention.

This rapid acceptance leads us at UNICEF to hope for something that has never been accomplished before -- **achievement, by the year 1995, in time for the UN's 50th anniversary, of universal ratification of the Convention.** It would then become the first truly global law of humankind, undoubtedly spurring on the process of implementation. Only 38 countries are left that haven't ratified, and almost half of them have already signed.

Universal ratification of the Convention would do more than give a boost to children's rights and human rights in general. It would also reinforce global efforts to reach the goals set at the 1990 World Summit for Children -- health, nutrition and education goals aimed at striking a real blow against some of poverty's worst symptoms, and some of its main perpetuators, by the end of the century. It is, I am sure you will agree, an obscenity that 35,000 children still die every single day -- 13 million every year -- largely of causes that can be easily prevented, with simple technology, and at low cost.

It is therefore our profound hope that this World Law Conference will add its voice to that of the recent World Conference on Human Rights -- held last June in Vienna -- in calling for universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by 1995, as well as for "effective implementation of the Convention through the adoption of all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures...".

What can each one of you do as individuals? You can:

- * strongly advocate in favour of ratification of the Convention in your country, if it has not yet been ratified there;
- * work to see to it that your country's laws and practices vis a vis children are up to the standards set by the Convention;
- * help ensure that your country's legal system provides equal and effective protection to each and every child, no

matter what his/her race, religion, ethnic background,
family situation or economic status may be; and
* help publicize the Convention and its provisions.

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, lawyers,
parliamentarians and human rights activists have a precious and
powerful "agent for change", of which we need to take full
advantage as the 21st century approaches.

In closing, I want to thank you on behalf of the world's
children and wish you every success in your deliberations in
Manila this week.