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for the Turkish newspaper
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"Children First: Ensuring a Better 21st Century"

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CHILDREN FIRST: ENSURING A BETTER 21ST CENTURY

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As the international community sorts out the complexities of the post-Cold War era, one thing is becoming crystal clear: we simply cannot afford to limit ourselves to running around the world putting out fires of conflict that are already out of control. While doing our best to improve our evolving mechanisms for peacekeeping, crisis management and humanitarian assistance, the emphasis must increasingly be placed on prevention. We have no choice, really; the human and material costs of an endless proliferation of avoidable conflicts and disasters are unthinkable. The international community is now spending more than four times as much on UN peacekeeping than it is on the multilateral development assistance that can help prevent future conflicts. Foreign aid budgets are being cut in many donor countries. We are at a crossroads and there is doubt and confusion about the direction in which we should be heading.

What needs to be done? I suggest that we need to regain our confidence in the possibility of progress. So much of today's widespread pessimism about Third World development is misplaced. It just doesn't hold up against the historical record. We often forget, amidst the tragedies and crises of our times, how far humankind has actually come, how much progress has been made toward well-being and dignity for all. Life expectancy, over the last forty years, has improved more than during the entire previous span of human history. As I write these words, the World Health Organization is pondering destruction of the last laboratory samples of smallpox virus -- that first scourge to be conquered by modern science -- and polio and tetanus and other diseases are now targeted for eradication by the end of the century. Child death rates have been more than halved and UNICEF is working with governments and communities around the world to cut them a further third by the year 2000. The proportion of children enrolled in primary school has risen from less than half to more than three-quarters. Today more than 60% of rural families have access to safe water; a little more than a generation ago, the percentage was only ten percent.

Citing such remarkable progress, we are not Pollyannas minimizing the magnitude of what remains to be done; we are merely recognizing the existence of a momentum of historic progress that can and must be kept alive. Indeed, we can do more than keep it alive; we can **accelerate** that momentum if -- and only if -- we take advantage of a number of unprecedented

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opportunities that have converged in the 1990s.

We must work to avert and relieve the malnutrition, disease and illiteracy that are some of the worst symptoms and, at the same time, some of the leading causes of grinding poverty and underdevelopment. Above all, we must invest in our children -- protecting and nurturing them during their first critical months and years -- if we want them to become the healthy, productive, wise and free citizens the 21st century will need and demand.

We have, for the first time ever, the knowledge and the tools to extend at least the basic benefits of modern civilization to every man, woman and child on earth. As a result of the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 1992 Earth Summit, we even have measurable goals and timetables upon which the world's leaders have agreed, and low-cost strategies for achieving these consensus targets. Together, we can finish the great unfinished business of the 20th century: eradicating the worst manifestations of poverty before the new millennium.

We have an opportunity, in the 1990s, to re-invent development. *Putting children's basic needs first... investing in people (with an emphasis on improving the status of women)... using low-cost technologies... mobilizing the very fabric of society... community participation...* -- these are the simple concepts that are driving our efforts to accelerate human progress. I believe they hold the key to achieving a more dynamic world economy, a more peaceful, democratic and stable international order, and greater well-being for all the inhabitants of our global village. And what better place to start than with the children, putting a "bubble of protection" around their first, fragile months and years, giving them a head start in life. We have the knowledge and resources to accomplish this, but only a bold, concerted effort will make it happen.

Turkey knows very well the sweet success that such bold efforts can bring. In April 1985 immunization levels in Turkey were at 21 per cent. By December of that year they had reached 83 per cent -- close to five million children were protected against the six major killing and crippling diseases of childhood. What happened in the intervening months was the result of one of the greatest mobilization efforts ever to have taken place. Every aspect of Turkish life was involved -- the President and Prime Minister, regional governors, imams, teachers, entertainers, football teams, the media, even the meat and fish industries. A WHO-UNICEF study concluded that some 22,000 child deaths were averted as a direct result of the campaign; measles cases decreased by almost 90 per cent.

Five years later, Turkey's success was replicated globally, when immunization coverage reached 80 per cent. What this means is that 4 out of every 5 children in the developing world today -- some 100 million children every year -- are being reached on five separate occasions with vaccines before their first

birthday. Some 3 million young lives are being saved yearly as a result of this largest international peacetime collaboration in history.

As a logistical achievement, the immunization effort is unprecedented; and it shows beyond any doubt that the outreach capacity now exists to put the most basic benefits of recent scientific progress at the disposal of the vast majority of the world's poor. It also demonstrates that, with sustained political commitment, progress can now be made toward basic social goals even by the poorest of developing countries.

The situation we face today may be analogous to what happened in the mid-1960s with regard to hunger in Asia. In the early 1960s, there was no lack of scientifically documented gloom and doom scenarios of population growth in Asia outrunning food supply, leading to projections of massive famine, chaos and global instability in the last third of this century.

But then, quite suddenly, within 4-5 years, there was the Green Revolution in Asia, extending from the Philippines through South Asia to Turkey. In country after country, wheat and rice production increased at annual rates unprecedented in the West. Why then? The miracle grains had been around for some 15 years. But it was only by the mid-1960s that the surrounding environment became propitious for rapid expansion, for going to national scale. Only by then had fertilizer and pesticide use and controlled irrigation become widely practiced and readily available, thanks in large part to earlier aid programmes. And, equally important, the combination of Asian drought and increasing awareness of the population explosion created political will at the highest levels to drastically restructure price levels for grains and inputs, and to mobilize the several sectors of society required for success.

I would suggest that we may be in a similar position today on a much broader front -- encompassing primary health care, basic education, water supply and sanitation, family planning, gender equity, as well as food production -- covering a much wider geographical area, now including Africa and Latin America, as well as Asia.

The goals set at the World Summit for Children -- each one reflecting specific advances and low-cost strategies -- include a one-third reduction in under-five mortality rates, a halving of child malnutrition, 90% immunization coverage and control of the major childhood diseases, the eradication of polio, a halving of maternal mortality rates, 80% primary-school completion, the provision of safe water and sanitation for all communities, and the universal availability of family planning services.

In the last three years, over 100 governments have drawn up national programmes of action to achieve these goals, and these plans are now being put into effect, with varying degrees of

commitment and vigour.

What is needed, in all countries, is more depth and breadth of support from opinion leaders and the media, from educators and religious leaders, from the non-governmental organizations and the professional bodies, from the political parties and community organizations, and from the public at large. The goals and the means of achieving them must be articulated and argued for in every country; the proportion of government spending, and of international aid, allocated to the meeting of basic human needs must be doubled to at least 20%; the systems for monitoring progress must be put in place; and the United Nations family must play its part in supporting and monitoring progress towards the goals which have been agreed by almost all its Member States.

UNICEF is confident that Turkey, one of the pioneers of the Child Survival and Development Revolution, will meet the goals for children, the treasure and future of the nation and the world.