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Address by Dr. Guido Bertolaso
Deputy Executive Director (External Relations)
of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Regional Conference of ASEAN Mayors, Defenders of Children

Bangkok, Thailand
26 October 1994

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Bangkok - 26 October 1994

I am delighted to be here with you today and honoured to share the floor this morning with such distinguished speakers. It is rejuvenating to be among so many who have recognized their responsibilities toward our most precious and vulnerable citizens -- our children.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the government of Thailand -- and in particular, His Excellency Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, and His Excellency the Governor of Bangkok -- for hosting this important meeting, as well as for their inspiring remarks and kind words about UNICEF.

With its focus on issues of particular concern to the ASEAN region, this gathering represents an important step in the expansion and consolidation of the "Mayors, Defenders of Children" initiative. All of you are pioneers in this noble undertaking, and on behalf of UNICEF, I thank you for the commitment and the activist impulse that have brought you here today.

It is in the context of contemporary society's powerful trends toward urbanization, decentralization and democratization that the "Mayors, Defenders of Children" initiative takes on its full significance. As the arm of government closest to the people, and therefore closest to the many problems crying out for solutions in the world's towns and cities, municipal authorities are increasingly on the front line of human and economic development. And the significance of municipal level involvement in actions for children is growing, since responsibility for urban health, education and other vital services is becoming more of a municipal and less of a national responsibility in many countries.

The Mayors' Initiative for Children, launched in Italy in 1991, has now taken on global proportions. Mayors and municipal leaders from 45 countries of Africa, Asia, Europe, North and

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South America and Oceania, gathered in Mexico City in July 1993 for the Second International Colloquium of Mayors, Defenders of Children. They reiterated their commitment to achieving the goals established at the World Summit for Children and called upon their counterparts around the world to do likewise, adapting National Programmes of Action (NPAs) for children to municipal realities.

The Mexico City colloquium has been followed by a number of regional activities, and follow-up actions at country level:

* In December 1993 the 60-member League of Cities of the Philippines signed a seven-point Declaration of Commitment to Children pledging to develop city plans of action for children within the framework of the NPA and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Progress reports are to be submitted every year beginning at the end of 1994.

* In the Dominican Republic, 21 mayors from that country's central region held their First Regional Meeting of Mayors as Defenders of Children, committing themselves to promote and strengthen local initiatives in favour of children and urging all city council members across the country to come together on initiatives directed at healthy development of children.

* In Estelí, Nicaragua, 32 mayors committed themselves to prepare municipal plans of action for children.

* The interior ministry of our host government, Thailand, held a two-day meeting for all mayors as a follow-up to Mexico.

* The Mayor of Santa Cruz, Bolivia met for three days with the mayors of that country's ten largest towns.

* Mayors of Santiago, Chile, of Ibagué, Colombia, and of Limbe, Cameroon all held follow-up meetings.

* National meetings of mayors have also taken place in Argentina, Colombia, Guinea, Italy and Morocco.

The clear message that has reverberated through this series of mayors' meetings is that it is good economics -- and good politics, too -- to prioritize investments in the well-being of children and youth, and that municipal governments are increasingly in a position to leverage important gains for children in spite of the narrow mandates, tight budgets and shortage of trained personnel that seem to be a common feature of most city governments.

This conference will not only enable you to share and learn from one another's experiences, but also provide valuable input to the Third Colloquium of the mayors' movement for children, to be held in Paris next month.

Human progress made in this part of the world will determine to a great extent the overall state of the world as we approach the 21st century. The extraordinary achievements in economic and human development that we have witnessed in much of Asia -- and increasingly, in Southeast Asia -- over the past few decades set an example for the rest of the world.

A recent World Bank report says that following recent trends, East Asia could become the first region in the world to eradicate poverty within a generation. The report points out that the region halved the distance between itself and the rich countries between 1965 and 1990, as measured by indicators such as per capita calorie intake, infant mortality and life expectancy. Calorie intake per person rose by 35 per cent over this period, infant mortality dropped by 64 per cent and the fertility rate fell from 6.2 births per woman to 2.7. Even more remarkable is the plunging proportion of the absolute poor -- those at or below subsistence income -- from a third of the region's population in 1970 to a tenth in 1990.

These gains are attributable to a number of factors, varying from country to country, but a central feature of all the Asian success stories was early and significant investment in basic education, primary health care, nutrition, and improvement of the status of women. Children, the future of every nation, were made a top priority. And many countries in this region made clear public commitments to poverty reduction and incorporated goals toward this end in long- and short-term development plans.

But poverty and its cruellest companions -- malnutrition, preventable disease, illiteracy and gender discrimination -- still remain a formidable foe in many of your countries -- in spite of real gains made on many social and economic fronts in recent years.

This means that every president and prime minister, every mayor and governor are really each the leaders of two nations, two provinces and two cities -- the nation, city and province of the "haves" and the nation, city and province of the "have-nots". The tendency of free-market economic policies to favour the already advantaged means that safety nets must be provided for those left behind by progress. Children and other vulnerable sectors must be protected, and the most disadvantaged groups identified and assisted.

The international community has taken several major steps towards embracing responsibility for all children over the past

few years. Actions on behalf of children have been greatly facilitated by the new scope for global cooperation brought about by the end of the Cold War and by the growing consensus that a human-centred development paradigm is needed.

* In November 1989, the UN General Assembly approved the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**. This most comprehensive of human rights treaties has quickly become the legal and ethical framework for worldwide efforts to improve the lives of children. The Convention recognizes every child's right to develop physically, mentally and socially to his or her fullest potential, to express his or her opinions freely, and to participate in decisions affecting his or her future. This new ethic goes for girls as well as boys; it applies to children living in rural and hard-to-reach areas as well as to those living in cities and peri-urban areas; it is as valid for children whose families and communities are poor as for those who are better-off; and it should benefit children of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities as well as those from the majority or mainstream of a given society. The Convention is a "Bill of Rights" for all children, and a code of binding obligations for governments, communities and parents with respect to the young.

167 countries have already ratified it, making it the most widely embraced human rights treaty in history. Only 23 countries remain on the dwindling list of those yet to ratify, and we sincerely hope that it will become the law of the land in those countries before the end of next year, the UN's 50th anniversary. The World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna last year set 1995 as the year for obtaining universal ratification, which would make the Convention the first law embraced by all humankind. UNICEF is counting on mayors to be outspoken advocates for ratification of the Convention where it has not yet been ratified, and that you will actively seek its implementation in your cities and nations.

* In March of 1990, the **World Conference on Education for All** was held right here in Thailand, jump-starting a renewed global effort to ensure a basic education for all, with an emphasis on providing access to the poor and to girls and women.

* In September 1990, the historic **World Summit for Children** was held, the first ever truly global summit meeting and the first in the chain of critically important UN conferences and summits that have been taking place and will continue during this decade. At the children's summit, the world's leaders committed themselves and their governments to prepare national programmes of action to achieve over 20

goals in child health, nutrition, education and rights by the year 2000. Subsequently, 13 mid-decade goals were agreed to, and more than 120 countries -- accounting for some 90 per cent of the world's children -- have issued or drafted national programmes of action to reach both sets of goals.

* Perhaps the most remarkable development of interest to this audience is the **widespread decentralization of NPAs to provincial and municipal levels**. Action programmes at provincial and/or municipal levels are being developed in some 50 countries and planned in an additional 25. Every province in China has signed a contract with the National Coordinating Committee for Children and Women to prepare its own programme of action. Every state in India has been directed to do likewise and eight states have already drafted these documents. In Latin America, 16 out of 24 countries surveyed by UNICEF are carrying out some form of decentralization of the NPA process. In the two largest countries of Latin America, Brazil and Mexico, virtually all States are involved. Provincial Governors in the Philippines have signed a Declaration of commitment for Children in the Countryside in which they pledge to implement Provincial Plans of Action, mobilize resources for doing so and produce annual progress reports for the President. In this region, Vietnam -- all of whose provinces, as well as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City already have programmes of action for children -- is a particularly good example.

In UNICEF's experience, goals, carefully considered and seriously adopted, constitute the strongest basis for social action. By setting measurable, time-bound goals, nations -- and their cities, too -- open the way for the focused action, social mobilization and monitoring measures necessary for sustainable progress. The year 2000 and mid-decade goals transform many of the articles of the Convention into specific, tangible claims which have inspired a shared vision of what can and should be provided to children as we enter the 21st century.

It is our hope that each one of the mayors and governors attending this meeting will see to it that a comprehensive, goal-driven, multisectoral and community-oriented plan of action for children is soon drafted and operational in your city or province. And why not create an inter-agency body to coordinate and support government and NGO efforts for children in each province and municipality?

Because of efforts such as the ones I have just outlined, and despite all the problems of a world bleeding from continuing wars and environmental and economic wounds, it is becoming clear that one of the greatest of all human aspirations is now within reach. Within this decade, we at UNICEF believe it will be

possible to bring to an end some of the worst manifestations of absolute poverty in the lives of all children -- the malnutrition, preventable disease and widespread illiteracy that are also some of poverty's causes and help perpetuate the transmission of disadvantage from generation to generation.

Achievement of the mid-decade goals for children would assure that the momentum toward accomplishing the full set of decade goals is maintained. At the same time we estimate that it would avert the deaths of an additional 2.5 million children annually by 1996. During the coming year, therefore, progress toward these mid-decade goals will be the main yardstick for assessing the seriousness of the larger decade-long effort. Mid-1994 assessments indicate that with sustained efforts a majority of countries should achieve a majority of the mid-decade goals. My colleagues will be discussing the mid-decade goals in more detail, but I do want to say that we hope this meeting will embrace them as enthusiastically as have previous mayors' meetings.

The Human Rights Commission's Committee on the Rights of the Child has decided to use the World Summit goals and timetable as a yardstick for measuring national compliance with the provisions of the Convention relating to children's rights in health, education and nutrition. For the first time, respect for human rights -- in this case, a sub-set of children's rights -- can be gauged in terms of fulfillment of concrete goals around which global consensus exists, on a timeline agreed upon by the international community. This is the best way to quickly translate the extraordinary legal and ethical breakthrough of the Convention into tangible benefits for the world's children.

UNICEF has traditionally emphasized child survival and development, but with the impetus provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child we have increasingly taken up the banner of child protection. Permit me to focus on a few protection issues that are of universal concern, but which tend to impact most severely in urban environments.

As you know, the Convention says that children have a right to be protected from exploitation and abuse -- a right every bit as important as economic and social rights. A very important component of the Convention comprises those articles known as the "special protection articles" which guarantee the child protection against physical, psychological or moral injury in the form of abuse, exploitation, abandonment or neglect; they also cover the child's rights to special protection in the context of war or forced migration, or in situations where the child is in conflict with the law or subject to imprisonment.

Exploitation and abuse of children is a worldwide concern, whether we are talking about the growing numbers killed by the

ravages of war... the rape of girls and women... the children maimed by land mines or displaced from their families and homelands... children subjected to pornography or prostitution or other forms of exploitation... or children and teenagers who, by the millions, are driven by poverty and abuse into the streets or the sweatshops where they are brutally exploited. We are also concerned that the children affected by the AIDS pandemic -- orphans and those who are themselves infected -- receive the care to which they are entitled, coupled with the respect for their rights.

The Convention is a powerful tool for global efforts to safeguard children's protection rights. The protection provisions of the Convention address the obligations of governments to prevent all forms of exploitation and violence against children. But now that the vast majority of nations have embraced the Convention, how do we judge a country's compliance in the field of child labour, for example, for which the international community has not adopted convenient targets and timelines? Passing and enforcing the necessary laws and regulations is obviously an essential part of what needs to happen, but eliminating such social evils is a complex undertaking that cannot be accomplished overnight in any society. But at the same time, if States Parties do not start moving seriously on this front, they open themselves to criticism for failing to comply with the relevant provisions of the Convention.

That is why UNICEF is currently working with countries where such problems are serious to design strategies and timelines for compliance. Enforcement can be phased in over a realistic but not overly-long timeframe. For example, a country might set itself the goal of getting all children 12 years old and under out of the workplace and into the schoolroom within a specified period of years, starting with six year olds in the first time period, seven year olds in the second, and so on until achieving the goal. UNICEF is convinced that more can be done - more must be done - in the area of child labour. Making greater progress on the child labour front is essential if the world is to achieve the broader health, nutrition and education goals which have been endorsed by this gathering.

The sexual exploitation of children, including the issue of so-called "sex tourism", has also been identified as a priority area for UNICEF's programme for children in especially difficult circumstances.

In this connection I want to thank His Excellency the Prime Minister for his frank remarks on this subject, and draw your attention to the excellent report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Mr Vitit Muntarbhorn. UNICEF is expanding its cooperation with government and NGO programmes combatting these sensitive and

difficult problems, and we look forward to your ideas and suggestions on how we can particularly help municipal governments protect the young from these evils.

Recognizing that some of these local problems have an international dimension, UNICEF is actively supporting preparations for the World Congress on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children to be held in Sweden in 1996, hosted by the Swedish government in collaboration with a coalition of non-government organizations including End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT). Hopefully, the outcome will be greater awareness of these issues and more energetic global cooperation to address them.

Today we gather because of our mutual concern for children, all of us acknowledging that children are the future. But we must take time to remember that the chasm between high blown rhetoric and real commitment and between principle and practicality remains very wide. The challenge of this meeting is to help narrow that gap.

When populations were primarily rural and scattered throughout the countryside, it was natural that decisions were centralized in the Capital, under the mandate of central or state governments. The importance of metropolitan and local space is growing rapidly, partly as a result of the intensity of urbanization. The urban population is growing worldwide by 160,000 inhabitants every day, roughly 57 million a year. The institutional impact of this deep change of the structural background of development is gradually becoming clear: the fact is that the overwhelming majority of our daily needs, ranging from schools and doctors for children, to small businesses, employment programmes, fresh fruit and vegetable production, transportation and so forth can be responded to or regulated locally, with little need for central State intervention. Nowadays, any average town has, or is rapidly acquiring, the capacity to decide on its own development needs, and the management space for mayors is growing rapidly.

The challenge for mayors, in this changing context, is particularly difficult: the rapid urbanization, against a general background of widening economic gaps, means that you are on the front line, having to face thousands of explosive social, economic and infrastructure problems with limited means. In other words, you are first to contend with the problems, but the lowest rung of government.

On the other hand, change can also be seen as opportunity. People in local space can be better organized to participate, new technologies can bring new solutions, and local administrators know their problems and the necessary responses much better than distant bureaucracies. This is of paramount importance for

policies related to children, as they usually depend on a great number of different and finely tuned actions, frequently coming down to individual problems where direct knowledge and local decisions are essential.

In one way or another, what present trends show is that local space is coming of age, and by promoting such an important initiative as the Mayors Defenders of Children, mayors are in fact paving the way for more humane and more ethical development. I wish you the best of luck in your deliberations over the next two days and urge you, once more, to return home with renewed energy and determination to implement programmes of action for your children.