

(III) Speech*

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Honourable Minister of State for Law, Justice and Company Affairs, Mr. Bhardwaj; Honourable Justice Pandian; Honourable Justice Kirpal; Mr. R. K. Anand, Vice President, The Indian Law Institute; distinguished colleagues and friends,

Let me first say that it has been a pleasure to work with the Indian Law Institute, Mr. R.K. Anand, his colleagues and the other organisers of this International Conference. I believe that the Conference has been a landmark for child right internationally and in India in particular. You have taken a quantum leap in this Conference in raising consciousness and generating commitment at the highest levels of law and politics. I have been genuinely enlightened, moved and further motivated by the statements and presentations made. The Conference has been unique in bringing together professional in child development, health, nutrition and education with legal luminaries and activists from India and abroad – a truly interdisciplinary experience.

In the few minutes available to me, let me very briefly reflect on some of the key statements emanating from the Conference. During the inaugural session, the Prime Minister of India asked, "can we do today what the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution could not do?" Mr. Narasimha Rao was referring to the banning of child labour and the implementation of compulsory primary education for all children. "The law has to be forceful and powerful," he said.

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I believe that the consensus and recommendations of this Conference indeed reinforce this wish. However, as the Prime Minister emphasised, the recommendations must be implementable and, I feel, we have duly taken this into consideration by, for example, proposing a step-wise approach to enforcing compulsory primary education. Undoubtedly, participants feel that primary education is the key priority for children.

The President of India gave us a *tour de force* of children's rights emphasising the problems of the girl child, child labour, street children and, again, the importance of primary education. He highlighted the need to reallocate resources away from military technology to the well-being and development of children. The Conference has clearly signalled that social policy and resource allocation must match legal strictures. The law is crucial though and I recall Justice Krishna lyer's statement that "the history of the child will be rewritten given judicial activism in affirmative action." Give voiceless children a voice and a vote was his sentiment.

Swami Agnivesh, Shantha Sinha and others gave us a practical reminder of what is possible in removing children from bondage and labour and placing them in schools, their basic right. They highlighted the attitudinal barriers both at policy and parental levels which must be overcome to guarantee the child's right to basic education. Permeating their presentations was the optimism that this *can* be done given political will and the implementation of viable strategies.

My colleagues, Drs Richard Jolly and Jon Rohde, emphasised the 'doability' of

measures to prevent child mortality and improve the physical and mental development of children. The techniques are simple, inexpensive and implementable. There is no excuse for inaction.

As Professor Ramalingaswamy said, "intersectoral action is a precondition for success in assuring children's rights." Again, I believe that this Conference has responded to this reality. However, as Professor Ramalingaswamy pointed out, "equity must be pursued proactively; it will not necessarily trickle down from economic growth." We therefore need to maintain a constant vigil and monitor *social* indicators of development regularly.

Let me end by returning to the children themselves by quoting the last line from a play performed by street children that some

of us had the pleasure of seeing one evening this week. They conclude, after depicting quite vividly the terros of street life, by asking the audience, "What will you do now – go back to your houses and watch TV while we go to the station and sleep on the platform?"

I do hope that this Conference will not be regarded as just another platform of eloquent speeches, fine words and rhetoric but a true awakening and basis for *concerted action*, starting today as the Honourable Minister urged, to ensure the rights of the child, that is, to ensure that children experience true childhood.

Thank you.

