



RESPECTED PRESIDENT, Honourable Prime Minister, Your Excellency, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, other dignitaries and participants, Ladies and Gentlemen :

I bring you first the greetings and appreciation of Mr. James Grant who sees this gathering as setting a global precedent—a New Deal for all children. Eight years ago India hosted the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summit (SAARC) at Bangalore. During that meeting, Heads of State of great nations paused to consider for the first time in history, the importance of children to the development of their nations. Their deliberations went beyond a charitable or humanitarian concern by calling for concrete actions. They asked the UN to formulate the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, they initiated the commitment of all governments to achieving universal immunization of children by 1990. This meeting for the first time put children on the international agenda. It was followed by similar deliberations and resolutions from the Organization of African Unity, Central American Heads of State and even in the famous Reagan-Gorbachev Summit in Moscow. Perhaps, it was their concurrence on the importance of peace for children which started the thaw that ended the Cold War. The momentum from Bangalore led to a new departure in world concerns for the future actions which in a very real sense brought nations to think about what was really important and contributed to the end of a

polarized world. By 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was voted by the UN. Soon thereafter followed the largest summit ever, the World Summit for Children when 71 Heads of State gathered in New York to discuss and commit themselves to the future of children. Later in 1990, the accomplishment of universal immunization was a proof that indeed the impossible can be done.

Today India is once again leading in the recognition that the elimination of the worst elements of poverty need not await the long and arduous path of economic growth. Indeed, children cannot wait in the words of the famous poet, Gabriela Mistral :

Right now is the time his
bones are being formed,
his blood is being made,

and his senses are being developed.

To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow'.

His name is 'Today'.

With India's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child just over a year ago, more than 90 per cent of the world's children are now covered by this, the most widely signed and ratified human rights Convention in world history. In recognition of its obligations under this Convention, as well as the provisions in the Constitution and India's own policy on children, measures are being actively pursued to assure the most basic rights of survival, health, nutrition, basic education and protection from exploitation. And indeed, it is an urgent and pressing task, for everyday in India, nearly 10,000 children die (the same number of lives lost in the disastrous earthquake in Latur in September 1993). This daily toll of death comes not from

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the common and readily preventable and treatable diseases for which technologies exist and are affordable. Two-thirds of our children are under-nourished, their minds and bodies growing less than their God-given and genetic potential. Some 25 million young children are not enrolled in school and an equal number drop out before attaining even the basic skills of reading and writing. Twenty million or more are fully engaged in the labour force, having virtually no childhood worthy of the name. Of 300 million Indian children, boys outnumber girls by nearly eight million, two-thirds of out-of-school children are girls, a majority of children in hazardous work places are again, girls. Small wonder, tears often greet the birth of a girl child.

These challenges are being rapidly addressed while full immunization continues, other primary health services are being added in the villages addressing the most common causes of death, diarrhoea and pneumonia, laws now protect breastfeeding from the onslaught of infant formula promotion, and the ICDS has expanded to assure better feeding and upbringing of each infant. The Prime

Minister himself has announced an increased allocation to education to reach 6 per cent of GDP. The government's attention to assure universal education of at least five years for every child is testimony of the commitment to this basic right. Compulsory primary education instituted one year at a time progressively over the next 5 years itself could be the lever to take children out of the workplace, freeing those millions of jobs for adults and restoring the right of each child to a real childhood, where young minds know joy, peace and a hope for their own future.

UNICEF is proud to be a small partner in this great endeavour as we work together towards meeting the promises made to all of India's children. By accomplishing the goals set out in the World Summit for Children, embodied in India's National Plan of Action for Children and in the numerous State Programmes for Children throughout the country by fulfilling these worthy national objectives, India is clearly stating its national priorities by placing *CHILDREN FIRST*.

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