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on the occasion of the presentation
of the
UCI 1990 Award to the NGOs of Lebanon

Beirut - 9 December 1991

It is a great honour and pleasure to be here today representing the United Nations Children's Fund and its Executive Director, Mr. James P. Grant. Mr. Grant and all of us in UNICEF have closely followed events in Lebanon over the past decade, sharing your anguish during years of conflict and celebrating with you the great strides you have made toward a lasting peace. It is our fervent hope that the people of Lebanon and the entire region will be able to reap an abundant harvest of social and economic progress as guns fall silent and energies are redirected toward the works of peace and development.

Today it is my privilege to present you, Mme. Mona Hrawi, First Lady of the Republic, as representative of the NGOs of Lebanon, with an award for an extraordinary "work of peace and development": the UCI 1990 Award. As you know, last 8 October at UN headquarters in New York, the heads of the World Health Organization and UNICEF certified to Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar attainment -- by the end of 1990 -- of a goal the international community had set five years before: coverage of 80 per cent of the world's under-one-year-olds with vaccines against the six foremost child-killing and -crippling diseases.

This is a remarkable achievement, indeed, and Lebanon can be proud of having contributed to this greatest public health triumph of the 1980s. Worldwide, success was possible thanks to the largest global collaboration ever mounted in peacetime. Governments, NGOs, international agencies, presidents and parents, religious leaders and the media, mayors and sports stars...worked together to bring the benefits of modern medical science, in the form of vaccines, to remote mountain villages...across deserts and jungles...to city slums and isolated rural hamlets...all the while keeping the vaccines cold to preserve their potency. We are now reaching 100 million infants up to five times during their first year of life, preventing over three million deaths from measles, neonatal tetanus and pertussis and more than 400,000 cases of paralytic poliomyelitis each year.

In Lebanon, success in surpassing the international goal for immunization against diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus and polio was also the result of unprecedented collaboration between government, NGOs, international agencies and local communities. But in the case of Lebanon, circumstances did not permit this to be a peacetime collaboration; you reached and overshot your immunization targets for these antigens in spite of the extraordinarily difficult conditions -- material, logistical, political and psychological conditions -- provoked by prolonged conflict. You carried out this "work of peace and development" under the most adverse conditions; you have accomplished a miracle.

Before 1987, there was no immunization programme in Lebanon -- that is, beyond sporadic and unplanned campaigns launched in response to epidemics and reported disease cases. Most vaccinations were administered by private physicians; very few health centres provided vaccination free of charge. Only about half of the children under five years of age had received DPT and polio vaccines.

In 1986, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs signed the National Plan for the Expanded Programme on Immunization and the programme was launched the following year, marking the introduction of regular immunization services in Lebanon. From the outset, it was a collaborative effort between government, NGOs, WHO and UNICEF. The programme has pushed forward along two tracks: continuous vaccination of children through an expanding primary health care infrastructure at the qada or district level, and through National Days of Immunization, organized each year during the first week of the months of April, May and June, using mobile teams to reach children in areas not covered by health centres.

In the process, the primary health care system has been strengthened, with greater emphasis being placed on preventive services. A comprehensive immunization information and monitoring system is solidly in place and is now being expanded for surveillance of broader health indicators. Training of health workers and administrators for the immunization programme has made for greater efficiency in delivery of a range of health services. Perhaps most important, the UCI effort has mobilized the very fabric of society -- schools, the printed and electronic media, religious institutions, scouts, political leaders, women, etc. -- creating greater public awareness of the need for immunization and for community involvement in health and other services.

All of you here today know that the history of the UCI campaign in Lebanon contains many pages of genuine heroism. Lebanon's NGOs have written many of those pages. Time does not permit me to single out the many individual heroes, but I do want you to know that we in UNICEF repeatedly cite your example in publications and conferences around the world to emphasize how much can be accomplished for children -- even amidst the hardest of times -- when the will is there. I especially remember 1989, when the viability of the immunization drive was threatened by the escalation of violence, the breakdown of government institutions and communications, the cut-offs of electricity in areas where vaccines were refrigerated, etc. I recall the anxiety and concern we felt at UNICEF headquarters and our growing astonishment as reports would come in that the programme not only was maintained in the face of so many

difficulties, but accelerated and expanded. This could not have been accomplished without the participation of NGOs working together within the framework of an overall plan of action.

Due, in part, to the absence of an agreed schedule for when the shots were to be given, coverage in Lebanon with measles vaccine was less than half of rates achieved for the other vaccines. Recently, we were gratified to learn that your professional associations of physicians formally adopted the WHO/UNICEF recommended schedule, which should pave the way for a major increase in coverage. UNICEF believes Lebanon can double coverage with measles vaccine and immunize four out of five under-one-year olds by the year 1993. By 1996, you can reduce measles-related deaths of under-five-year olds from 3 per 1,000 children to 1 per 1,000. Other immunization goals -- more ambitious than those embraced at the World Summit for Children -- would be to achieve a coverage rate of 90 per cent for polio and DPT3 vaccines; to eradicate polio and eliminate neonatal tetanus by 1996. We are confident you can meet these targets and go on to greet the new century with close to universal levels of immunization.

Lebanon and its UCI campaign illustrate the extent to which the differences which separate adults can be narrowed in order to address the needs of children and how social solidarity can be strengthened when children's interests are placed high on society's agenda. You have made an important contribution to the increasing number of experiences of protecting children in times of war and conflict. History will show that the determination of the Lebanese people to immunize their children was part and parcel of the peace process whose precious fruits you are harvesting today.

It is this key principle -- that children's essential needs should be given a first call on society's resources in bad as well as in good times, in times of war as well as in times of peace -- that underpins the Convention on the Rights of the Child that went into effect last year and which is now the law of the land in over 100 countries, Lebanon included. And it constitutes the ethical foundation of the Declaration and Plan of Action approved at the historic World Summit for Children, held a year ago at UN headquarters.

As you know, 71 heads of state and government -- including Lebanon's Prime Minister -- attended the Summit, the largest gathering of world leaders ever to take place and the first of leaders from North, South, East and West. They were joined by senior representatives of another 88 countries. What was so remarkable about the World Summit for Children is not simply that the powerful met to discuss the plight of the powerless and pronounce lofty words about improving their lot; what made the Summit different from anything that came before is that the leaders committed themselves and their governments to a detailed Plan of Action for the 1990s, with performance markers and systems to monitor progress along the way. The Plan -- which each country is now adapting to its own concrete situation through the elaboration of National Programmes of Action due by year's end -- is a holistic approach to the survival, development and protection of children, based on proven, low-cost/high-impact interventions and community participation in support of government services...the UCI programme we are commemorating here today being only one of a series of highly effective strategies.

If fully implemented, the Summit agenda will save the lives of some 50 million children over the decade and better the lives of millions more whose survival would otherwise be the half-life of malnutrition, illness and untapped potential. If the commitments of the Summit are fulfilled, economic development will receive a boost, population growth will be slowed, the environment will be given a reprieve, and humanity will be that much better equipped to face the new challenges of the 21st century, the third millennium.

Lebanon stands as a symbol of why we at UNICEF are optimistic about the prospects for meeting the year 2000 goals for children. The worldwide trend toward resolution of conflicts, the end of the Cold War, the dismantling of parts of the nuclear arsenal, the move toward democracy and greater respect for human rights -- constitute an enabling environment for keeping the promise of the Summit.

But it will not happen automatically. At every step of the way, hard choices need to be made to keep children's and women's needs at the forefront of our priorities. Governments will have to find ways to provide essential services more efficiently to those most in need, and communities and individuals will have to take greater responsibility for their own health and well-being. The private sector will have to do its part. NGOs will be called upon, more than ever, to help meet human needs in innovative ways, drawing on the creative energies of highly-motivated communities.

What we in UNICEF have referred to as the Grand Alliance for Children will have to become a vast movement to improve children's lives, a grassroots movement not unlike those that have brought progressive change to so many countries in recent years. This global movement which takes as its framework the World Summit for Children Plan of Action is alive and well in Lebanon. I know it will be further strengthened and broadened in the years ahead and it will be UNICEF's privilege to help keep the promise to the children of this beautiful, hopeful land.