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Statement by Carol Bellamy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund
At the 13th International AIDS Conference

Durban, 11 July 2000

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Dr. Brundtland, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to be here, both on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund -- and in UNICEF's capacity as chair of the committee of co-sponsoring organizations of UNAIDS.

Mr. Chairman, we are here today to discuss what are termed "outstanding issues." There are obviously many.

But there is one, among all others, that we must address with special urgency, and with a degree of bluntness as well -- and that is the need to break the unconscionable silence that surrounds this disease.

Make no mistake: the silence that surrounds HIV/AIDS will remain impervious to efforts by individuals, communities, organizations and nations until -- and unless -- the entire global community joins forces to fight back.

Mr. Chairman, we are gathered here in a hall in South Africa, a country whose triumph against apartheid followed many years of struggle -- and the lifting of an earlier, and equally inexcusable, conspiracy of silence that had been sustained by much of the rest of the world.

The end of apartheid was a shining affirmation of faith in fundamental human rights -- and in the dignity and worth of the human person. More than anything else, it was a victory for children, and for the future. And it was, in the end, a testament to the power of courage and commitment -- and to the transforming effects of global solidarity.

We have seen more recent proof of that power in the global ban on anti-personnel landmines, which continue to kill or maim far more children than soldiers while thwarting post-conflict reconstruction and development; and in the international consensus to confront atrocities and the culture of impunity, which resulted in a global agreement to create a fully empowered International Criminal Court.

And we saw it 54 years ago, when the global community created UNICEF, in horrified recognition of the immense suffering of children as a result of World War II and its aftermath.

Since then, children have continued to be caught up in the unspeakable effects of armed conflict between States -- and now, increasingly, within them.

Governments and the public have responded with aid, and UNICEF has continued to provide assistance to children wherever it is needed.

Now, with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the world faces a new threat, with consequences for children around the globe as devastating to humankind and as potentially long-lasting as any war in history -- and yet the global community has failed to mount an adequate response. The consequences of

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that inaction are already apparent.

Before the end of this day, some 15,000 people will acquire HIV -- and 60 per cent of these new infections will occur among children and young people.

In 1999 around 570,000 children under 15 were infected -- and of these, 500,000 were in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mother to child transmission, or ~~MCT~~, is by far the major cause of HIV infection in young children, accounting for over 90 per cent of infection in infants and children during late pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

Without intervention, fully one-third of infants born to HIV-infected women will be infected with the virus. With 30 per cent of pregnant women infected in several countries in Southern Africa, this means that 10 per cent of infants will be born with HIV infection and will suffer the misery of AIDS within a few years.

Of course, when we speak of mother to child transmission, we must not forget that it is usually men and fathers who infect the mothers -- and that the best way of preventing mother-to-child transmission is to prevent mothers from becoming infected in the first place.

Among older children and young people, the risk is primarily from unprotected sex, sexual abuse and intravenous drug use. Nearly half of all infections occur in this group.

Almost 3.2 million children under 15 have died from AIDS since the beginning of the pandemic -- and because of HIV infection and the loss of family care, child mortality is likely to double in the worst affected countries by 2010.

The impact of the epidemic on families affects children's physical, mental and social health and development.

More than 11 million children have already been orphaned by AIDS -- and the number of orphans is expected to rise to over 40 million by 2010, more than 90 per cent of whom will be in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. Chairman, there are some injustices so stark, so obvious and so appalling that it is impossible to draw attention to them too often. And among the most intolerable of modern inconsistencies is this: in a world in which many countries and people are awash in knowledge and resources, humankind is merely standing by, barely making an effort to defend its young against the siege of HIV/AIDS.