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EDUCATION IN A NEW GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT  

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  

New York - 26 January 2002  

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to join you for this immensely important gathering - and it is a privilege to be in the company of so many dedicated professionals, whose work, day in and day out, serves the best interests of our most precious resource - children.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Children are precious for many reasons - and one of them is that their growth and full development today will determine the well-being and productivity of future generations for decades to come.

That is why UNICEF and its many partners are working to help children survive to experience childhood as a joyful experience - a time of play, of learning and of growth, in an environment where they are loved and cherished, where their health and safety is paramount, where their gender is not a liability, where they can indulge their natural curiosity and expend their boundless energy in a just and peaceful environment - and where they have every opportunity to grow and develop into caring and open-minded citizens.

In all of this, education has a crucial role. Indeed, the power of education in the promotion of peace, tolerance, social justice and respect for human rights has been extensively documented - and it has helped inspire a Global Movement for Children - a growing worldwide campaign to build a shared sense of responsibility for the well-being of every child on earth.

But each and every day, countless numbers of children around the world face dangers that compromise their growth and development in devastating and often fatal ways. Nearly 10 million of them under the age of 5 die every year of a variety of illnesses and the effects of malnutrition. Others fall victim to discrimination and gender-based violence; to neglect, cruelty and economic exploitation; to the pervasive effects of HIV/AIDS, to the effects of life as a refugee or displaced person, and all the other horrors to which the poor are susceptible - hunger, disease, disability, exposure, depression.

The single worst danger to children and their healthy development is armed conflict and violence of every kind. Wars are proliferating, and more and more children are becoming caught up in the lunacy - some as combatants and camp followers - and all as victims and casualties.

In the last decade alone, at least 2 million children died as a result of armed conflict. Three times that number were disabled or seriously injured. Even more died because of disease, malnutrition or sexual violence. And this does not even count the disabling sorrow of those who lost their homes, their possessions, and often their families.
Political violence is also on the rise - and on September 11th, the United States mainland became a target. The cumulative shock and anguish of that day and its aftermath have left their mark on all of us, but the effects have fallen most heavily on children, especially those who witnessed or experienced things that no child should ever see - and those struggling to understand the loss of parents or others dear to them.

The number of children who were directly affected is still anybody's guess; but we know, for example, that the deaths of 650 employees at Cantor Fitzgerald deprived some 1,300 children of at least one parent.

On Tuesday, The Daily News ran a story on how a sampling of children who lost parents are coping. The article mentioned a 9-year-old girl who dreams she is able to travel back in time to warn her firefighter father to stay away from the World Trade Center.

It talked about a 10-year-old boy who releases a balloon with a note attached to his dad asking how he's doing, up there in heaven. And we learned of a 14-year-old boy who endlessly scans the street for green Saturn sedans, hoping that sooner or later, he'll spot his father behind the wheel.

Other children and young people - part of the young multitude that Newsweek magazine is now calling "Generation 9/11" - told pollsters that the attacks had altered their worldview almost overnight.

Young people reported that life seemed suddenly more precious and fleeting.

Many young people told pollsters that they were convinced that the world had changed profoundly because of 9/11. Others are less sure. The British historian Niall Ferguson flatly rejects the idea, arguing that 9/11 represents simply another step in the globalisation of political violence, which has been a fact of life for years in major cities around the world - including New York's sister city, London.

Whatever the case, 9/11 caused educators all over the United States to begin pondering, on an urgent basis, two huge and complex educational problems - first, how to help children and young people cope with the personal fallout from the terrorist attacks; and second, how to think about war and political violence in an informed and open-minded way.