

AS PREPARED – CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Remarks of Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director, UNICEF
UNICEF Executive Board, Second Regular Session, Opening Remarks
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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, good morning. Many thanks to all of you for being here today as we begin the Second Regular Session of the UNICEF Executive Board for 2009.

Mr. President, thank you for your excellent stewardship of the work of the Executive Board and your personal commitment to the issues that impact the lives of children. Thanks also to the vice-presidents and the Board members for your dedication and hard work on behalf of the world's children. The continued guidance and important input of the Board members is greatly appreciated and helps strengthen the work of UNICEF.

A key focus of this meeting will be on our proposed 2010 – 2011 budget. In the context of the four year financial plan ending 2012, UNICEF is forecasting a potential decrease in its expected total income by 14% from 2008 due to the global economic slowdown. Despite this projected shortfall, UNICEF will be in a position to maintain 2010-2011 program expenditure at the same level as in the previous biennium. This is made possible through the use of the fund balance accumulated over the previous years. UNICEF is committed to ensuring cost effectiveness.

We constantly review and identify ways of generating operational efficiency to enhance delivery of results for children. We were pleased to receive the positive comments from the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and note the constructive recommendations made in their report on UNICEF's biennial support budget. This week we will also discuss evaluation and audit issues, which are crucial to ensuring organizational efficiency, transparency and accountability.

As we meet today there is some encouraging news to report. Last Thursday, I announced that the under-five mortality rate continued to decline in 2008. The data shows a 28% drop in rate, from 90 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 65 deaths per 1,000 births in 2008. According to these estimates, the number of child deaths in 2008 declined to an estimated 8.8 million from 12.5 million in 1990, the baseline year for the Millennium Development Goals. That means that compared to 1990, 10,000 fewer children are dying every day. The data shows global under-five mortality has decreased steadily over the past two decades and that the rate of the decline has increased since the 1990s.

The average rate of decline from 2000 to 2008 is 2.3%, compared to a 1.4% average decline from 1990 to 2000. Public health experts attribute the continuing decline to

increased use of key health interventions. These interventions include: immunizations, such as measles vaccinations, the use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets to prevent malaria, Vitamin A supplementation and better treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS, including prevention of mother to child transmission. Where these interventions have increased, positive results have followed.

Impressive gains have also been made in countries that are not fully on track to meet the Millennium goal. Niger, Mozambique and Ethiopia have all reduced under-five mortality by more than 100 per 1,000 live births since 1990. With only six years left until the 2015 deadline to reach the Millennium Development Goals, the world needs to act with an added sense of urgency. While progress has been made in many countries, the rate of improvement remains insufficient to reach the global target. Some 40% of the world's under-five deaths occur in just three countries: India, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This summer, I visited two of these countries, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria. The most recent of the visits, and my second to this troubled country, was to the DRC where I again witnessed first-hand the impact of years of conflict on the lives of children. Tens of thousands of girls and women have experienced sexual abuse in the most violent form. The continued conflict could leave a long term impact on the population of the DRC and the development of the country.

Thousands of children have seen their mothers raped, their fathers killed, and their villages burned. They are often without access to healthcare, education and proper nutrition. One woman I spoke with had managed to stay in her community but her husband had left after she was brutally raped. She only had few resources to support her family. With tears in her eyes, she said one of the hardest decisions she had to make was which of her eight children to send to school because she could only afford to send one.

I also saw families living in make-shift shelters or camps for the internally displaced where they remain vulnerable to abuse and disease. In Bukavu in Eastern DRC, I met with a girl I had first been introduced to in 2006 and who I have spoken about so often since. At the age of 12 she was brutally raped by four men. Three years later, she is still suffering. Having lost both her parents, she is cared for by women in her community who help provide her with shelter but who sometimes cannot afford to feed her. Three years ago she told me that she wanted to become a nun when she grew up. This time, when I asked, she told me her aim in life is the same. Her choice speaks volumes.

The rapes and the violence which leave girls, women and communities shattered must stop. My visit to the DRC followed on the heels of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to the region where she highlighted these issues so successfully. And initiatives such as the City of Joy, a program of UNICEF, V-Day and Panzi Hospital, will help girls and women who have suffered brutal

attacks turn pain into power. I visited Panzi hospital where Doctor Mukwege and his team are helping to heal the physical and mental wounds of many of the women and girls in the DRC.

The Security Council's new resolution 1882 on children and armed conflict is another step in the right direction of helping children caught in conflict. This resolution, which was passed in August, requests the Secretary General to list in his annual reports the parties that engage in patterns of rape or sexual violence against children and the killing and maiming of children in conflict situations.

Rebel groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army have for years been responsible for such violations, including kidnappings of children in Uganda, Sudan, DRC and the Central African Republic, forcing them to kill and maim innocent victims and using girls as sexual slaves. I saw the impact of the LRAs brutalities against children when visiting Northern Uganda a few years ago. There, the fear of abductions turned children into the so-called 'night commuters,' fleeing remote villages to the relative safety of shelters every evening often on the instructions of worried parents. One of the areas in which the LRA is now operating is in northern DRC. They are using the same form of brutality against the civilian population.

During my trip last month, I visited Dungu, a remote community in the north-east of the DRC where the population lives in constant fear of attacks from the LRA. I heard horrible stories of abuse from some of the children who had escaped from the LRA. One of the children had been severely beaten and left for dead by the rebels. He was among the children who had escaped from the LRA who was now being cared for by the women of the community.

While I was horrified by the violence inflicted on these children, I was inspired by the will and determination of the community to help. I met five women, each of whom had taken in traumatized children despite having limited resources and large families of their own. This kind of community care is a true example of humanitarianism. I was also incredibly impressed by the tireless efforts of UN and NGO staff who are living under particularly difficult circumstances to help the women and children of Dungu.

At our last board meeting, we had a special session on global health with particular focus on polio eradication. In early August, I visited Nigeria, one of the four remaining endemic countries in the world and the only endemic country in Africa. Nigeria has the highest number of cases this year of confirmed polio. While visiting a health center I met a group of young boys unable to walk because of the crippling effects of the disease. Their presence was a grim reminder of the importance of polio vaccination.

But polio is far from the only risk to the health of Nigeria's children. Extreme poverty, lack of access to health facilities, corruption and at times a husband's

refusal to let his wife visit a doctor, are contributing causes for high rates of child and maternal mortality. Diseases such as malaria, pneumonia and diarrhea are common killers of children. In Nigeria, the life time risk of a woman dying of pregnancy related causes is 1 in every 18, compared to 1 in every 48,000 in Ireland.

In early September I participated in a high level meeting at 10 Downing Street convened by Sarah Brown on the issue of maternal health. Each year, around 500,000 women around the world die from pregnancy related causes. And for every woman who dies, 20 more suffer from fistula, uterine prolapse, chronic infection, infertility, depression and anemia.

And as I often say, the health of a child is inextricably linked to the health and wellbeing of the mother. Of the some 8.8 million under five deaths every year, over six million die within the first year of life, and more than three million die within the first 28 days of life.

In June, I was in Syria, the first UNICEF Executive Director to ever visit this country. Syria is host to the largest number of Iraqi refugees estimated between one million to one and a half million. UNICEF and UNHCR are assisting with programs to help ensure that basic health care and education is available to the refugee population. Yet the influx of tens of thousands of people is adding a burden on already strained social services and water resources. Syria is also experiencing the impact of climate change with extended severe drought in parts of the country. This is putting a strain on local food production and water resources.

In a few days, world leaders will meet in New York in connection with the General Assembly to discuss the impact of climate change, which the Secretary General has said is his highest priority. UNICEF is organizing a youth delegation to participate in the September 22nd event. UNICEF is also helping organize a youth forum with more than 160 delegates from some 40 countries in connection with the December Copenhagen Climate Change Conference.

Two months from now the world will mark the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The Convention is a mobilizing force behind a number of programmatic thrusts in child protection, including disparities within countries and focusing on the most vulnerable and forgotten children. UNICEF will release a special issue of its flagship report The State of the World's Children in November titled "Celebrating 20 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child".

A series of planned events around the world will help raise awareness about the impressive gains that have been made in achieving child rights. The report will also highlight how much more remains to be done to protect children around the world from violence, abuse, illness, poverty and conflict.

As I have said many times before, UNICEF's staff continues to be the strength of the organization, and I want to welcome Christine Lloyd to her first Board meeting after taking up her post in New York as Director of the Division of Human Resources.

I was reminded of the strength of our human resources yet again when attending the global staff association meeting in Istanbul in July. In our last Board meeting you heard the excellent speech of Rita Ann Wallace, the Chair of the Global Staff Association, and I am sure that you won't be surprised to hear that she organized the outstanding meeting in Turkey.

With over 160 representatives of UNICEF's worldwide staff association, it was the largest assembly of its kind and provided an important forum to address broad staff concerns, including security. As we were painfully reminded during the last Board meeting, many of UNICEF's staff continue to work in difficult and dangerous environments to assist those children who need our help the most. Ensuring the safety of staff continues to be an utmost priority to UNICEF. Access must be provided to humanitarian workers so they can carry out their work.

On August 19, the tribute was to these brave men and women as we marked the first ever World Humanitarian Day. In the last ten years, more than 700 humanitarian workers have given their lives to help others. Thousands more have endured bombings, kidnappings, attacks, hijackings and robbery. Let us keep them - and the children, men and women that they set out to help - in our hearts and in our minds as we turn to our agenda of this week. There is no better way to honor their memory and their sacrifice than to help ensure that their work is carried through – by saving and improving the lives of children and their families.

Thank you.
