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**UNICEF Statement at the First Child Protection Forum
Central Asia Republics
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Your Excellency Minister Aitimova,
Distinguished High Mufti,
Distinguished Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Ambassadors,
Dear members of governmental delegations of countries of Central Asia,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to join you today for this immensely important and historic meeting-- the "First Child Protection Forum in Central Asia Republics". The importance of this meeting cannot be overemphasized: we have gathered here because we all know that children cannot thrive, cannot develop to their full potential if they are not protected from harm, abuse and exploitation.

On behalf of UNICEF I would like to extend our sincere thanks to Her Excellency, Minister of Education and Science, Madam Byrganym Aitimova, for her very warm welcome, hospitality and inspiring words and to the Government of Kazakhstan for its readiness to host and all efforts to organize this Forum in Astana. We are delighted to be here.

I also would like to welcome the delegations of the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as our UN and international partners present today. The level and inter-sectoral composition of country delegations demonstrate the increasing priority being accorded to child protection in each country. I would also like to give recognition to the World Bank, the European Commission, and the Governments of Japan, Italy and the United States for their engagement in promotion of well being and rights of children in Kazakhstan and in other Central Asian countries. Your participation and engagement is essential for the success of this Forum and our future work.

In few days from now Kazakhstan will celebrate its 15th Anniversary of Independence and we were honoured today to hear the special address of His Excellency President Nazarbayev that protection of child rights in Kazakhstan during all these years of independence and transition has not only remained a

top national priority but will be further improved and expanded for the sake of future generations.

Indeed, this Forum is not only most timely, but also an important turning point for the countries of this region to collectively review and discuss the challenges faced and opportunities that can be seized upon for realization of children's rights and improvement of their development and protection. We in UNICEF are confident that all your countries, as signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, have a firm commitment to ensuring that the rights set out in the Convention are not mere aspirations but rights to which all children are entitled.

The importance and challenge of child protection

Children are at risk everywhere, in all countries of the world, because they are vulnerable and they depend on decisions made by adults. Our research in rich industrialized countries of Europe and North America has shown that no matter the level of economic growth and levels of poverty, some children keep being at risk of being exposed to violence, abuse and neglect. Societies are constantly changing and we have to be ready to monitor how these changes impact on the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens. All government structures, but especially justice, education and social protection systems have to be flexible and quick to adapt to new challenges.

Today, in the 22 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) covered by UNICEF Regional Office in Geneva, several millions of children are in immediate need of protection. They live in families that are facing serious difficulties, or are at risk of getting separated from their parents; they are exposed to violence –at home, in the streets, in schools, and in institutions; they are exposed to trafficking for sexual exploitation and for exploitative labour. To illustrate this problem I can mention that in 2002 more than 1.1 million children in the CEE/CIS region lived separated from their biological parents and were in public care - in different types of residential care institutions, and in non-institutional care alternatives such as foster and guardian care – compared to 850,000 in 1990. This up-ward trend in numbers of children in public care is especially of great concern, because in the same period, the region has experienced a significant drop in the child population while all countries have experienced economic growth.

Many children have to work to sustain their families and have to sacrifice their schooling for this – forever depriving them of the possibility to break the vicious cycle of poverty. A large number of children are isolated from society in residential care institutions for orphans or disabled children or are deprived of their liberty in detention centers and correctional facilities. Improving the protection for these children throughout the region is a key challenge. But the challenge does not stop with this. The challenge also includes finding the best ways to prevent these horrors from occurring in the first place. The importance of a strong and healthy family environment, to prevent children from being exposed to harm cannot be stressed enough.

It is noteworthy in this regard that only a few weeks ago the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children was presented to the UN General Assembly in New York. This study led by Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the independent expert, and carried out in collaboration with the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF and WHO, paints a detailed picture of the nature, extent and causes of violence against children, and proposes clear recommendations for action to prevent and respond to it.

The study concludes that violence against children happens everywhere, in every country and society and across all social groups. Extreme violence against children may hit the headlines but children say that daily, repeated small acts of violence and abuse also hurt them. While some violence is unexpected and isolated, most violent acts against children are carried out by people they know and should be able to trust: parents, family members, boyfriends or girlfriends, schoolmates, teachers and employers. Violence against children includes physical violence, psychological violence such as insults and humiliation, discrimination, neglect and maltreatment. Although the consequences may vary according to the nature and severity of the violence inflicted, the short- and long-term repercussions for children are very often grave and damaging. Many of the above problems are on the agenda of our Forum.

Central Asia and the Child Protection Forum

In Central Asia, all countries are involved in national processes to review how to better respond to new risks and dangers that families and children are facing. This first Child Protection Forum is at the same time a third thematic regional forum in Central Asia which focuses on the problems of children after the Maternal and Child Health Forum (formed in 1997) and the Education Forum (formed in 2001). In our view this forum will create a unique platform for sharing your experiences, discussing key issues and ensuring that child protection issues are placed high on the national agendas. The Forum, we hope, will also make it possible for your countries to:

- ✓ Work together to tackle difficult issues, or to tackle problems that we may even be afraid of admitting that they exist.
- ✓ Learn how other countries, both within and outside of the region, have succeeded in tackling these problems. Realizing that other countries are facing similar difficulties can help overcome the feeling of isolation we feel every now and then.
- ✓ Articulate and be vocal about what support is needed from international and regional partners for addressing similar issues and concerns.
- ✓ Have an opportunity to sharpen your views and have a sounding board for new ideas and innovations.

- ✓ Finally, in an increasingly globalised world, social problems tend to not stop at country borders. A regional Forum will provide a necessary space for formulation of strategies and measures to tackle cross border issues.

The Central Asian countries have gone through tremendous changes in the past 15 years and this is a special region in many respects. Central Asia is known for its concern for children. You enjoy a culture of solidarity that is rooted back in your history. You have built up a strong infrastructure in the social sectors that provides many children with the health and education they need for their future. Let us build upon these advantages and address what remains to be done. But it will be easier if we do it together.

The way towards protective environments

So how do we go from here?

UNICEF has learned from its engagement in this region and globally, that it is not sufficient to intervene to support groups of children who are already in a difficult situation. It is actually crucial to intervene in the environment around the child and build protective elements, so that children do not fall between the cracks. And here, the States have unique opportunity to direct their support towards strengthening these crucial pillars of protective environments. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is unmistakable in this regard:

- ✓ All State parties that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, have assumed the responsibility for making sure that all children are protected from harm. In this regard, the Convention calls on the states for example to put in place effective policies, protective legislation and efficient systems to protect children from any form of violence, abuse and exploitation. The responsibility for such protection lays with every sector of the government, including health, education, justice, law enforcement and social welfare, as well as with every professional who comes in direct contact with children. States have to keep monitoring that all children are given the best opportunities to develop into their full potential.
- ✓ States also have to foster societies to provide a protective and enabling environment for children. Norms, practices and cultural beliefs and traditions can serve as useful elements in a protective environment around children. But States should also not shy away from tackling upfront those deeply entrenched practices, traditions or norms that are harmful to children.

And the most important of all tasks for the state parties is to support the environment that is the closest to the child:

- ✓ States have to make sure that families are enabled and equipped with knowledge, resources and skills to provide the best possible upbringing for their children. In particular, direct support has to be provided to those

families that are most at risk so as to strengthen their capacity to care and protect their children.

A final comment

Economic and social progress is being made in all Central Asian countries, but what is the point of this progress if it does not benefit ALL children. Real improvements in the lives of all children is well within your resources but to make it happen will require the exercise of real leadership from the highest levels of the governments to civil society at every level- from non-governmental organizations to academia, the media, religious groups, private sector, families and children themselves. Investing fully in children today will ensure the well being and productivity of future generations to come.

UNICEF stands ready to make the commitment to work jointly with you. We are ready to provide long-term and systematic support to your efforts to improve and strengthen the protective environments for children so that every child can develop to his/her full potential and grow to adulthood in health, peace and dignity.

Children have always been respected in the Kazakh society. I have just learned this Kazakh proverb "A six-year old child arriving from far away will be greeted by a 60-year old man". I hope that this Forum and our work together here and in the future will not let down 22 million children of Central Asia but help place them at the centre of the national agendas of your countries.

With these final words, I would like to wish us successful work at this First Child Protection Forum and close by reiterating our special appreciation to Her Excellency Madam Aitimova and the Government of Kazakhstan for hosting this Forum.

Thank you!