

Address delivered by UNICEF Turkey Representative Reza Hossaini at the opening session of the International Symposium on Children at Risk and in Need of Protection (ISCRIP)

“Theme 2009: Children in Conflict with the Law”

27-29 April 2009, Ankara, Turkey

Respected guests, members of Parliament, members of the press, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of UNICEF, let me start by welcoming you warmly to this first International Symposium on Children at Risk.

Right from the outset, let me congratulate the Turkish National Police for this timely initiative, and at the same time express my appreciation for the collaboration and the support of the Turkish Grand National Assembly in hosting this symposium. This is indeed an indication of the importance that both these institutions place on the protection of children.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the international and national experts who will be contributing to the Symposium and facilitating the working groups. I know there is at least one person here who had to take as many as four flights (including a helicopter ride) to get here. We really do appreciate the effort you have made.

This year, it is exactly twenty years since Convention on the Rights of the Child was passed in the UN General Assembly in New York. Twenty years on, this convention is the most universally ratified convention in the world. Every single country on this planet, except for two, have ratified the Convention.

As we celebrate two decades of the Convention this year, it is also time to reflect on how far we have come, how children’s rights are being protected or being violated, and what more can be done. That is exactly what this symposium is about: *to put the Convention into practice!*

Juvenile justice is a ‘children’s rights’ issue, and we have to ensure that all children are better served and protected by justice systems, whether they be victims, witnesses or offenders.

Certainly, much progress has been made over the past twenty years. There are millions more children in school now than there were then. More children have access to health facilities now than then. We now have trained children’s judges, child courts and child police that we did not have before....But can we really say that the world is a safer place for children now than it was twenty years ago?

Unfortunately, the children of today continue to faces new risks and new challenges. The changing fabric of society, migration to urban areas in search of work, the break-up of families, single parents and the rise in the numbers of children on the street have combined with peer pressure, drugs, organized crime and child trafficking to put children at greater risk:

- According to a World Health Organization report, 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 experienced some form of sexual exploitation and sexual violence in 2002. In the same year, 53,000 children were victims of homicide. Sadly, very often, these

children are abused by the very same people who are supposed to protect them. It happens at home, or in institutions, or in detention centers.

- According to the UN Study on Violence against Children, conducted in 2007, between 20 and 65 per cent of school-aged children reported having been verbally or physically abused in the 30 days prior to the survey.

- Although no reliable and updated data on children in detention are available, it is estimated that *over a million children worldwide* are in detention. This is despite the government's obligation to ensure that the detention of children is used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.

- According to the same report, most of these children have been involved in minor or petty crimes, and are first-time offenders. The sad part of the story is that in some countries, *the majority of children in detention have not been convicted of a crime, but are being held in detention for long periods awaiting trial.*

These things are happening in both developed and developing countries. You know as well as I do that detention centers are not the safest places for children. They are frequently subjected to violence by older detainees as well as punished by prison staff. In at least 77 countries corporal and other violent punishments are accepted as legal disciplinary measures in penal institutions. According to the UN report, children are likely to be beaten, painfully restrained, and subjected to humiliating treatment.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child demands that national legislation provide separate facilities for children in conflict with the law in order to prevent abuse and exploitation by adults. *Yet detention with adults is routine in many countries.*

The challenges are huge and no single institution alone can respond to these needs.

A successful justice for children programme should have a strong preventive component. The courts and detention facilities alone can not address this growing problem of children coming into contact with the law.

There is a need for improved coordination and collaboration among different sectors to deal with the prevention of child delinquency, to provide a protective environment for the children at the highest risk, to provide better justice for delinquent children and monitor the situation of children who come into contact with the law.

On the 20th anniversary of the convention we need to renew our commitment for a 'child friendly' and 'child specific' justice system for children. This should include specific legislation, specific institutions and trained personnel.

We should continue to our effort to increase public awareness on children's rights and the risks to which children are exposed. Families, communities, school and government institutions should be aware of the risks and provide a better protective environment for children.

We are hoping that in the next three days here in Ankara, by sharing experiences and best practices, you will be able to draft a declaration that will pave the road for better justice for children in your countries.

Once again I would like to thank you all for your participation, thank our co-organizers and express special thanks to the members of the scientific committee of the

symposium and my colleagues whom I know have been working hard to make this first international symposium a success.

All the very best with the symposium and wishing you a happy and comfortable stay here in Ankara.