STATEMENT BY UNICEF GOODWILL AMBASSADOR KENENISA BEKELE AT THE 'LESSON FOR LIFE' ADVOCACY EVENT HELD AT THE ETHIOPIAN CHILDREN'S FUND (ECF) VILLAGE IN ALELTU ON 25 NOVEMBER 2004

Dear students and teachers
Members of the UNICEF family
Members of the media
Invited guests
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to the ECF village in Aleltu today.

When I was invited to become a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador I was informed that there are more than one million children in this country that we love so much who have lost one or both parents. This stark reality should be more than enough to shock us all awake and get us to work together to find lasting solutions to the predicament that we find ourselves in.

Today we are fortunate. We have been discussing and playing with happy and joyful children. We have seen that they are being provided with the basic needs they need to succeed in life, to achieve their goals and make their lives a reality. We must not give up our struggle until this is a reality, not just for the children of ECF but for all Ethiopian children.

Children often ask how I became a runner. Growing up I followed the careers of Ethiopia's great athletes like Haile Gebreselassie as they scored victory upon victory in international races and put Ethiopia on a pedestal on the world stage. I began dreaming of becoming a runner when I witnessed their success.

It began with having a dream, having the desire to succeed. My advice for all children everywhere is to dream big, to desire and aspire to reach the highest levels in whatever inspires you. It is all of our responsibility to help you, children, to reach your goals and aspirations. It is the responsibility of the Government and the society to make sure that all children can grow up healthy and are able to learn without worrying where their next meal will come from or where they will find clothes to wear, or whether they can afford school fees, uniforms or books.

My dream of becoming a runner became real because these basic needs were fulfilled – because I was never without the support of my family. When these over one million children lost their parents, however, they lost their main source of care and support that is essential for them to succeed in life. It is our responsibility to fill the gap and make sure their basic human rights are fulfilled.

We don't necessarily need financial resources to contribute to this. There is one fundamental human need that does not cost anything but if we were to try and measure its worth we could never place a financial value to it. My own life is a

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witness to this - that thing is love. As World AIDS Day approaches this is the main message that I would like to convey. The children that are in front of us are testimony of this. We have witnessed that they are growing up to be responsible citizens in a loving environment where their needs and rights are met and respected. I ask that we work to provide all Ethiopian children with similar bright hope. You don't have to be rich to do this – you can start by giving them love which does not cost anything.

And all of you children, I want to again remind you to never stop striving to make your dreams a reality.

Thank you.

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