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PRESS RELEASE

Trinidadians Asked to “Put Children First”

AS UNICEF LAUNCHES SECRETARY-GENERAL'S STUDY ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

UNICEF – Trinidad and Tobago – November 21, 2006. UNICEF Representative for Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname, Johannes Wedenig, issued a call to action for all citizens of the twin Island Republic to find their role and act on their responsibility in helping to eliminate violence against children in all its forms. “We commit today to mobilizing public response, galvanize Government, civil society, parents, guardians and the children themselves to be unequivocal in their condemnation of violence and child abuse and step up work to disseminate prevention programmes at all levels of society”, Wedenig said.

The call came as United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) with support from the Tobago House of Assembly and the Ministry of Social Development launched the UN Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children in Trinidad and Tobago under the theme “No violence against Children is justifiable; all violence against children is Preventable.”

Speaking to the more than one hundred and fifty adolescents, Government and private sector officials, NGO representatives and parents, at a separate launch held in Tobago on Thursday November 16th, the UNICEF representative explained that this is the first time that a single document provides a comprehensive global view of the range and scale of violence against children, outlining five specific areas of violence against children.

Reflecting on the situation facing Trinidadians, Mr. Wedenig explained that over the last few years, the situation of children in Trinidad and Tobago had been severely compromised by a number of major problems, stemming from shortcomings in various systems, more particularly the increased involvement of children in crime and violence, as both perpetrators and victims. He cited the most two recent cases of brutal murders, “Who here will ever forget Sean Luke or more recently Permanan Persaud, who were both sexually assaulted and brutally murdered, exemplifying the extremes to which violence can go in Trinidad and Tobago?”

The UNICEF Representative reiterated UNICEF’s support to the government of Trinidad and Tobago in general and the Tobago House of Assembly in particular, in their efforts to face the many challenges and create a protective environment for children.

Speaking on behalf of the Tobago House of Assembly, Dr. Author Potts of the Division of Youth Affairs and Sport said the Secretary General’s Report could not have come at a better time, especially when the Island has to seriously look at its future – the well being of its children. He said the Assembly was grateful to the UN for having commissioned such a study putting the spotlight on children and bringing their very survival to the fore. The Assembly will work closely with UNICEF, civil society, NGOs and all interested parties in ensuring that the issue of violence against children stays on the agenda until we have a safer environment for our children to grow up in.

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Addressing a totally different audience in Trinidad on Friday November 17th, UNICEF's Special Envoy to the Caribbean endorsed statements made by the UNICEF Representative in Tobago, calling on Government to study the extent of sexual violence and exploitation of children, take appropriate legislative and policy measures to prevent it and support children that are victims of sexual violence and exploitation. She said there is need for public education campaigns that raise awareness of consequences of ill-treatment of children, alternative measures of discipline for children and address socio-cultural barriers that inhibit victims from seeking assistance. "For Trinidad and Tobago's children to have a future free from violence, we must continue to work together to pass the necessary legislation to protect our children and more importantly to prevent children from being victims or perpetrators of violence and abuse," Ms. Sham Poo stated.

She reiterated UNICEF's commitment to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and other organizations to further create and sustain a culture of prevention of all forms of child abuse and violence, whether it be in the home, school or other institution or in the community.

Ms Eunice Gittens, Director of National Family Services, Ministry of Social Development stressed the importance of partnership in combating the various challenges facing government in their efforts to deal with child violence. She indicated that the Ministry has recently concluded the revised National Plan of Action on Children which embodies various elements in response to the situation of children in the twin island. This Plan, she said, will be launched very shortly.

The separate launches took the form of panel discussions and interactive dialogue with panelists representing various sectors of society including the Police, School's Welfare Department, NGOs, Sports and other community service organizations and two students, giving their perspectives. This created very lively and interesting discussions on the five areas of violence mentioned in the report.

The proceedings also included a series of short dramatic theatre presentations by the BARCAM which ensured that the issues facing children had deeper significance to the development of the nation.

The United Nations Resident Coordinator for Trinidad and Tobago, Ms. Inyang Ebong Harstrup gave the concluding remarks rapping up the panel discussions. Both programmes in Trinidad and in Tobago were chaired by youths from the Tobago Youth Council and the Trinidad Youth Council.

About the Study

The Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children was commissioned in 2001 by the UN General Assembly. Independent Expert Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro lead the Study, in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF.

Children and young people were fully involved in contributing to the Study from its beginning. They participated in national and regional consultations, and in some countries held their own youth forums to collect information about violence, discussed the impact it has on their lives and developed recommendations for preventing it and addressing it where it does occur.

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The Study recognizes that much violence against children remains hidden and is often socially approved. It combines human rights, public health and child protection perspectives, and focuses on five 'settings' where violence occurs: The home and family; schools and educational setting; institutions (care and judicial); the workplace and the community.

Violence against children includes physical violence, psychological violence, discrimination, neglect and maltreatment; it ranges from sexual abuse in the home to corporal and humiliating punishment at school

"Violence has a lasting affect not just on children and their families, but also on communities and nations," says UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman.

About UNICEF

UNICEF works with governments, civil society organizations and other partners world-wide and in the Caribbean to advance children's rights to survival, protection, development and participation, and is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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