Global Campaign on Children and AIDS
Malaysian Launch

Friday, 25 November 2005 ð Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

WELCOME REMARKS

Ms. Gaye Phillips

UNICEF Representative, Malaysia
UNICEF Special Representative, Singapore & Brunei

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Malaysian launch of **Unite for Children. Unite Against AIDS**, a special five-year global Campaign by UNICEF and UNAIDS to mobilize every part of society to join together to put the care and protection of children, adolescents and young people at the center of the HIV/AIDS agenda.

UNICEF and our partners have convened this Campaign more than twenty years into the AIDS epidemic because tens of millions of children are missing their childhood because of AIDS. They are missing mothers, fathers, teachers, doctors and community leaders. They are deprived of education, healthcare and the chance to have a healthy future. They are left unprotected from abuse, exploitation and illness.

Children are suffering not only because of AIDS itself, but because the world has not recognized that AIDS is wreaking havoc on childhood. For too long, we have refused to recognize the impact this epidemic is having on the lives of young girls and boys. And we have failed to acknowledge the many children and young people around the world who are lost to us daily.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

HIV/AIDS is increasingly a disease of the young and most vulnerable. Every minute of every day, one child under the age of 15 is infected with HIV, while one child dies of AIDS. Equally alarming is the fact that one young person between the age of 15 and 25 gets infected with HIV every 15 seconds. Of the 40.3 million people alive today with HIV infection, at least a third are young people under the age of 25. And, young women face twice the risk of HIV infection from young men.

For us to do right by our children and young people, we must first of all understand the special reasons as to why young people are especially vulnerable to HIV infection. One is that adolescence and youth are times of discovery, emerging feelings, exploration of new behaviours and relationships. It is a time when young people feel they need to test their boundaries to determine who they are and what they can do. Establishing healthy behavioural patterns during this time is therefore critical to keep our young people safe and a lot easier than having to change risky behaviour later on.

Teenage years and the transition to adulthood is a very taxing period for both parents and youth. Since they are so vulnerable, youth are faced with peer pressures and influences. They go through physical, emotional and psychological changes which come along with a range of problems. Expectations are ñimposedò upon them and on their part, youth have a need for acceptance by family, peers and society. Advice sought is normally from friends, which more often than not, can lead them astray. Hence, appropriate guidance and communication are vital to assist our young to be able to make independent and correct decisions in life. Lack of supportive environments to practice safer behaviours and disturbingly low basic knowledge on HIV infection and transmission gives rise to this pandemic problem.

We can however confront these challenges, as UNICEF has learnt from our experiences around the world. One of the ways in which we can help our young deal with the pains of growing up is to provide them with "safe spaces" to meet and socialize with peers. These spaces should be created in a protective and non-judgmental environment where they can receive information and counseling; and establish connectedness" with adults. Such programmes have proven successful in helping young people build their skills and confidence that they need to keep safe from HIV infection.

As adults, we must also recognize that young people have a big role to play in the fight against AIDS. Too often, we make decisions about how to deal with AIDS and youth related issues without taking into account the experiences of young people. The time has come for us to change our own behaviours and to extend our young opportunities and platforms that will enable them to speak out honestly about their needs so that we may learn from them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS underlines UNICEF's strongest commitment to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic. I am particularly pleased to welcome to Malaysia UNICEF's Regional Director for Geneva, Mr. Philip O'Brien who has kindly agreed to help launch the Campaign this morning together with Yang Berhormat Datuk Dr Abdul Latiff Ahmad, Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Health.

Just as important, I wish to acknowledge a special group of young people who are here with us today. They have undergone HIV/AIDS workshops with us and shared with our national goodwill ambassadors, the TV hosts of 3R, their own concerns and hopes to challenge HIV/AIDS in Malaysia during a closed-door youth roundtable. Ms. Nur Syakirin bt. Husnal 'AzôHari, a 16-year old student from the Sekolah Menengah Sains Muar will represent her peers and share with us the voices of Malaysian young people. I appeal to all of you to listen to them and to act on their words and needs.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the Government of Malaysia for its leadership and commitment in always making its children its top priority. We are grateful to the Ministry of Health Malaysia for joining us in the launch of this Campaign in Malaysia. It is UNICEF's hope to further strengthen the partnership with the Government of Malaysia, in particular the Ministry of Health to reduce the prevalence and reverse the present trend of HIV/AIDS. In partnership, we believe that this can be achieved.

We invite all of you to help create a healthy Malaysia for the young people of today, the future generation and the leaders of tomorrow. Let us **Unite for children and Unite against AIDS**.

Thank you.