

## Speech by Her Excellency Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor *wife of the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia*

Ms. Anupama Rao Singh, UNICEF Regional Director, East Asia & the Pacific

Ms. Gaye Phillips, UNICEF Representative to Malaysia

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Evening.

1. It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be here tonight in the company of some of Malaysia's most prominent women. We are here tonight to mark the Malaysian Launch of UNICEF's flagship report, **The State of the World s Children 2006**.
2. This Report covers a particularly challenging subject namely children and it brings to light the silent suffering of millions of children around the world. It describes children who live on the very edges of society – hidden, invisible and excluded from basic services; children whose lives are impoverished; who are uneducated; who do not have identity; who are discriminated against; neglected; and abused.
3. The report essentially portrays the reality of the lives of many innocent children, which in some ways is reflective of our failure to keep our promises to protect and ensure that **no child is left behind**.
4. It wasn't too long ago, specifically in September 2000 that world leaders, including from Malaysia, gathered together in New York to commit to the Millennium Development Goals and to strengthen global efforts for peace, democracy and good governance, while continuing to promote the principles of human dignity for all, including children.
5. The Millennium Development Goals are not lofty. Neither are they unattainable ideals. The specific goals on children are pragmatic, attainable and comprehensive and more importantly, they can be met if only we are serious about making every child's right to health, education, protection and equality a priority. All we need is a caring attitude and the political commitment to see them through.
6. Five years have passed since these promises were made and, tragically, the world's children continue to suffer. Allow me to give you a quick snapshot of the situation in the world today. Globally, every year:
  - Some 55 per cent of births are unregistered.
  - Street children are estimated to be in the tens of millions.
  - The number of children held in detention centres is approximately 1 million.
  - The number of child soldiers continues to grow.
  - 171 million children are involved in hazardous labour.
  - 110 million children do not attend primary school

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Invisible and excluded children become prime targets for exploitation, abuse, manipulation and psychological and physical violence.

7. The consequence of these alarming figures is a litany of child misery, beyond imagination, and the wide-scale exploitation of those who are most vulnerable. This is a social time bomb and a shameful stain on the moral fibre of humanity. Why are so many children still suffering? The simple answer is - poverty and discrimination.
8. Children in the poorest countries face higher risks of illness and malnutrition. One in every three infants – globally, 42 million children – is moderately or severely underweight. Children from the poorest households are at least twice as likely to die before the age of five.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. As Malaysians, we can take pride in our country's achievements in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. Let me now highlight the scenario in Malaysia. Our achievements have been premised on a sound and visionary leadership. The following facts reflect our success:
  - Since 1970, Malaysia's intensive poverty eradication programs has meant that only a small percentage of 'hard core' poor now live below Malaysia's poverty line;
  - Improved access to clean water and improved sanitation through well-developed primary health care system;
  - Malaysia has achieved universal primary education and gender parity. In fact, today, girls outnumber boys in senior secondary school and university.
  - Malaysia's literacy rate of 93% is one of the highest in the world;
  - Infant and maternal mortality levels are now on par with fully developed nations due to the implementation of health policies and innovative procedures taken to achieve a better standard of health and a better quality of life.
10. In addition to the above progress with regards to the right to live, survival and education, other achievements include:
  - Programmes to enhance child participation in the decision making process in national planning that affects them have been undertaken such as ensuring the voices of children are heard in the National Plan for Action on Children (NPAC) 2001-2020;
  - The quality of life of children with special needs has markedly improved with the provision of Early Intervention Services at the primary health care level and increased educational opportunities;
  - Promotion of healthy, responsible, and resilient adolescents through holistic and comprehensive development programmes inculcating moral, social values and appreciation of the cultural heritage.

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11. It is obvious that Malaysia is working hard for its children and we are rightfully proud of the progress we have made. Notwithstanding our achievements, we cannot afford to remain complacent. In Malaysia too, as with so many other countries discussed in UNICEF's Report, there are "invisible" children.
12. Tonight is an opportunity for me to make such hidden truths visible. Let us ponder over the following facts:
  - We cannot deny that there have been times when we open the morning paper to read about a child whose life is ended, after months or years of abuse, by those who are supposed to be entrusted with the care and protection of that child.
  - We read of a teenager who has committed suicide because of failure in exam.
  - We read of the abuse and rape of vulnerable children.
  - We hear about our neighbour's son, a young man, now infected with HIV, after years living as an injecting drug user.
  - A friend, in deep shock, tells us that her daughter has run away and can't be traced.
  - And what of the single mother desperately seeking good childcare so she can earn a living secure in the knowledge that her child is safe.
13. The Malaysian Government is mindful of the need to find the best possible ways of overcoming social illnesses affecting our children. Every effort has and will continue to be mobilized to ensure that the well-being of our children is guaranteed. One way is to look at present provisions of existing laws that take into account new needs emerging from social changes accruing from global development. Malaysia's Child Act 2001 recognises the child as a crucial component of society. In the Act, new and appropriate provisions are accorded to the child in line with the general principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding care, protection, maintenance, support, rehabilitation and development. It also takes into account the role and responsibility of the family as the source of care, support and development of the child. In other words, the Child Act 2001 safeguards the best interests of children.
14. We are also aware of the growth of HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact on children. The Malaysian Government has acted early to establish HIV/AIDS coordination mechanisms and provide a wide range of prevention and care programmes such as HIV/AIDS programmes in-school and out-of-school youth and on drug abuse treatment, free or subsidized access to HIV/AIDS treatment, antiretroviral treatment and the prevention of mother to child transmission. Malaysia continues to take an active role in regional cooperation on AIDS especially issues on children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and works in collaboration with NGOs to provide care. A Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS was formulated in 2004 that will provide the national blueprint for tackling the issue.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. As a woman and a mother, it is my obligation to speak for those whose voices cannot be heard:
  - Children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS;
  - Children who are orphaned;
  - Disabled;
  - Children who live in remote and hard-to-reach places;
  - The sons and daughters of injecting drug users;
  - Young people indulging in risky behaviour to ease their pain of alienation, boredom, and marginalization from society;
  - And for the children whose voices are silenced by violence at home, in schools or in the communities in which they live.
16. I wish to emphasise here that all of us have a moral obligation to speak out against inequity and against putting children at a disadvantage. We must instead offer creative solutions.
17. As a nation, when we design policy and programmes and surge ahead in development and economic growth, we must also measure the impact of our actions on our children and young people. We must ensure that our efforts are inclusive and leave no child out, or invisible. If we could remind ourselves to see through the eyes of a child, this would mean staying centred in our family life and how we share it with others less fortunate. It would affect how we think about equipping a new generation to approach their responsibilities.
18. Giving children the right start to life means ensuring they have good health, proper nutrition, early learning and care. The solutions do not always have to be complex or expensive. Numerous studies have shown that for every dollar invested in ensuring children the best start yields \$4-\$7 return in the long run to children, families and taxpayers. Giving children a good start can be as simple as modest investments in quality early childhood care and education and the encouragement of local parenting programs. For this reason, the Government will continue to give emphasis on early childhood and development. The Government of Malaysia encourages Child Care Centres to be set up at the workplace to provide facilities for working mothers. Community Child Care Centres will be set up to provide affordable and accessible quality care to low income families.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

19. My own think tank group, of which I am the chairperson, has proposed to the Government to set up Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Centers throughout the country, to promote quality child care services and education. God willing, this will be implemented in our 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan.

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20. To support this programme, we have invited professionals, academicians and educationists to conduct research and set up a database, as well as conduct training to caregivers, teachers, parents and the community. We hope to raise awareness, especially among the general public and in particular, the policy makers, on the importance of ECEC. Towards this end, one such centre has been set up at the Sultan Idris University of Education, Tanjong Malim, Perak.
21. The truth is that the solutions to the problems facing children and young people today are already known to us. We have the technology, the know-how and the capacity to deliver on our promises to children. What is needed is the moral strength and the will to say, "Enough is enough". Governments, communities and families must work together to ensure that the rights and needs of every child are met and that every child has the chance to grow and develop to his or her full potential.
22. This year UNICEF commemorates 60 years of work for children living in every corner of the globe, children living in emergency and conflict, in poverty and deprivation as well as those disadvantaged by inequity in the midst of the wealth and development of rich nations.
23. I take this opportunity to thank UNICEF for its remarkable work for children and am honoured to launch the UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2006.
24. I commend this Report to you and urge you all to strengthen efforts to develop a comprehensive and effective protective environment for children, in Malaysia and the world over.

Thank you.