Press Launch of Progress for Children in Malaysia in conjunction with Universal Children s Day

Thursday, 18 November 2004 ð Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

WELCOME REMARKS

Ms. Gaye Phillips
UNICEF Representative, Malaysia
UNICEF Special Representative, Singapore & Brunei

The Honourable Minister Datuk Dr. Chua Soi Lek,
Minister of Health, Malaysia

The Honourable Mr. S A Vigneswaran,
Parliamentary Secretary of Youth & Sports, Malaysia

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of UNICEF, I take great pleasure in welcoming each and all of you to share with us the Malaysian Launch of UNICEFôs Progress for Children Report in conjunction with Universal Childrenôs Day.

We are especially honoured by the presence of Malaysiaôs Minister of Health Datuk Dr. Chua Soi Lek who will address us later this morning and officially launch the release of this Report. Thank you Datuk Dr. Chua for being with us this morning.

UNICEF would also like to express our deepest appreciation to Le Meridien Kuala Lumpur for graciously hosting this ceremony for us. Mr. Brian Pirie, thank you for your kind support.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Rights of the Child and Universal Children s Day

We gather here today to recognize the rights of our children. Almost fifteen years ago, leaders from around the world came together at the United Nations General Assembly to unanimously agree for a special date to be set aside to remind us, less we forget, of our obligations to our children.
November 20 was the date selected. It is the date that marks the day on which the Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The Convention's 54 articles cover everything from a child's right to be free from exploitation, to the right to his or her own opinion and the right to education, health care, and economic opportunity. The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the creation of Universal Children's Day reflects the growing recognition that children are important and valued members of society, now and in the future. Universal Children's Day celebrates children just for being themselves. It reminds us that children need love and respect to grow to their full potential. It is a day to listen to children, to marvel at their uniqueness and all they have to offer.

A Basic Right of the Child The Best Chances to Survive and Thrive

The first step to meeting our obligations to honour and respect our children is to guarantee that we do all that we can to ensure that they have the best start in life. That our children be given every opportunity to survive and to thrive. This means ensuring that they are safely delivered into this world and that the best health care is made available to them in the early years of their development and growth.

This is essential since what happens during the very earliest years of a childôs life, from birth to age 3, influences how the rest of childhood and adolescence unfolds. Most brain development happens before a child reaches three years old. In a short 36 months, children develop their abilities to think and speak, learn and reason and lay the foundation for their values and social behaviour as adults. Because these early years are a time of such great change in a young life and of such long-lasting influence, ensuring the rights of the child must begin at the very start of life. Choices made and actions taken on behalf of children during this critical period affect not only how a child develops but also how a country progresses.

No reasonable plan for human development can wait idly for the 18 years of childhood to pass before taking measures to protect the rights of the child. Nor can it waste the most opportune period for intervening in a childôs life, the years from birth to age three.

The time of early childhood should merit the highest-priority attention when responsible governments are making decisions about laws, policies, programmes and money.

Caring for our children means caring for our women

Emphasizing the care of babies and toddlers means we need to also focus on our women as their physical and emotional condition influences their pregnancies and their babiesô development. Poor prenatal care and malnutrition in mothers have been linked to, amongst others, low birth weight, hearing problems, learning difficulties, and brain damage in children. Infants born to underweight mothers are more likely to develop certain diseases and conditions later as adults, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity.

If we fail to honour the rights of our women, we will ultimately fail to deliver on our responsibilities to all our children. Two areas where womenôs rights directly affect children are in health and education. Infant deaths are significantly related to the poor nutrition and health of their mothers prior to and during pregnancy and soon after the post-partum period. Making women our top priority makes sense and improved prenatal care for mothers saves both womenôs and childrenôs lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A strategic approach to ensuring the best for our children

Realising the rights of children and women is attainable. Working towards this realization will also help free our communities and society from disease, violence and discrimination that currently drains the lives and spirits of children and adolescents around the world. By doing so, we will assure all infants the best possible chance for their survival, growth and development. It would promise that all children are ready for school and all schools are ready for children. And it would insist that children and adolescents be given the opportunity to participate in and contribute to their societies.

Such an approach is grounded in the knowledge that all stages of child development are linked and that the best time to start ensuring a full life is as early as possible. A healthy baby will likely become a physically and mentally strong child ready for school and later learning. That strong child will likely grow to be a contributing adolescent, more apt to continue with education, delay marriage, defer childbirth, avoid high-risk pregnancy and later set a sound foundation for the next generation of children. Investing in children from their very earliest moments displaces negative patterns in a society and allows cycles of hope and change to have their turn.

Investing in Children today means investing in our Nation's Future

The rights of children and the cause of human development are sound reasons for investing in early childhood. The neurosciences provide another rationale that's hard to refute as they demonstrate the influences of the first three years on the rest of a child's life. In addition, there are also compelling economic arguments: increased productivity over a lifetime and a better standard of living when the child becomes an adult, later cost-savings in remedial education and health care and rehabilitation services and higher earnings for parents and caregivers who are freer to enter the labour force. And there are social reasons as well: Intervening in the very earliest years helps reduce the social and economic disparities and gender inequalities that divide a society and contributes to including those traditionally excluded. And political reasons: A country's position in the global economy depends on the competencies of its people and those competencies are set early in life – before the child is three years old.

Thus, the options before leaders who are striving to do what's best for children and best for their country seem obvious:

- Assure that every child, without exception, is registered at birth and starts life safe from violence, with adequate nutrition, clean water, proper sanitation, primary health care and cognitive and psychosocial stimulation **OR** fail their moral and legal obligations as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Support families and communities as they care for their young children **OR** abandon the hope that the next generation will be healthy enough and skilled enough to lead a country out of poverty and away from destructive disparities of income, education and opportunity.
- Provide the monies necessary to ensure every child the best possible start in life during the early childhood years **OR** perpetuate the inequities that divide people, compromise their well-being and eventually destroy societies and countries.
- Spend what's needed now to assure that families have access to basic good-quality services they need for their young children **OR** spend more to fix problems later.

These alternatives are clear-cut for all of us to see and for all of us to act on. It is not only the responsibility of the Ministry of Health to ensure that our children have the best start in life but the responsibility of Government at all levels. Equally, it is the responsibility of civil society, the corporate sector, religious organizations, and the media to collectively come together to ensure that the needs of our children are honoured and respected.

Leaders in all parts of society must:

- Make the rights and well-being of children a priority,
- Create, find and reallocate the resources that are necessary to adequately fund early childhood care as the first essential step in ensuring the rights of the child, and
- Assign responsibility and accountability for ensuring that every child has the best possible start in life, as the fundamental prerequisite for healthy growth and development during school age and adolescence.

Until societyôs leaders step up to these responsibilities, the children and adolescents of this world, and their parents and families, will be left to absorb the effects of poor public policy into their private lives, before passing them to the next generation. And as long as a nation allows its public policies and budget decisions to violate the rights of children and women, there is scant hope of changing therealities and futures of children or of achieving sustained development. Nor will humanityôs potential be fully realized.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

no task nobler than giving children a better future (MDG 4 & 5)

There is no task more nobler than giving children a better future. The lives of children and women are the truest indicators of the strength of communities and nations.

If the youngest and most vulnerable are left to find their way alone, a country violates the rights of its people and sabotages its future as an equal partner in the global economy. Weak and dependent children and women make for weak and dependent countries. In dramatic contrast, children and women empowered by their rights make for robust and self-sufficient societies. Comprehensive early childhood care is a key to creating a world characterized by hope and change rather than by deprivation and despair and to building countries that are thriving and free.

When the UN Millennium Summit convened in September 2000, 189 countriesadopted the resolution for the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which affirms a global commitment to guaranteeing every human being the right to development and freedom from want. Resulting from the Declaration are the millennium development goals, a set of 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators which will serve to measure the progress of nations on their commitment made through the Declaration.

Progress for Children is UNICEFôs Report Card to map the response and progress made by Governments in meeting their commitments as laid out in the Millennium Development Goals. The Report that will be launched today addresses the fourth Goal which aims for a two-thirds reduction of under five mortality rates between 1990 and 2015.

Malaysia An example in action

How achievable is it for countries to reduce their under-five mortality rates by two-thirds in a matter of twenty five years? Well, Malaysia is an example in action that this is possible.

Where once children died of preventable diseases, today many more survive because of immunizations and improved conditions and care. Where once the risk of mothers dying in childbirth was immense, today the country has a safe motherhood programme that is accessible through all Hospitals, including the Ministry of Health's Family Health Clinics.

Throughout Malaysia, these and other advances have reduced misery, simulated economic growth, built a stronger society and enabled the country to modernize and engage with the global marketplace.

As a result of visionary leadership, a strong commitment to the wellbeing of children and investment in health and education, Malaysia has reduced its under five mortality rates from 21 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 8 per 1,000 live births in 2002. The country's achievements are all the more impressive given its relatively low starting base and the sharp constraints on public finances imposed by the Asian financial crisis of 1997 to 1999.

But we can do better. Challenges will never cease. Malaysia must continue to remain vigilant to all forms of threat to its children if it is to honour its obligations and meet its commitment in reducing child mortality. In today's world, these threats come in the form HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation, injuries and accidents. According to the Malaysia's Vital Bulletin Statistics, road accidents killed an average of 3 children daily in 2001. These threats though formidable, are preventable. Solutions do exist. Interventions are available. Strategies to improve the situation are known. All that is needed is for Leaders to act in a timely fashion with commitment and courage.

Malaysia's under-five child mortality rate of progress at 8% in the last decade, places it at the top of the ladder in the East Asia and Pacific region and second only to Malta in the World. With a required rate of progress of only 1% for reduction of under-five child mortality in the next decade, UNICEF is confident that Malaysia will continue to prioritise its children and will likely reduce its under-five child mortality by more than two-thirds by 2015.

On our part, UNICEF remains committed to our partnership with the Malaysian Government to ensure health, education, protection and equality for every child in Malaysia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Children are the hope of mankind. They are the continuity of human species. They are our most precious resource and our future.

Let us never fail them.

Thank you.