

MEDIA RELEASE

Child Protection Week: UNICEF welcomes gains but warns against disturbing trends

Pretoria, 30 May 2006 – Despite measurable and significant gains made by democratic South Africa since 1994 to protect its youngest and most vulnerable, UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) says a disturbing pattern is still evident when it comes to the abuse, exploitation and neglect of children.

“Born frees” – as the country calls South African children born after 1994 – today benefit from numerous advances brought about by democracy: education, primary healthcare and social assistance, among them. Most significantly, millions of children have been pulled out of the social welfare system. However, UNICEF says that despite these gains, children, particularly young children (girls and boys) are falling prey to various forms of exploitation – particularly sexual violence.

The South African Police Services reported that 40% (22, 500) rapes were against children in 2005, a figure that may not fully reflect the situation as many assaults are not reported. The study also showed that the mean age of the abused child – currently 10 years – is getting younger, as is the age of the sexual offender. Significantly, an overwhelming majority of the abused children (90%) is known to their abusers.

UNICEF applauds this year’s theme for Child Protection Week: “Caring Communities Protect Children” and Country Representative, Macharia Kamau is urging South African communities to embrace the theme – and act on it.

“Violence against women and children is, sadly, a harsh reality in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa – and throughout the world, as was shown by the United Nations Secretary General’s Study on Violence against Children of 2005. UNICEF welcomes the changes in the legislative and policy environments being spearheaded by the Government,” says Kamau. “But Government isn’t alone in this. Children need the help of every individual to ensure their protection and development, regardless of social status.”

Acknowledging the important actions that have contributed to improving and protecting the lives of South African children every day, Mr. Kamau cited the Government’s Anti Rape Strategy and Sexual Offences Bill recently adopted by the Cabinet, which have provisions for the prevention of abuse, the management and protection of abused children, and for the prosecution of offenders. He congratulated South Africa on the establishment of the Thuthuzela Care Centres – integrated judicial, healthcare and social havens for abused children and women – offering rape survivors immediate treatment and psychological support.

Mr. Kamau also stressed the need for responsible parental action to protect the unborn and newborn child, from parent to child transmission of the HI virus. He expressed the hope that with the increased awareness brought about by the Week’s annual observance, coupled with strong legislative and vigilant community action, the incidence of violence against children in schools, HIV infection among young people and the vulnerability of children and women will be significantly reduced or eliminated.

“The theme for this week should be the theme for any day. Caring Communities Protect Children aims to involve all sectors of society to help protect and care for children. No one is left out,” Mr. Kamau stresses. “Community organisations, faith-based organisations, traditional leaders, local government, parents, school committees, healthcare workers and educators all have a role to play in protecting children.”

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