

Aid for children from UNICEF:

An interview by FT Kid Reporters –

Reported by Dinusha Weerawardane

UNICEF, originally standing for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, but now devoid of the word "Emergency", was initially formed after World War II as a short-term project in 1946 to carry out postwar relief work in Europe, but eventually became a long-term project due to its effectiveness. It is now chiefly concerned with providing healthcare, education and improved nutrition to developing countries. Its headquarters are in Geneva. UNICEF has won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965. This is its 60th anniversary.

Three of the Kid Reporters of the *Funday Times*, Dinusha Weerawardane (15 yrs.) - a student of Holy Family Convent, Bambalapitiya, Ama Peiris (12 yrs.) - a student of Lyceum International, Nugegoda and Kusan Panditharatne (10 yrs.) - a student of St. Thomas' Prep, had the opportunity to interview JoAnna Van Gerpen, the Sri Lankan representative for UNICEF on the 23rd of May 2006 at the UNICEF head office at Githanjali Place, Colombo 3.

JoAnna Van Gerpen, a US born lady, has been in Sri Lanka since last August, and will be here for about 4 yrs. This is the 7th place that she has worked in, and she had worked in Sudan twice, Nepal, Armenia, Somalia and Sierra Leone. She was inspired to work for the UNICEF by the Model United Nations Conference.

The interview began with the following question asked by Dinusha; "Apart from being a UN organization dedicated towards providing healthcare and education to developing countries, what else does the UNICEF do?"

"UNICEF has been very involved over the past to promote universal immunization. All children are immunized against mumps, measles, rubella (MMR), diphtheria, polio and tuberculosis (DPT). We also immunize mothers against tetanus. We support other healthcare initiatives too. In Sri Lanka, 30% of children below the age of 5 are underweight. Up to about 6 months, when they are still being breastfed, they are alright. However, when other types of food are added to their diet, their nutrition standards begin to deteriorate. We also work on water and sanitation, because that influences health greatly.

The UNICEF also supports education, and since almost all Sri Lankan children go to school, we are working on the quality of education, which includes what's being taught in the classes and the sufficiency of teachers.

We also have a child protection program, which protects children from abuse, violence, exploitation, and it also deals with children who have been recruited to be part of the forces and those who get into trouble with the law. We try to make sure that their inheritance rights are protected," said JoAnna.

As a reply to the question of whether the UNICEF is active in all the countries and are there any countries in particular which the UNICEF does not help, asked by Dinusha, JoAnna stated that they work everywhere they find children with important needs and that they have 150 offices around the world, of which about a 100 of them are program offices, where UNICEF assists the government and communities to implement programs, and in about 50 countries, they have offices that are helping to raise money from donor countries.

The next question was how the UNICEF looks after babies whose mothers are in prison asked by Kusan. This was JoAnna's reply.

"When babies are born, it is very important for them to spend as much time as possible, or if at all possible, stay with their mothers in prison. In Sri Lanka, the children usually stay with their mothers as long as she can provide proper care. The prisons will provide special food and hopefully special facilities."

When Dinusha asked whether when the child reaches school-going age, would the child be adopted, JoAnna stated that they can stay with their own family or with a relative until the mother is released, or if that's not possible, then the child will have to go to a foster family. "In Sri Lanka there's a very strong family connection. That's one of the good things about Sri Lanka," she added with a smile.

Dinusha's next question was what the UNICEF has done towards preventing children against diseases like malaria, which affect population growth in least developing countries (LDCs). JoAnna stated that malaria

is a big problem, especially in countries like Africa. She further stated that the UNICEF works with other health organizations, UN development programs and governments and they try to provide bed-nets to every pregnant woman and to families with children below the age of 5. "Children should sleep under bed-nets so that they don't catch malaria. They are the priority. Therefore, prevention is the most important message," she said.

Kusan wanted to know whether there are any particular areas in Sri Lanka where children are more affected by poverty. In reply to that question, JoAnna stated that according to studies done with the government, the tea plantation areas, the North East and the areas that have been affected by the war have large numbers of very poor people who have not been able to establish their livelihoods.

As a reply to Dinusha's question of where the UNICEF gets all the necessary capital, JoAnna stated that the UNICEF does not get a fixed budget from the UN. "We have to raise our money from contributions from governments and private individuals. Our officers in worldwide offices work with the general public to raise contributions. It's the individuals contributions that support the UNICEF," she added.

When Ama asked whether that money is sufficient, she stated that about 1/3 of their budget comes from individual citizens and the rest (2/3) from governments. The Government of Australia has given the UNICEF \$ 2.6 million to construct toilets and water systems in Puttlam.

"How do you inform children about their rights?" This was Kusan wanted to know. In reply to that, JoAnna stated that they do so through workshops, mass media, training in schools etc.

The next question was whether the UNICEF officials encounter any problems with communicating to the people in some countries, asked by Dinusha. This was JoAnna's reply. "In every country, UNICEF now has 6 principal working languages; English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian and Arabic. So we hire locals and people with different language skills... It's nice to come to a country like Sri Lanka, because many people speak English and it's easy to communicate," she added.

In reply to the question of the recent projects that the UNICEF has got involved in, in Sri Lanka, asked by Dinusha, JoAnna stated that they have a huge program right now for tsunami recovery. In Sri Lanka, the program for tsunami recovery is about USD 170 million, which is to be spent by 2008. The big focus of UNICEF's attention is to rebuild schools and health facilities. The UNICEF has provided soap, clothing, school supplies, uniforms, bedding, and cooking utensils.

When Kusan asked what happens when the Convention on the Rights of Children are different from the Sri Lankan laws, JoAnna replied that the National Child Protection Agency (NCPA), was established by the Sri Lankan government to review its laws and see if they are the same, or, if they are different, to propose changes.

As a reply to Ama's question of what has been done about the children affected by the war in Sri Lanka, JoAnna stated that the money given by the Government of Australia would be spent in areas where people are now living because they were forced to leave their homes in the North East.

The day's interview concluded with Dinusha asking JoAnna whether the UNICEF would be able to help all the children affected worldwide if a 3rd World War takes place. She stated that the UNICEF would be prepared to respond if such an incident was to take place. "All of us should work hard to prevent such a thing from happening," she added.

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