

**STATEMENT BY CAROL BELLAMY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND  
ON THE CHILD-FRIENDLY  
TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION REPORT**

**New York – 27 October 2004**

Distinguished delegates (Presidents of the SC/GA/ECOSOC),

We are gathered here, today, for a historic meeting. We have come together to recognize the accomplishments of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, and to commend the unprecedented role that children have played in that process.

Numerous truth commissions have been convened in various countries over the last several decades. Several have addressed the experiences of children. Yet, never before has a report focused on children, as victims, and also profiled their role as actors in the reconciliation process. The child-friendly truth and reconciliation report for Sierra Leone is the first of its kind, anywhere in the world.

During the 10-year war in Sierra Leone, up to 10,000 children were targeted for abduction and forced recruitment. They were taken from their homes, drugged, threatened with death and forced to kill. Thousands more were abducted for sexual slavery. Thousands of children were massacred, raped and mutilated.

This report records the heartbreaking stories told by children to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It also includes children's recommendations to prevent a recurrence of war. As stated by children in the report, "We, who survived the war, are determined to go forward. We will look to a new future and help build the road to peace." UNICEF welcomes the opportunity to join the children of Sierra Leone in this important task.

The child-friendly report was first proposed more than three years ago, when children and experts met together to plan children's participation in the truth and reconciliation process. Children wanted a shorter and simpler version of the report that they could read and understand, a report that would help them plan their future.

In drafting the child-friendly report, children worked closely with the Commission, supported by UNICEF and UNAMSIL, and in collaboration with local and international child protection agencies, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and the Government of Sierra Leone.

Children were eager to play a role and give shape to a report that would bring about positive action, for and by children. They also expressed their wish that the child-friendly version would not be censored. They wanted the story told the way they remembered it. As stated in the report, "Because we are the ones who survived, we are the voice of our sisters and brothers who were murdered in the war... The story we have to tell is not a

story for children. It is not ‘child-friendly’. Still, we are children and we will not surrender our childhood to war.”

Children were involved in the activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from initial preparation and planning, to research and investigation, to the drafting of the final report. The task presented challenges. It was important to prevent any risk of reprisal or retraumatizing of children. Special care was taken to protect them – both as victims and witnesses. Specific measures were put in place to provide confidentiality and to conduct interviews in a safe environment, especially for girls who suffered sexual violence and abuse. Initially there was concern that children’s involvement in remembering and reporting the horrors of war might have negative effects. But, in fact, children who participated in the hearings expressed a sense of relief and even pride in their contributions.

Distinguished delegates,

For the children of Sierra Leone reconciliation means reuniting with families, attending school and finding a place in the community. Reconciliation also means accountability. By gathering testimony and creating an accurate record that acknowledges the crimes committed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides a basis for social and political reform to prevent further abuse. Children’s involvement in the process demonstrates how children can become active partners, helping to break the cycle of violence and re-establish confidence in the rule of law.

The report also reaffirms that children themselves are the best source of inspiration on how they can play a meaningful role. The final chapter, created by children, provides a “plan of action” for children to work together with the government, child protection agencies, community leaders, teachers and parents, in reconciliation and peace-building. They have called upon the Government to make children its first priority. They have asked that the Children’s Act be adopted by the Parliament of Sierra Leone without delay and that urgent attention be given to children most affected by the war. And they have requested that the child-friendly version of the report be incorporated into the national school curriculum.

Distinguished delegates,

In telling the story of the war, the children of Sierra Leone have expressed their determination to build a bridge to the future. As emphasized in the report, “We want our vision for Sierra Leone to go beyond the borders of our country... We want to share our ideas with children in other countries, to tell our story and bring the hope and dreams of peace to children everywhere.” They have outlined specific steps to take their vision forward.

Children are impatient for the future. There is not a moment to lose. Let us work together in providing the support and guidance they need to make their future vision a reality.