Excellencies, Executive Director Fore, Distinguished Delegates, Dear Colleagues, Good Morning.

It’s my pleasure to welcome you to the second regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board, our final session for the year.

We are meeting yet again on the virtual platform. Who would have thought that this would become our ‘new normal’? I thank you for your understanding, support and willingness to make the best of the unprecedented situation that we are going through now, together. This collaborative spirit will serve us well as we navigate our agenda over the next days.

The impact of the current pandemic is felt throughout the work of UNICEF and its many stakeholders. I stand with all countries as they continue to fight
COVID-19 and grieve their losses. And I commend and thank UNICEF staff across the world for their dedicated and tireless efforts in responding to the crisis and to advance the mandate of the organization under the leadership of Executive Director Fore. The Executive Board greatly appreciates the strong commitment of all UNICEF staff during this extraordinary time.

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Last month, we were all shocked and saddened by the Beirut explosions, which left many dead and thousands injured and left in need. Many among them are children. We stand in solidarity with the people of Lebanon during their hour of need, and I was proud to see UNICEF at the forefront of the response.

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[Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies] The pandemic has upended lives everywhere; and children’s lives have been deeply impacted. Children are particularly vulnerable, as their families and caregivers face uncertain futures. Over 80 million children are at risk of falling into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year.

Globally, more than 1.6 billion children are out of school; and the majority of them are in the developing world without access to distance learning. A large
majority may not be able to return to school for reasons ranging from poverty, child labour and child marriages.

Immunization services have been disrupted. An estimated 80 million children under the age of 1 may miss out on receiving life-saving vaccines this year. Malnutrition is also rising at an alarming rate; 36 million children may go hungry this year. The impact of this situation on essential services and regular programmes for the children is a matter of serious concern. We cannot allow the pandemic to become a children’s crisis.

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Against the backdrop of such sobering reports, it is reassuring to see UNICEF’s rapid and extensive response to the crisis. UNICEF staff on the frontline of the pandemic have gone to all lengths to get critical emergency supplies and equipment to those most in need.

And this called for creative thinking to adapt their programmes to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the children. I am pleased to see UNICEF working in close collaboration with other agencies in responding to the pandemic. I am
also very grateful to the donor countries for their generous and timely assistance which made this possible.

The Executive Board stands firmly behind the efforts of UNICEF as it adapts to the need of the hour.

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[Distinguished Delegates] I am pleased to note that vaccine delivery is being prioritized, and is continuing through innovative and collaborative solutions. It is critical to ensure that pandemic response does not disrupt regular immunization programmes.

UNICEF’s WASH team has continued its commendable work in ensuring clean water and sanitation services to the children in over 100 countries. Every day 800 children die from diseases caused by poor water or lack of sanitation and hygiene. Diarrhoea alone causes 11 per cent of global child deaths.

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I thank Executive Director Fore and the Secretariat for the adaptability they have demonstrated so that the Executive Board could fully exercise its oversight function despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. Our
discussions around resources, oversight, working methods and evaluation must continue.

As must our consideration of country programme documents, which are developed in consultation with all relevant key stakeholders at country level. Further, we must make best efforts to address the adverse impacts of the pandemic on children by adjusting the implementation of the programme as needed on the ground.

It is reassuring to see UNICEF actively exploring innovative means of financing, while acknowledging the need for organization-wide efforts to increase efficiency. I commend UNICEF for strengthening partnerships with sister agencies, and its commitment to UNDS reforms.

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[Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies] It is fitting, that the theme for the country programme documents at this session is education. We will hear first-hand how education is woven into country programming to improve the life of every child.
Education has taken a heavy toll in the pandemic, especially in the developing world. As children stay out of school, there is increased exposure to violence and exploitation. Malnutrition is on the rise for children who depend on school feeding programmes – as many as 370 million children may miss out on nutritious school meals. And the situation is also having a serious impact on the mental health of children.

Girls are at particular risk. COVID-19 is exacerbating the existing inequalities that increase risk of gender-based violence and discrimination. At the peak of the pandemic, over 700 million girls were unable to attend school; and an estimated 11 million girls are at risk of not returning to school after the pandemic crisis. Investing in girls’ education would be critical to ensuring their advancement; their dignity; and protecting them from exploitation. In my country, our heavy investment in girls’ education has brought about transformative changes.

It is imperative that we get the maximum number of children back into a learning environment, and soon. With more than one billion students still affected by school closures, this is no easy task. At least 31 per cent of students
from pre-primary to upper secondary schools cannot do distance-learning due to lack of capacity and access to connectivity. Access to online and distance learning must be made a top priority now.

Initiatives such as GIGA, launched by UNICEF and ITU, which aims to connect children to classes, need to be expanded. The GIGA team, I am told, has undertaken initiatives in 11 highly impacted countries in the past 6 months, by sharing open-source remote education tools and content. I call upon partners in the business sector to contribute with their expertise and funding to support this innovative approach to connect more students to education.

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[Distinguished Delegates] We all rely on clear and reliable data to make informed decisions. Good data are the basis for evidence-based programmes and interventions. We look forward to hearing the update from the Office of Research–Innocenti, and to understand how their research connects to UNICEF programming and advocacy, and to our partners.

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I am also pleased to share that we will be joined tomorrow by Mr. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, when we discuss UNICEF’s humanitarian action. We will also hear about how best to link humanitarian and development programming.

Greater inter-agency cooperation continues to be the Board’s priority now more than ever. UNICEF and UNHCR can certainly be stronger together, as they strive to reach refugees and displaced children whose situations are exacerbated by the pandemic.

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[Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates] Let me highlight a few other challenges facing children; as the pandemic may only compound them.

HIV/AIDS remains a major public health concern, especially in Africa. While progress is being made, children and adolescents still fall behind. Of the 38 million people living with HIV in the world today, it is estimated that over 2.8 million are children. In particular, new infections among adolescents are falling too slowly. And we know that teenage girls are affected more than boys.
We must not let pandemic-related disruptions stagnate progress made in the fight against HIV – or worse, reverse it.

This is the same for all regular programme areas of UNICEF.

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UNICEF has made good inroads into promoting gender equality. We have seen many success stories. We also see many hurdles standing in the way of girls reaching their full potential.

This starts with their personal dignity. I would like to highlight the issue of their menstrual health and hygiene, a subject that rarely comes up in any discourse. It is important that every girl can manage this most natural aspect of her life without experiencing stress, shame, stigma, or barriers to information, access or supplies. Without access to adequate supplies, girls are often forced to stay at home during menstruation, leading them to miss out on 10 to 20 per cent of school days. And this is true for girls from both the developing and the developed world.
Menstrual health and hygiene can have lifelong impact on girls and women’s health. I commend UNICEF for advocating for girls and their right to personal dignity and would urge that this issue receives more attention that it deserves. It is linked to a girl child’s full development into adulthood.

[Distinguished Delegates] Drowning is a leading cause of global mortality among 1- to 14-ear-olds, with more than 320,000 deaths every year. And this is a conservative estimate. Of these preventable deaths, more than 90 per cent take place in low and middle income countries, mostly in Asia. I call upon UNICEF to strengthen its advocacy work on drowning prevention at the country level, together with WHO and other agencies, as well as NGOs. This will certainly contribute to reducing child mortality.

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[Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates] We have a heavy agenda before us this session. But I am pleased to see the progress made on the discussions on the various items, including fruitful and constructive discussions on our working methods, which will ensure more efficiency and effectiveness.

I mentioned at the outset that this is our last session together in this Executive Board. It has been an absolute honour to serve as your President, alongside the
other members of the Bureau. I am truly privileged to have real partners in my Bureau members, and together it was possible to take forward the ambitious agenda that we had for the year despite the disruption brought about by the pandemic.

I wish to thank the Secretary of the Board and her team for once again seamlessly preparing our session under trying circumstances. Their excellent support is unwavering. Putting together two virtual sessions in a row is no small task. We are grateful to them. This is also Hai Kyung’s last session; but I shall save the farewell message for the closing segment. We are not yet letting her go.

And finally, Executive Director Fore, it is a true privilege to work with you. I greatly appreciate your valuable counsel and support always. Thank you very much.

Children around the world are counting on us to ensure a safer and better world for them; and to make a difference in their lives. Let us keep that promise to them.
I thank you all again for your patient hearing, and I look forward to a productive session.

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