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SPEECH BY MR YATIMAN YUSOF, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (FOREIGN AFFAIRS), AT THE JOINT UNICEF-UNAS SEMINAR ON "THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN THE NEXT DECADE" AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL ON TUESDAY, 20 DECEMBER 1988 AT 9.30 AM

It is a great honour and privilege for me to open the seminar on "The Rights of the Child in the Next Decade".

Children are the most precious human resource of humanity. In them lie the hope and progress of mankind. In many parts of the world, children are seriously affected by hunger, disease, armed conflict and social injustice.

So it is only logical if in our effort to build a better world for tomorrow, the question of children becomes the focal point of our attention.

Consideration of children's rights in international forums began in 1924, when the Geneva Declaration asserted that "the child deserves the best mankind has to give". Every child should be provided with conditions that would allow him or her to grow up in a healthy manner and to realise his or her full potential. Today, there is a growing universal awareness of the need to take specific measures to secure the development and well-being of children.

Most of these measures fall into two categories. First, improvements are being made to those standards that are applicable to people in general, such as special conditions for employment and the administration of justice for juveniles. Second, there are measures that deal with

issues solely relevant to children, such as adoption and education. These measures are needed not only because a child has the specific rights and duties of a human person, but also because of his or her vulnerability arising from a dependence on others for development.

The child must have the right of access to basic provisions such as adequate medical care and free primary education. Legislation must also be enacted to protect the child from abuses such as the exploitation of labour. The child must also have the right of expression and effective participation in matters affecting his or her life. These include the rights to a name and a nationality, the free expression of opinion, the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to rest and leisure, and to the preservation of identity without unlawful interference. All these rights are required for adequate physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

1989 will be a significant year because it is both the thirtieth anniversary of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Child. It will also be the tenth year of multilateral efforts to complete the drafting process of a Convention on the Rights of the Child. Today, there are about 80 international conventions on children's rights. However, the proposed Convention on the Rights of the Child will constitute the most comprehensive document possible of what the international community believes to be the fundamental rights of a child. Since 1979, the UN Commission on Human Rights has worked hard to draft this Convention. The Commission has had the full support of the UN General Assembly, which has called for the adoption of the Convention in 1989. Indeed, it would be a most fitting tribute to international efforts if the Convention could be adopted during next year's triple anniversaries.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has played a pivotal role in fostering international co-operation to protect the interests of children. It has been working to ensure that the national development plans of UN members include strategies for an overall improvement of the situation of children. Among them is the goal to halve the 1980 global child mortality rates by the beginning of the next century, or to 70 per 1,000 live births. To assist member-states to achieve this goal, UNICEF has launched the Child Survival and Development Strategy, which has been successful in reducing child mortality rates.

People are the only natural resource that Singapore has. Therefore, substantial resources have been devoted to the development of our children. Primary education is free for all children of Singapore citizens. Today, Singapore has a literacy rate of 86 per cent, compared with 76 per cent in 1973. Our education system not only aims for literacy and numeracy, but also strives to instil social and moral values in our children. Extra-curricular activities cater to the physical and aesthetic development of children and to the moulding of their personality. Over the years, schools have been equipped with improved facilities for the accomplishment of these aims.

Our children also enjoy a good standard of health care. This is due to the accessibility of health services, to stringent health control measures and to the general socio-economic condition of our population. Government health care services are highly subsidised to ensure that health care is within the means of all. Health education and immunisation are implemented rigorously to prevent the spread of diseases. In 1986, Singapore's infant mortality rate declined further to 8.8 per 1,000 live births.

The Children and Young Persons Act provides the legal basis for action to protect children and for intervention if a child is mistreated. All complaints of

child abuse and neglect are investigated and those guilty of wilful cruelty and neglect are prosecuted. Children who are victims of abuse and sexual assault are offered protection in welfare homes or are cared for under a fostering scheme administered by the Ministry of Community Development. This Ministry also manages six homes and two hostels for children in need of care, protection or corrective training. Here, the children are given educational and vocational training in addition to developmental and recreational activities. They are also given opportunities to receive religious instruction in their own faith. Moral values are also promoted through community projects and moral education classes.

I am happy that the United Nations Association of Singapore has responded to the request by UNICEF by organising this seminar to reflect and consider what has been achieved over the past decade for the well-being of children and to look forward to more achievements over the next decade. I wish you all a successful discussion.

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