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Notes for a speech by the
Right Honourable Joe Clark,
Secretary of State for
External Affairs, to the
Canadian UNICEF Committee

TORONTO
June 22, 1985.

This is a year of important anniversaries. UNICEF begins its 40th anniversary year next December and the Canadian UNICEF Committee marks its 30th anniversary this year. And this Wednesday will be the 40th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco. Stephen Lewis will lead a Canadian Delegation, including some of the Canadians who were at the signing in 1945 and three young Canadians active in United Nations affairs.

In those forty years, Canadians have become accustomed to the successes of the United Nations, and preoccupied by its weaknesses. In 1960, 77 per cent of Canadians polled thought it was "very important" to try to make the United Nations a success; this March, this number was down to 58 per cent. Some 25 per cent think that purpose is "fairly important", compared to 12 per cent in 1960, so there is still overwhelming Canadian support for the United Nations. Those of us who support the system must recognize that, left to its own devices, skepticism will grow, in an age when people know more about hostages and hijackings than they do of children saved from starvation.

Last September, in my first speech as Secretary of State for External Affairs, I spelled out the determination of the Mulroney Government to help strengthen the United Nations system. That is a continuing tradition of Canadian Governments, and is above politics. The issue, which I expect will be examined during the current general review of Foreign Policy, is not whether Canada should downgrade our participation in United Nations activities, but how we can be more creative in revitalising the United Nations system.

That involves two challenges for supporters of the United Nations. The first is to advertise the successes of the United Nations system, and the second is to recognize its failures, and work hard at turning them around.

Let us start with the successes. Compared to what the world was in 1945 and the chaos it contained, the United Nations has been a spectacular success.

Not in all it tries to do, to be sure, not in all we want it to do, and certainly not in all we need it to do. But in those areas where Member States have given it authority - sometimes very limited authority - it works well. And in some cases, it works magnificently.

UNICEF is perhaps the outstanding example. Single-handedly it virtually justifies the United Nations' existence. 400,000 children every year are saved by UNICEF - 400,000 children!

Skeptics should know about UNICEF's oral rehydration packets which, for a few cents, keep desperately poor children from dying of diarrhea and dehydration. They should know that thanks, in part, to UNICEF and its child survival revolution, most of the world's children could be immunized against serious contagious diseases. Fighting in rural El Salvador actually stopped for three days to let UNICEF's immunization program take place. And the cost of this immunization? Five to ten dollars per child. The skeptics should know that for fifty cents, a third world child can be saved from blindness.

Nor is UNICEF the whole success story. Through the World Health Organization, smallpox has been virtually eradicated from the world, malaria has been beaten back in many areas, and progress has been made on measles, chicken pox and polio. We are making headway against major tropical killers such as river-blindness and bilharzia. And day in and day out, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees saves ten of thousands of people, and provides shelter for those fleeing their homes in terror.

The United Nations Development Programme handles 8500 projects in 150 countries - helping developing countries build viable economies.

In Africa, we are seeing the degradation of a whole environment, the slide of half a continent toward disaster. We have also witnessed, in Africa, the United Nations at its best, its people working under conditions of

extreme difficulty, coordinating urgent relief efforts in 20 countries, saving thousands and thousands of lives, and stimulating us all to do better.

The struggle against poverty, ignorance and violence is so daunting that it is tempting to give up in despair. But it must be said that, despite errors and setbacks, mistakes and shortages, progress has been made. Infant survival and life expectancy have risen, birth rates have declined. The people of South Asia and China can feed themselves. And for the first time in all human history, more people are literate than are not.

So we need not be diffident about it. Looked at honestly, the UN is a success. But far from a complete success. It has, at best, a marginal role in too many vital issues of peace and security.

Almost before the ink was dry on the charter, it was clear that the UN could not guarantee our security, nor that of our friends or others, either. The allies of one day became the enemies of the next. And yet in the last forty years there has been no global conflict. The several hundred regional conflicts have not engulfed us all. When the political will has existed, the UN has been able to provide peacekeeping mechanisms, particularly in the explosive middle east situation. But this has not always led to peacemaking - the conundrum of the middle east continues; the Iran/Iraq slaughter goes on; the two communities in Cyprus remain at loggerheads; apartheid remains and Namibia must still achieve independence; terrorism continues unabated.

Who is to blame? It is not the creative, visionary Secretary-General and his hard-working staff. It is not the institution of the UN, the body corporate, that is to blame. The UN Secretary-General cannot impose its will on nation states. Those states have not wanted to sacrifice very much of their own sovereignty to the world body. There is no UN capacity to dictate to member states or even to interfere very much. The UN cannot make Iran and Iraq stop the slaughter, much as we wish it could. The blame for UN ineffectiveness resides in member states.

And some UN agencies are in urgent need of reform if they are to survive - UNESCO is the most pressing example. Indeed, UNESCO should heed one of the lessons suggested by UNICEF - that the UN functions best when it has clear objectives, and the authority to carry them forward.

In a sense, UNICEF and UNESCO dramatize the success and the failure. The UN system is capable of both. Canada's challenge is to keep the successes growing, and to concentrate pragmatically and persistently on reforming the failures.

The Government is making a special effort in 1985, the UN's 40th anniversary, to revitalize the UN. Important activities are taking place across Canada: the visit of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar last March to Toronto, Ottawa and Quebec City; seminars and conferences on strengthening the United Nations; the first of what will become an annual National Model UN Assembly, organized by the UN Association in Canada, a month ago in Montreal, which brought together 650 university students from across Canada; educational materials on the United Nations which will be distributed to schools across the country. We want to reach beyond the normal constituency of Canadians who follow and support UN issues.

At the UN itself, we have been trying to mobilize, along practical lines, support for improving the effectiveness of the UN system. We have been working with a coalition of member states from all political and geographic groupings, not just in New York but also in the other UN capitals of Geneva, Vienna, Paris, Rome and Nairobi. We sometimes refer to this new coalition of committed member states as the "friends of the UN", knowing that practically every member state regards itself as a "Friend of the UN".

We do not expect dramatic progress in reversing the trends in any one year, even the 40th anniversary year. We shall, however, persevere over the next few years in promoting practical and cumulative reform of those parts of the system which are not performing effectively. It is never easy to convince governments of the need for change in advance, rather than in the aftermath, of a convulsive shock to the UN system.

We are working to improve the effectiveness of the UN in the following ways:

- First, by supporting the Secretary-General in his unrelenting efforts to help solve difficult political problems around the world, such as in Cyprus, Iran/Iraq, Afghanistan and, most recently, the taking of hostages in Beirut. But his actions must support, and not be a substitute for, actions by the Security Council. We cannot accept the

reluctance of the council members to agree to hold regular informal meetings in private in which the council members can review current and potential crises with the Secretary-General.

- Second, by ensuring that multilateral negotiations and discussions, under the United Nations, spur on and complement bilateral efforts to make progress on nuclear issues and other vital questions of arms control and disarmament.
- Third, by improving the UN General Assembly's performance in its consideration of political issues. It cannot just be a safety valve to let governments blow off steam. We must ensure that the same ritualistic debates are not repeated each year. Its debates and resolutions, rather than hardening divisions, should point the way toward realistic but equitable solutions.

And fourth, by exposing irresponsible management wherever it appears in the UN system, including urgently UNESCO. We must not allow politicization to frustrate the UN's essential work.

Let us use the UN's 40th anniversary year not just as a commemorative occasion but to launch a process of reform of those parts of the UN system which need it. Let us celebrate the UN's strengths, such as UNICEF. But let us also address ourselves to its problems with diligence and patience, with realism and tenacity. And let us always be guided by our Canadian vision of a more equitable and more effective community of nations.

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