

UNPROTECTED CHILDREN: The Myth of Human Rights

It is an undeniable fact that children occupy a great space in the field of human concerns. As adults, it is probable that we see in children a reflection of our own infancy. And it is perhaps for this very reason that we continue to repeat painful patterns. But today the human society has to consider changing the world of children, by recognizing their human rights: various national legislations and international covenants already exist on the protection of children, but in reality, our concern for children is not much more than that, as our societies still have high infant mortality rates, illiteracy rates and in many regions, children have to work instead of playing and going to school. The diverse problems faced by children today, outlined in this article by UNICEF consultant Boris Yopo, make us realize that it is time to stop just worrying, and to start acting in the defense of children's rights.

"In the midst of a noiseless emergency, approximately 280,000 children die every week on this planet"

James P. Grant
Executive Director -UNICEF

A long time before the United Nations organization was born, one of main concerns of the international society was the welfare of children. In 1924, the League of Nations approved the Declaration of Geneva, the Rights of the Child, and when the Commission of Social Development of the United Nations elaborated its First Programme in 1984, one of its first recommendations was

that when the study of the Letter of Children's Rights was resumed, it should assign more importance to the Declaration of Geneva and moreover, transform the document into an instrument of the United Nations, which should contain the principal characteristics of the most recent concepts of child welfare.

A draft of the Declaration prepared by the Commission of Social Development was sent to the General Assembly after the Commission of Human Rights had examined it and offered certain revisions. On November 20 1959, the Assembly approved and proclaimed the "Declaration of Children's Rights". This "Declaration" established a Code of Laws for the welfare of all children "without exception" and: "Without distinction or discrimination of race, color, sex,

idioms, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other condition of himself or of his family". These rights are classified in 4 categories: civil, cultural, economic and social.

In 1979, the National Assembly proclaimed the year 1979 as the International Year of Children, specifying that the year should have the following objectives:

- 1) Offer a context for the defense of children and increment the awareness of their special needs.
- 2) Spread the acknowledgement of the fact that programs for children should be a vital part of plans for economic and social development.

Moreover, the Assembly implored governments to strengthen their

efforts for the long lasting improvement of the welfare of their children, with special attention to the more vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.

The Cruel and Coarse Reality

Almost 30 years after the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the world scenery could not be more brutal and desolate, in this precise moment there does not exist a human group where human rights are more systematically violated than in the case of the child, should they live in a surrounding of poverty or not, in "ill developed countries" or in technical and industrial societies. Both from the quantitative and qualitative viewpoint this statement is true and can be validated at any time.

Each day 40,000 children die on this planet. This makes a total of 280,000 children in one week or 14,560,000 yearly. These children die unjustly due to causes absolutely under our control, in the face of the indifference of the world society, already thoroughly alienated in a terrifying individualism.

A recent report from UNICEF points out:

"From the ethical point of view nothing changes because of the fact that these millions of children should die in one or other moment or place". But this means that in certain cases their misery is not reflected by a camera lens, and therefore this implies that their deaths do not constitute news and that the world is not ashamed or obliged to do something for them.

This drama of millions of children exploited or unjustly murdered in a major number of countries, has been entitled "A Silent Atrocity"; "The Invisible Problem"; "A Noiseless Emergency"; "The Useless Sacrifice".

Nothing is more terrifying to the human conscience than the forgotten and imposed death of these children by an unjust

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economic and social system which condemns millions of children to death or to a degrading life even before their birth.

If the mighty world policy to arm itself should yield 5 percent of its astronomic inversion in the armaments industry, which reaches 980 thousand millions of dollars, 90 percent of the lives of those 14,560,000 children, who die unjustly and uselessly each year, could easily be saved: that is, the lives of 13,204,000 children. The cost of one nuclear submarine equals the global educational budget of 23 African countries for the term or 1 year. These countries have a total population of 160 million children of school age; while the money spent each year on weapons and other military items in the Middle East would be sufficient to finance the immunization of the whole world against traditional infectious mortal diseases. If the 500,000 high level scientists who work today in the armaments industry should direct their knowledge to socially productive services they would also collaborate to diminish this atrocity.

Nevertheless, besides those 14.5 million children who die of hunger, malnutrition, diarrhea, or for lack of vaccines, there are millions of children who survive and subsist in marginal conditions or in extreme poverty.

Latin America: Street Children

Very realistic estimations elaborated by UNICEF at the beginning of 1980, show that approximately 50 million children live and work in the great cities of Latin America. These children are subject to the working conditions of marginality, poverty and violence on the part of the 'mass society'. Practically none of the countries of the region, escape this drama which is the other side of the coin of the processes of 'modernization' which these countries are living. Brazil shelters 12 million of these children (*meninos da rua*), Colombia 9 million (*gamines*), and Mexico 8 million (*pelones*).

These 50 million children do not constitute a real danger to the governments. Because of their lack of political organization they cannot exert pressure to reclaim their most elemental human rights.

The children that tramp the streets of Latin American work in the most varied occupations to survive. These occupations vary from selling newspapers or chewing gum in the streets, to the practice or prostitution—open or disguised on the part of girls, or homosexuality on the part of boys.

Sexual Exploitation of Children

Sexual abuse and violence against boys and girls is another crude reality which mankind has to confront. A recent study carried out by INTERPOL shows that the traffic of boys and girls for sexual trade exists in 69 countries. These children are led to participate in all kinds of sexual activities: from pornography to the practice of sexual relations.

The sexual exploitation of children is equally severe in the industrialized and in the "ill-developed countries".

In the latter, poverty is the principal cause whereas in the former there is a conjunction of psycho-sexual pathologies.

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Two North-American authors, Daniel Campagna and Donald Poffenberger, published a book entitled *The Sexual Trafficking of Children*, (Auburn House, 1987), where they point out that the traffic and sexual trade with children in the United States exceeds one million minors under 14 years of age. They point out

moreover, 'that girls between 8-13 years are very desirable merchandise'. In the year 1986 there were, in Switzerland alone, 30,000 rapes of children under 12 in accordance with the figures supplied by "International Defense for Children".

In Third World countries, due to the endemic poverty and misery, the exploitation and sexual violence exerted with boys and girls is equally disastrous. The prostitution of minors is openly observed on the streets of Bombay and Taipei as well as in Nairobi and in Santiago, Chile. There are estimates that in Thailand there are 14,000 girls, under 14 years old who make a living from prostitution. In Manila there are around 15,000, and a recent investigation made in Brazil by a sociologist, in the 8 largest cities,

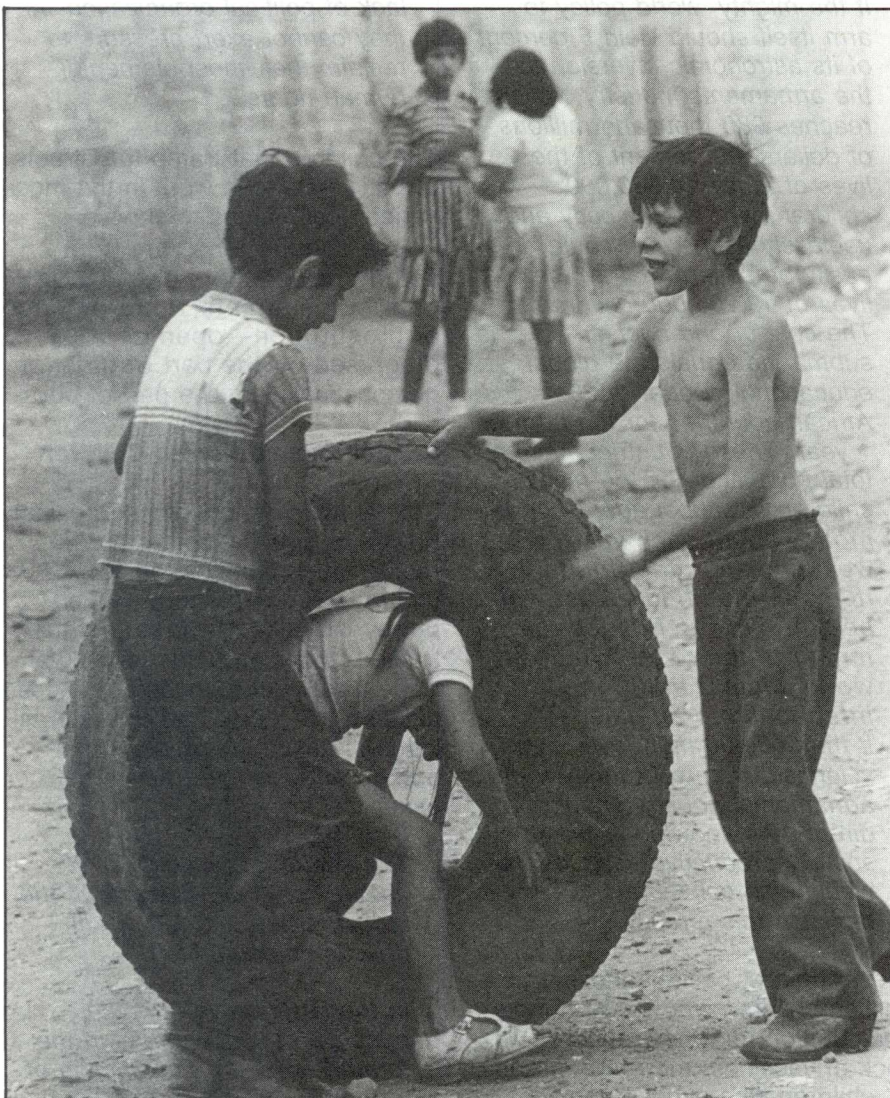
revealed terrifying results: 300 thousand girls, under 15, live from prostitution. In Colombia the case of the 'Paraguera girls' (infant prostitutes) is famous and their number easily exceeds 100 thousand. There are abundant cases of 'boys-men' in the streets of Brazil, Honduras and México, who have been contaminated with the terrible AIDS disease by homosexual men, both nationals and foreigners.

The Children of War

Children are always the most innocent victims in armed conflicts, results of ideological processes that they will never comprehend and that do not concern them in any way.

The Conference on "The Condition of Child Victims of Conflicts in Africa" held in Nairobi on June, 1987, under the sponsorship of UNICEF and the African Net for the Prevention and Protection of Children Against Abuses and Forlornness (ANPPCAN), served as a framework to analyze the drama of child victims of war deeply and conscientiously. On this occasion, Dr. Arabang Maruping pointed out that "around 20 million persons, children and women in their majority, have died in 150 armed confrontations, practically all in under-developed countries, since the Second World War". She also informed that 'civil uprisings and political violence have affected about 4 million children in one third of the African countries'.

In a recent conference dictated in London by Dr. James P. Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF, he pointed out that in Angola and Mozambique, approximately 360 children die daily, as a consequence of war. "It is as if a Jumbo jet full of children should crash to earth daily", he added. There are, therefore, 130 thousand children murdered each year, which leaves us petrified and without any explanation from the part of the "military strategists". This has caused UNICEF to decide to launch a campaign to sensitize international public opinion on the situation of minors victims of Apartheid in South Africa. We are witnessing the



An estimated 8 million children have been abandoned in Mexico City.
Photo by Rodrigo Flores.

destruction and dehumanization of an entire generation. "It is almost a genocide", stated Max Coleman, a militant for the defense of Human Rights in South Africa.

It is estimated that in Lebanon 40 thousand children have died in the last ten years of war: "No illness has ever killed so many children during the same period", asserts one of the physicians who works in the Palestine refugee camps. During the Israeli invasion in 1982, 20 percent of the wounded civilians who were admitted to the hospitals of Beirut were minors, under 15 years, and more than 10 percent of them died as a consequence of wounds, without counting those that arrived already dead at the hospitals.

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"A decisive fact that we must analyze is that war is not included in the classification of public or international health as a cause of infant mortality". For this reason, there is no adequate device to recopilate and divulge statistics related with this issue", states Dr. Amal Shama, Director of the Pediatrics Department of the Berbir Medical Center in Beirut.

The campaigns of the counterrevolution in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the aggressions of the "contras" in Nicaragua also generate effects which are wicked to children. The Supreme Court of Justice of Guatemala, points out in a recent document that military actions "have left at least 100 thousand orphans whose ages vary from 2 months to 12 years, and who have

no economic support. These orphans are from the conflict areas in the Departments of San Marcos, Sololá, El Petén, El Quiché, and Las Verapaces".

The aggression launched against the legal and legitimate Government of Nicaragua has cost this country around 50,000 victims, of whom 22,000 are dead. Of these 1,553 are children and youths. Besides, the conflict has left 1,542 children and 1,665 youths crippled. There were 1,236 children and youths kidnapped, whose whereabouts are unknown, and 180,000 children displaced by war.

In Peru, unofficial figures estimate that some two thousand children have lost all their family since 1980, when 'Sendero Luminoso' began their activities in the Peruvian mountain range. Meanwhile, the Commission of Relatives of Vanished Prisoners estimates that at least 3 thousand children, out of a total of 10 thousand persons, have disappeared in the last five years in the areas of emergency in that same country.

The aforementioned drama resembles that which the Argentinians suffered during the years of military dictatorship. The mothers and grandmothers of the "Plaza de Mayo" continue their struggle up to this time demanding of the Government and Armed Forces the restitution and identification of the vanished children. Furthermore, it has never been possible to establish with certainty the exact number of children found in a cemetery near the city of Buenos Aires, who had been shot by the armed forces.

In Uganda the children are called 'Kadogos' (small)... There are about 3,000 soldiers, boys and girls, whose ages oscillate from 8 to 15 years, who fight within the context of a non conventional civil war, which they have not promoted.

The famous American newspaper "The Christian Science Monitor" in a special 24 page report entitled: "Children in the

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Darkness: The Exploitation of Innocence" (June 30, 1987), states that the situation of "child soldiers, who learn to kill before learning to read and write, constitutes a bitter reality of the military career."

Working Children

Working children make up another category of the exploitation that different societies have been exerting on children. An investigation carried out by the International Labor Organization (ILO), estimates in 200 millions the number of minors who have to work in the order to survive. According to this study, in Latin America the quantity of children who have to work oscillates between 12 and 26 percent of the economically active population; in Asia they represent 11 percent, and in Africa 17 percent. Many of them have to carry out dangerous tasks, for example, work in the mines and in the manufacture of explosives; others are employed as cheap labor in industries which do not respect the established regulations of health and social security.

The Study Concludes

"These are the tasks that force children to grow up prematurely, and not those that are assigned to them in the familiar agricultural activities, and which force them to live a cruel life without perspective for improvement".

Undoubtedly, the greatest number and percentage of working children is living in the Third World. Nevertheless, the *Christian Science Monitor* points out that the problem is also present in the highly industrialized countries. It is

estimated that in the United States there are 800 thousand children laboring as migratory agricultural workers. Other investigations carried out along the United States-Mexico border found that around 100 thousand Mexican children under 15 years of age are working the agricultural fields of Texas.

Practically nothing has been done to become acquainted with the reality of girls who are employed as domestic servants. This is another underworld where human rights are still "tierra incognita". Nevertheless, knowing the realities of the Third World, and that of Latin America

in particular, there remain few doubts that the contingent of young domestic working girls must rise to many millions. This is another drama that the human conscience should remember some day.

The Challenge of the Fulfillment of Human Rights

This short essay has presented the serious problem of the violation of the human rights of all children, including those who are unprotected or abandoned. Children's rights have been proclaimed but there are absolutely no means to sanction violations. The great question is

WHY, why are there so many violations to children's rights? And again, in what consists a right that has no means of enforcement?

Undoubtedly, the moment has come for the world society to meditate carefully over this "silent cruelty" which is exerted against millions of defenseless children and human beings, and to have the courage to press forward from "what we can do" to "What we are going to do". □
