

The Women's Foreign Policy Group Presents

Ann Veneman
Executive Director, UNICEF

Women and Children's Rights Worldwide

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Maxine Isaacs: We are now pleased to welcome Ann Veneman. She is the Executive Director of UNICEF. She's led the agency since May of 2005, and is its fifth director. Prior to joining the UN. Ms. Veneman served as Secretary of Agriculture in the US Government and today she will discuss "Women and Children's Rights Worldwide." Please join me in welcoming Ann Veneman.

Anne Veneman: Thank you. I thought what I'd do today is discuss what you all what to discuss. Most of you know about UNICEF and our agency and what we do for women and children around the world, but we are focused on the Millennium Development Goals, really, the children are at the heart of them. Whether it's education, or child mortality, or maternal mortality or gender equity or HIV-AIDS, Tuberculosis, Malaria or clean water or sanitation or technology as talked about in MDG 8 and that is going to get us more vaccines for Malaria for children, the better off we'll be. We work in all these areas. I have been with UNICEF just one year this week. Certainly, it's been a very interesting experience. It's an agency that I'm very very proud to be associated with. I thought I would just open it up and talk about whatever people want to talk about.

QUESTION: You've been spending a lot of time in Africa. Could you talk about why you have chosen spend a lot of your time in Africa, what you've been doing on the ground, and what's really happening and what are your goals there?

Anne Veneman: I guess there are some people that think that I've been spending all of my time in Africa to the exclusion of other places. I have been to Africa. I've been to 26 other countries other than the US since I began one year ago, so I've been to virtually every region in the world, but I have been to Africa four times. Almost every one of these trips has been with counterparts. This is something that's never really been done much in the UN before, but I think it's so important to for all of us to be working together, so I just took a trip with Antonio Guterres And Jim Morris. Jim Morris being the head of the World Food Program and Antonio Guterres being High Commissioner for Refugees, and we focused on the issues of refugees in the region of the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and then Jim Morrison and I went on to Kenya and had some discussions about the drought in the

horn of Africa. I took a trip just a couple of weeks ago, with Peter Piat where we focused on the issues of children and AIDS. Very interesting again, and we got some real focus on the issues.

The other thing in the trip I did to the DRC, with the two gentlemen, was we also looked at the effects of conflict. In Africa, I've focused on a few things. One is just the general situation in Africa. Two is the issues of children and AIDS which is a very serious problem but most acute in sub-Saharan Africa. Three is the issue of refugees of post-conflict situations. I have not yet been to the Sudan, but I just had a meeting on it this morning. There are so many multiple issues in Africa. I also traveled to Pakistan after the earthquake; I went to Sri Lanka on the sixth month anniversary of the Tsunami, because UNICEF really crosses the humanitarian development issues. We spend about 40% of our resources on humanitarian [efforts], so we really cross cut the two kinds of issues. The kinds of issues we're dealing with in Africa, in particular, are very focused on child survival. We have a program in West Africa that has yielded, from preliminary results, a 20% reduction in child mortality, by using the community-based integrated healthcare approach. I think this is so important as we move forward. So much of what we focused on in children's healthcare in the past has been important in terms of immunization campaigns, but we really need to try to figure out, and this has been a real difficulty in the development community, how do we make results sustainable? How do you not just have a result for a while and then it not stay? How do you keep kids healthy? How do you reduce, for the long term, maternal mortality and infant mortality? It seems to me if you don't build a systematic, integrated approach in communities, you're probably not going to get there because we saw, for example, the immunization rates that in the 80s in Africa had been up to 75-80%.

Chad is obviously a very difficult situation, [it's] very unstable right now, the security situation is getting much worse. But if you look at a map of the whole Sudan situation, and you look at Chad and you look at where all of the refugees are going... if you look at a UNHCR map it's got these little dots along the borders where all the refugees camps are, so all of these countries are integrally linked in where the people are moving, how they're being cared for. There are just thousands and thousands of people who are in camps right now.

QUESTION: Could you comment on the issue of child soldiers in the region of the world of which you've just been speaking? In that, I assume that in these areas of conflict that in order to survive, the young men either have to be grabbed up by the Janjaweed or else they have to join the political opposition and how do we offer protection to UN and other protection workers?

Ann Veneman: Some of the most difficult meetings I have had have been in addressing some of these child soldier issues and the effects of war. The first time that I addressed these issues was when I was in Sri Lanka and I went up to the north and I met with the political leader of the LTTE. Our representative there had been very active in the child soldier recruitment issue, had been doing a lot of monitoring. I got a commitment from him that he would not recruit any child soldiers. Their excuse is that "oh well they say that

they're 18 years old," but some of them clearly aren't. So the recruitment issue is still a problem. The conflict, though we had hoped that the Tsunami may see some more working together of the government and the rebels, it seems to be backsliding now, [and] we're starting to see more complaints of child soldiers. Last July, I went to northern Uganda, and there it's not just an issue of recruitment, it's a matter of stealing kids. I went to this camp that UNICEF helps to support. It's a camp for returning kids, and returning young people, some are now over the age of 18. I was just amazed to hear their stories of how they were taken off the street on their way home from school and forced to walk miles and miles and miles with these rebels until they reached the rebel camps. They told me stories about how if a child fell or couldn't keep up they'd either shoot the child or leave them there to die. They told me stories about how they escaped. The girls are taken at 10, 11, 12 years old and made to be the wives of these soldiers, and I met with another group the next day of young mothers who had escaped or who had been let go and now had kids to raise; they had lost out on their education. Then I went also to some of the camps of people who can't live on their land because they are afraid of being shot or killed or having their kids stolen, and then I could not believe I just went to the one place where the night commuters were. It was unbelievable to see thousands and thousands and thousands of children where they just go to find a safe place to sleep. They don't serve them any food there, so they don't go to eat. Sometimes you wonder if, in refugee camps, they're going for food. These kids just go there for a safe place to sleep and they'll walk miles every day so that they are protected from this.

The other issue, not related to child soldiers per se, but really is one of the most difficult things is rape as a weapon of war. I met, in the DRC, three women who had been raped and not just raped, I mean brutally beaten, raped and left for dead. For every one of them it was by multiple soldiers. I've been to Rwanda twice this year and I've been to the genocide museum both times. Not only did they use rape as a weapon of war, but men who were known to have HIV-AIDS were raping these women so there would be a long after-effect of it. I don't think the world is outraged enough about this. The other issue, not related directly to war, but related to what I'm just talking about is I don't think that the global community has gotten outraged enough about women being sexually abused especially in the developing world and especially in Africa. I had a little sixteen-year-old girl, in Rwanda, speak to me one day, she spoke perfect English. She gave a little statement and then she asked six questions. One of them was 'when are you going to stop the rapes?' And I'd been in Rwanda for two days and we'd been talking about AIDS and it had never come up and it really hit me the next morning we were in Tanzania meeting with the country chief, our country representative from UNICEF said that as many as one third of women, and mostly young girls have their first sexual experiences forced. I said, "What are we doing about the rapes?" What I found out is that people on the country team don't even know what the rape laws are. That astounded me. Why aren't we taking a greater stand on protecting women and not accepting this as the norm? So I've been talking about this quite a bit lately. You're talking about protecting children when you talk about this, because most of these girls are 13, 14, and 15 years old when this happens to them. That's another related issue.

QUESTION: I want to play off the emotional power of your last statements; it is a question a little bit about UN reform. I want to applaud you on your emphasis on integrating what your agency does with other parts of the UN community, certainly one of the lessons of 9/11 and Katrina is that big bureaucracies have to learn how to communicate and work together. In this spirit of UN reform, which we talked about earlier in the day, one senses that people at the same time yearn for some kind of streamlining and clarity about missions and authority. I wonder if you could say anything about where in UNICEF's mission do you know that the lane of the road is only yours. When do you not have to be thinking what other part of the UN also has a piece of the action? And how do you think about when you're one of five equals or is there an emphasis on establishing a lead agency on the humanitarian and development side. Is that working? On what issues is UNICEF the lead? On what issues are you sort of a team player but not the lead and does it make a difference to how UNICEF functions?

Ann Veneman: Well, first of all, I should have brought copies of our paper that we wrote on UN reform because I got pretty personally involved what we were going to say because I felt so strongly that we need better coordination. My first day on the job last year, I said, "We cannot afford to compete in the field. The problems are too immense, we have to cooperate." That was my first day last May 2nd. Today I feel more strongly about that statement than ever. [It's] of the things we are trying to do with initiatives like United for Children United Against AIDS campaign. Everybody's involved in AIDS, but we try to set the benchmarks of these four areas set specific goals and rally partners around the issues to get results. I really think that if you're focused on results, if you're focused on what we're trying to achieve from the Millennium Development Goals, you will coalesce partners together better because you're trying to get those global results and not try to promote what your own agency is doing.

Part of the problem, frankly, is that agencies are always trying to do projects to raise money, to raise their profile because they're all voluntarily funded and that's not a bad thing, but we need to learn to do business differently. I do believe that you can raise money and still be a good partner and coalesce people. I really am trying got help UNICEF become more of a leader in some of the issues that impact children as opposed to being a project-oriented agency. The humanitarian side has begun this process of sector leads in certain areas. UNICEF has been given the sector lead, and as far as I'm concerned this does not mean that we do it all, we just help coordinate it. We've been given the sector lead on water and sanitation, we've been given the sector lead on nutrition and we have traditionally played the sector lead role in education. They didn't want to assign one because it was one that was working already.

One of the things that we find in a humanitarian crisis is that it's very important to get kids some kind of structure and education. If you can get them back to school, it's critical. I think the concept of sector lead is a good one. I think it's a good start. I also look at the development side. Everyone's trying to figure out what the UN's trying to look like. Well I think there's a pretty simple model. If you look at embassies around the world, I ran a department that had agricultural attachés all over the world in embassies, they reported to the ambassador and they reported to me. In my view that's the kind of model that's very

simple, and it's not rocket science but it works to help coordinate, obviously you've got to have your country's position coordinated when you're in the field, the UN should have a similar kind of system. I think it's important that the UN high-level panel is not called the panel on restructuring the UN; it's called the high level panel on coherence. And that's what we need is coherence within the system. Not just coherence within the UN system, coherence with their international financial institutions, especially and including the World Bank and we need coherence with donor governments and NGOs and all the other people that work on these issues.