UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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World Health Day

"Healthy Environments for Children"

Statement by Paul Hunt,
Special Rapporteur on the right to
the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard
of physical and mental health

On the occasion of World Health day 2003, I welcome the opportunity to address its theme, healthy environments for children.

The human right to health is not simply the right to health care. It is also a right to the underlying determinants of health, including food and nutrition, housing, access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, and a healthy environment.

Home, school and local community environments frequently harbour dangers that threaten children's lives and inhibit their healthy physical, mental and social development. Children living in developing countries are particularly at risk. Every year, more than five million children aged 0-14 die from diseases linked to the environment, such as malaria, schistosomiasis and cholera. Exposure to pollution and toxic substances threatens the health of children throughout the world. Poverty, conflict and natural disasters create particular difficulties for sustaining healthy environments for children.

I am particularly concerned about the situation of children in armed conflict, including the current hostilities in Iraq. In addition to the destruction of infrastructure vital for health, the use of weapons such as cluster bombs creates a deadly environment and endangers the lives and health of children. According to the Red Cross, more children have been killed picking up cluster bomblets in Kosovo than were killed by direct bombing during the conflict. I am deeply concerned that the same tragedy will recur in Iraq. Landmines are a threat to civilians and remain so for years - that is why they were banned by the Ottawa Convention of 1997. Like landmines, cluster bombs are indiscriminate - if not more so, because they are dropped from the air. Like landmines, cluster bombs leave unexploded devices on

the ground. Like landmines, cluster bombs create a deadly environment in which civilians have to live and children play for years after the conflict. Like landmines, cluster bombs constitute a violation of the right to health of those civilians who are caught up in armed conflict - and like landmines, they should be banned.

International human rights law imposes responsibilities on States to create healthy environments for children. The Convention on the Right to Child calls on States to "combat disease and malnutrition…through, inter alia…the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution." The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights calls on States parties to take steps necessary for the "prevention of the still-born rate and of infant mortality and for the healthy development of the child," for "the improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene," and for "the prevention, treatment and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational or other diseases."

I warmly welcome the recent focus of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) on the right to health, including healthy environments. In its General Comment 14 on the right to the health, CESCR recognised that the right to health embraces, among others, "access to safe and potable water and adequate sanitation, safe and healthy working conditions, and a healthy environment." CESCR's General Comment 15 on the right to water reaffirms that environmental hygiene encompasses "taking steps on a non-discriminatory basis to prevent threats to health from unsafe and toxic water conditions."

Meeting these obligations is crucial to ensuring that children grow up in healthy environments. It is also vital to the achievement of commitments made at recent international conferences. At the Millennium Summit in 2000 all Member States committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, including reducing child mortality and combating illnesses including malaria and tuberculosis. At the General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002, Member States committed among others to safeguard the natural environment for children, and to "give every assistance to…minimise the impact of natural disasters and environmental degradation on [children]".

I take this opportunity to remind States of the commitments they have made towards healthy environments for children. I urge them to develop and implement strategies to ensure the full realization of all child rights and combat threats to children's health.

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