

THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD.

Background.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by more countries more speedily than any other human rights treaty in history. To date, governments of 169 countries have publicly shown their commitment to children by ratifying the Convention since it became international law in September 1990.

The Convention goes further than any previous international human rights instrument. It merges, for the first time, civil and political rights with economic, social and cultural rights. It draws attention to the need for special protection for children exposed to economic and sexual exploitation and to trafficking and to drug abuse.

At present 169 countries have ratified the Convention. When the remaining 21 countries come on board, the Convention will become the first in history to be universally ratified. The most recent States Party to the Convention is the Netherlands. The 1990 World Summit for Children in New York set as a goal for the year 2000, the acceptance by all countries of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Signing the Convention is the first step towards ratification. But it is ratification which binds the government, by virtue of its own laws, to implementing the articles of the Convention. Every ratifying nation is obliged to report within two years on efforts it has made to implement the rights of the Convention. National reports are reviewed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which comprises experts in the field of child rights and welfare from 10 countries.

Among the articles of the Convention are those which protect the child from abuse, which recognize a child's right to education and basic health care, which ensure a child has the right to leisure and to play. Children have the right under the Convention to be protected from sexual exploitation and abuse, including prostitution and involvement in pornography, and from hazardous work that threatens their health. Countries which ratify the Convention are obliged to make every effort to prevent the sale, trafficking and abduction of children. And all children, under the Convention have the right to speak out and voice their opinions.

Ratification of the Convention is itself just another step in a much bigger process. Governments, communities, and children themselves must work together to make the Convention a living charter for children's rights.

UNICEF's former Executive Director, James P. Grant, said that, "Formally adhering to the Convention or passing laws is just part of what needs to be done. The key challenge is to ensure that the provisions of the Convention progressively work their way into the institutional life of nations and the everyday culture of individuals, families and communities."

"When children are no longer subject to abuse and degradation; when their basic health and nutrition are sufficiently guaranteed to enable them to fulfil, through access to learning, their genetic potential; when girls enjoy equal access to all that modern life has to offer; when families and societies start listening to what children have to say and start treating them with respect - only then will the promise of the Convention be kept," he said.

The very last letter which James P. Grant ever wrote was to the President of the United States, Bill Clinton. In it, he said, "Please allow me to stress... that your prompt signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child would make a genuine difference for the global effort to achieve universal ratification by the end of 1995, as called for by the 1992 World Conference on Human Rights."

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 10, 1995

President Clinton has decided that the United States will sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention will be signed next week by the United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright.

The announcement was made by the First Lady in remarks delivered today at James Grant's Memorial Service. James Grant, the former executive director for the United Nations Children's Fund, spent a lifetime working for children and was a tireless advocate on behalf of the Convention.

"Nobody fought harder than Jim for this Convention and its noble cause -- to promote the well-being and protect the basic rights of children throughout the world," the First Lady said. "I know how happy and proud he would have been to see our country add its name to the Convention. We owe it to him and to the children to whom he dedicated his life."

The Convention has been described by Pope John Paul II as embodying "fundamental values which are at the root of upright, orderly social life," most prominently of all, the need to afford special protection to children and the central role of the family. To date, the Convention has been either signed or joined by over 175 countries, including all major industrialized countries. It will be signed next week by Madeleine Albright, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

When he sends the Convention to the Senate to seek advice and consent for ratification, President Clinton will ask for a number of reservations and understandings. In particular, they will protect the rights of the various States under the nation's federal system of government and maintain the country's ability to use existing tools of the criminal justice system in appropriate cases. The Convention will not serve as a basis for litigation in domestic courts.

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