



## *On the Record for Children*

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### From the AP Editorial Desk

#### **Editorial: The Meaning of Participation**

*In this issue of On the Record -- the last in this series -- we publish some of the letters received in response to our coverage of the participation of children at the recent PrepCom*

Something went wrong when young people tried to form a caucus. That much is certain. But views differ as to what happened. That, too, is clear from these letters.

It is not surprising that participation by children turned into the 'hot issue.' Of all the rights under review, participation was the one most relevant to the PrepCom. What better opportunity could there be to exercise this right than at a UN conference on child rights?

But what form would it take? Somewhat remarkably, the children themselves were left to figure that out. It is not surprising that they tripped over.

The fact is that adults were all of a muddle over how to involve their younger colleagues. Some felt that they should act like young adults and treat the PrepCom like a classroom exercise -- as a sort of model UN. Others talked wistfully of 'letting kids be kids' -- implying that the PrepCom could benefit from a healthy bit of chaos.

It is not for this publication to suggest a 'right' approach. But it is important to recall that participation is an entitlement. Children have a right to be present at the PrepCom and make their views known, like any other interest group.

Moreover, human rights would not be the powerful force it is without the input of those directly affected -- be they women, indigenous, or torture victims. These courageous people have certainly enriched the United Nations and made it more relevant.

This seems to have escaped the attention of most governments. Only a tiny handful bothered to include children on their delegations. The vast majority didn't want to know. They listened to a token sampling of children and young speakers, but without any passion or excitement. There was certainly no sense that they were embarking on a bold experiment, and extending the frontiers of human rights, by involving children.

This comes partly from working in the UN, where everything is detached from the real world and reduced to words. But at a deeper level, governments are clearly not convinced of the value of having children participate in this process. Some are apprehensive. Most -- to their great discredit -- just seem bored.

They should read the excellent study just released by UNICEF's Innocenti research center in Florence. The study shows that children view the world in different terms from adults, and that adults can gain hugely from understanding this perspective. This applies to society as a whole, to individuals, and to families. Instead of undermining the authority of parents and weakening the family (as some critics crudely assert) participation creates respect and strengthens family bonds.

But the study also strikes a cautionary note: adults will have to adapt and adjust if children are to participate. Participation cannot be imposed, on an adult's terms. It has to be a two-way street.

Just how much can adults let go? Most parents wrestle with that question every day of their lives. But governments have not even begun to pose it -- even though the stakes are infinitely higher.

They should start now, because they badly need the input of children. Why? Because of the shocking statistics that were presented to last week's meeting. Ten million children under the age of five are dying each year, many from causes related to poverty. Millions of children are trafficked into prostitution, forced into back-breaking labor, denied the chance of education, recruited into war, and otherwise abused.

This is a scandal. At the very least it calls for a greater sense of urgency -- and this is where children can help. Their participation in this process is not a quaint idea. It is a full-blooded political necessity -- in the best interests of governments.

## **Comment: 'The Youth Caucus Was Neither Transparent nor Democratic'**

(Editors' note: The following comment was submitted to On the Record by a broad group of children under the age of 18 representing NGOs from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America.)

As a group of children and young people we are committed to upholding all aspects of the convention on the Rights of the Child including the rights of children under the age of 18 to participate and express their ideas.

It is important for our voices to be heard in all aspects of this meeting.

Many delegations have spoken about the need for child participation -- in fact that term has been a buzzword thrown around throughout this week. But in order for child participation to be meaningful, it must be offered in an environment that is supportive, open and safe for children's voices to be heard. The 'Youth Caucus,' a forum intended to be a space for children to express themselves, provided an environment that was anything but.

For participation to be meaningful, democracy and transparency are crucial. These two principles were not upheld by all members of the youth caucus. We registered our protest at this and other anti-participatory processes by walking out of the youth caucus.

To have a meeting where children are the point of discussion without children being present undermines all the principles of the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child'. We call on the United Nations Special Session on Children to recognize the diversity that exists among young people around the world. Children must play a meaningful part in all aspects of this meeting, all of them have a different story, these stories must not remain untold.

We would like adults to meet the promises they have made to us so that we can aspire for a better future. We call for an end to war, famine, poverty and ill health. We also call for the participation of children and young people because we know best the issues, which affect us. We call for our governments to respect our rights.

The 'Special Session' is for children -- you have to hear our voices. After all, if not us, who else is all of this for? Children should be seen and heard, not seen and not heard!

## **Letters: 'The Youth Caucus Was Respectful and Well Organized'**

*(Editors' note: the following letters have been slightly edited for spelling)*

From Alberta Daniels.

Hello, I am 16 years old, and I was a part of the Youth Caucus that was reported on (in On the Record). While reading through your report, I realized that the only references taken were from those who left the caucus. None were taken from us who stayed. I do believe that is irresponsible reporting. I am quite sure that there are many children who remained through the caucus meeting

who would love to give you their input on the report, making it less 'one-sided'. I thank you for your time in reading this, and I do hope you take into consideration to having some of the remaining children's input. Thank You, Sincerely Yours, Alberta Daniels.

From: Myrrhanda Keam

I recently read the article entitled 'Split in The Youth Caucus Highlights Dilemma of Youth Participation.' I was rather disappointed with the bias of the report. I am a 16 year-old child who participated in the prep-com in June of 2000 and in the Jan/Feb prep-com of 2001. I was present at all Youth Caucus meetings throughout the week and was rather disappointed at how the first three operated. Anyway, I won't let this drag on. I simply want to state that the article didn't include the opinions of any of the children who voted against the alienation of those youths over the age of 18. I would really appreciate if you would include the opinions of all children involved and not just those who complain the most. Thank you, Myrrhanda.

From: Joshua Clanton

I was quite disappointed when I read the latest issue of 'On the Record for Children,' that there was not more coverage of the other side of the story regarding the 'split' in the youth caucus. I would be quite happy to be interviewed so that both sides could be heard. Thank you for your time. Joshua Clanton.

From: Jamal El Shayyal

On this issue of the youth caucus, the story is very simple. A vote took place on whether or not to allow 18+ participation. Those under 18 who voted for 18+ participation outnumbered the opposition. In democratic situations what would normally happen is that all would respect the outcome and work based on it. This would not be the case. What happened was a disgrace to democracy and to the mature side of children. The chair along with ten +/- five walked out unwilling to accept the outcome. However those who had a true intention to portray the children of today in a positive light carried on with the caucus and voted in a new chair. The caucus convened in a much more orderly and democratic fashion.

### **News: 'Global Movement' For Children is Launched by UNICEF and NGOs**

UNICEF and some of its largest NGO partners have called for the launch of a 'Global Movement' on children before the Special Session later this year.

The call was issued in the form of a 10-point 'rallying call' on the final day of the recent PrepCom by UNICEF's Executive Director Carol Bellamy and representatives from five NGOs. These are BRAC (Bangladesh); World Vision International; the Save the Children Alliance; Plan International; and the NETAID Foundation.

The Global Movement will hopefully begin sometime in the spring and build to a climax by the time of the Special Session. Ms. Marjorie Newman-Williams, from UNICEF, told the Friday

session that its aim would be to reenergize the campaign and 'extend the constituency' for children. 'We need to put children's issues back on the front burner (of governments),' she said.

Ms. Newman-Williams said that the Global Movement will include four different elements:

- A grassroots campaign of mobilization;
- An initiative to encourage leadership among youth that will be led by Nelson Mandela and his wife Graca Machel;
- Partnership with the private sector;
- A snappy slogan - 'Say Yes to Children.'

A speaker from NETAID said that those willing to participate in the Movement would be invited to fill in a ballot form and fax this to a new web site, which would keep a tally of replies. The Save the Children International Alliance announced that it was creating an 'action matrix,' also on the Internet, into which people could send campaigning ideas.

The ten points in the 'Rallying Call' were published in On the Record (#4), and their content is fairly uncontroversial. But the manner of the launch has raised some eyebrows. Some UNICEF officials appeared slightly defensive for having joined with five of the largest NGOs working in the field - something that irritated many of its smaller NGO partners. 'We have to start somewhere,' explained Salehuddin Ahmed, from BRAC, who served as announcer at the Friday session.

Friday's ceremony was also notable for the absence of any child, and for the presence of only one speaker -- Mr. Ahmed -- from the south. Some also wondered whether the emphasis on high-tech communications is appropriate, given that the Movement will have to engage poor communities who have little access to any technology, let alone the Internet.

No one disputes that the global campaign for children must be re-energized, nor that children can provide a powerful motivation even in the most unpromising of circumstances. BRAC, for example, has succeeded in reducing the rate of infant mortality in Bangladesh by teaching 13 million Bangladeshi mothers how to prevent diarrhea.

The huge number of activists that attended last week's PrepCom is also proof that countless campaigns are at work on behalf of children, in communities all over the world. But the real question is whether the new Global Movement, as it is conceived, can both draw from their energy while uniting them into a powerful force.

Tom Burke, a 16 year-old journalist from Britain who edits his own newsletter, expressed doubts. 'It all looks very glossy,' he told the Friday session. 'We've been here before. We've got the tee shirt. Let's move on and see some action.'

UNICEF clearly hopes that the Global Movement will co-opt civil society, and offset the pressure UNICEF is likely to get from governments as the Special Session approaches. Many would say there is nothing wrong with such a strategy as long as it really catches fire with ordinary people, and does not turn into yet another top-down, high-tech edict from UN headquarters.

UNICEF no doubt hopes that its choice of partners will minimize the risk and get the Movement off to a strong start: BRAC has a proven track record in one of the world's poorest countries, while the Save the Children Alliance has members in 29 countries.

But the group will still have to take care not to ruffle the feathers of other NGO partners who are equally committed, if less well-endowed.

**Analysis: The Unstoppable Momentum of Child Rights**  
**by Iain Guest**

The recent Preparatory Committee meeting was notable for the emergence of a disciplined and well-organized NGO lobby on behalf of child rights. The strength of this lobby owes much to the failure of conventional aid programs on behalf of children.

The official debate at the recent PrepCom centered around the draft document entitled 'A World Fit for Children,' also known as the 'Outcome document,' that is being drafted by UNICEF under the direction of the conference Bureau.

The document is intended to serve as a mission statement for the Special Session of the General Assembly in September, and restate the commitments that were made to children at the World Summit in 1990.

Over the next few weeks, UNICEF officials will be incorporating the comments they received last week. They will find it particularly difficult to strike a balance between the 'rights-based approach' - which holds governments legally accountable for failing to meet the needs of children -- and the conventional approach to child survival, which relies on development aid.

This tension is apparent throughout the draft Outcome document, which has taken heat from an impressive array of advocates.

These range from the Child Rights Caucus, a group of some 100 NGOs, to UNICEF's own allies in the UN system. Olara Otunnu, the Special Representative of the UN on children in armed conflict, is said to have protested at the document's cursory treatment of children in war. The ILO sent such a lengthy complaint about the document's references to child labor that UNICEF reportedly sent a peace mission to Geneva to explain.

Meanwhile, another drama over child rights was being played out in the corridors of the PrepCom, as NGOs wrestled with the participation of children in this conference process.

All of these discussions -- public and private -- were surrounded by noise. A phalanx of groups opposed to abortion and purporting to support 'the family' elbowed their way into NGO caucus meetings and insisted that their views take precedence over everything else. Given that caucuses work by consensus and permit everyone to speak, they could not be denied. But many NGOs are worried that these tactics could set back NGO efforts to organize around key issues in advance of the Special Session. Some feel this is the objective.

Last week also marked the first foray into the UN for the new Bush Administration, and it turned out to be a shocker. The US delegation launched a biting attack on the basic concept of child rights that went far beyond anything anticipated. Not only does this raise questions about US commitment to the Special Session, it may encourage other governments to try and expunge rights from the key Outcome document.

At the same time, it has to be said that numerous governments expressed forceful support for the Convention on the Rights of the Child in their statements and at side meetings, clearly implying that they will not be bullied.

The markers for the Special Session and its PrepComs were laid down by the 1990 World Summit for Children, which was the largest gathering of heads of state to that point.

The World Summit laid down 27 goals for the development, protection and survival of children. UNICEF is still collecting the data, but Carol Bellamy, UNICEF's Executive Director, and Kul Gautam her deputy, were able to present some preliminary findings.

The glass, they suggested, is half full and half empty. The key goal set in 1990 was to reduce infant mortality by a third. Roughly 130 million births occur every year. In 1990, as many as 13 million of these children were dying before their fifth birthday.

By 2000, this number had fallen to 10 million. The reduction is significant. But, as Gautam said, 10 million deaths a year is still unacceptable. Moreover, the death rate has held steady and may even be increasing in 30 of the poorest countries -- most in Africa.

Some important goals are close to being met. In 1990, one third of the world's population suffered from iodine deficiency, which was then the single greatest cause of mental retardation. The solution is simple - iodization of edible salt. During the 1990s, iodization increased from 20 percent to 70 percent in the developing world, greatly increasing protection.

But primary education represents a huge failure. The World Summit called for universal primary education by the year 2000. Today there are 700 million children of primary school age. 120 million are not in school.

Some sinister trends are also hidden by the statistics. The vulnerability of girl children was repeatedly highlighted at the PrepCom. Girls are the last to be fed in poor families and the first to be pulled from school. They are also vulnerable to violence -- for example, female genital mutilation and even rape -- in and outside the family.

There are many other needy categories -- children with disability, children without a legal identity, street children. All have their NGO advocates who would argue that their clients have been bypassed by the World Summit and the follow-up. This, in their view, is a strong argument for shifting the debate away from goals and towards a broad strategy of child protection.

In retrospect, the goals set by the World Summit in 1990 look decidedly utopian. Universal primary education, for example, was never likely to be achieved by 2000 AD -- certainly not as

long as the World Bank insists that governments charge school fees to poor families. (The Bank is taken to task for this by Katarina Tomasevski, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education in her new report to the UN Human Rights Commission.)

Nor, in 1990, could anyone have predicted the impact of the AIDS pandemic in Africa. This scourge has upset the most optimistic forecasts and overwhelmed Africa's already fragile health systems. Even if aid budgets were growing instead of shrinking, the UN system would not be remotely equipped to respond.

Then there is the threat from war. Women and children have long suffered in war, but the 1990s took this to a new level. Children were singled out and targeted as never before, and even subjected to genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda. Two million children died in wars during the decade. Twenty-five million have been uprooted from their homes and another 300,000 recruited into armies. These figures represent a shocking failure of international will and compassion -- and to judge from Sierra Leone there is no end in sight.

The climate is deeply unfavorable in other ways. Governments are backtracking on commitments to provide more official development assistance and channel it towards social programs. There appears to be an assumption that private flows will fill the void. The problem with this is that private money will go where private money is to be made -- and that is not the schools and health clinics of Africa.

Cherished principles are no longer quite so clear -- cut as they seemed ten years ago. Many advocates of breastfeeding were shaken to learn that the HIV virus is transmitted by breast milk. Studies suggest that HIV-positive women face about a 15% chance of passing the virus on to their infants through breast milk -- if no intervention takes place. When intervention (medication) takes place, the risk becomes negligible. Nonetheless, breast milk is no longer the unquestioned symbol of a healthy infant that it once was.

Perhaps the same could be said about the model of child survival that was pioneered by UNICEF's charismatic former Executive Director James Grant, and endorsed by the World Summit in 1990.

All agree on the importance of getting the Outcome document right -- and making sure that the Special Session focuses, rather than dissipates, the energy and consensus that exists around children. The question is how can this be done?

The Bush Administration would like UNICEF to narrow the focus of the document -- to focus on child survival, cut out the language about child rights, and revise the goals.

At a briefing for NGOs at the PrepCom, US delegates said they wanted more rigor in the way goals were set and reviewed. They pointed out, for example, that the 1990 goal of reducing maternal mortality by one half had suddenly been revised to one third, for no apparent reason. 'We're not sure the process has been technically sound,' said one delegate.

This would be more acceptable if the United States has made more concessions to child rights and appeared less ideological in its rejection of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Together with Somalia, the US is the only government not to have ratified the Convention. But Michael Southwick, who headed the US delegation, made this sound like a triumphant achievement rather than a huge embarrassment.

Southwick said that there was no point in sending the Convention to the US Senate (which would have to approve US ratification) because it would not be approved. He could have left it at that because everyone knows the views of Senator Jesse Helms, the all-powerful chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The US government is also hampered by the fact that it has no institutional focal point or government agency for children -- nothing, for example, like an ombudsman for children.

The problem was that Southwick went further and disputed the very concepts of economic and social rights. Children are not 'entitled' to education and health, he said. These cannot be claimed from government.

This, of course, is completely at odds with practice in the United States, where the provision of health and education to children is very clearly a government responsibility. Children are not allowed to die from malnutrition in the United States -- at least not by law.

But Southwick also willfully ignored the underlying rationale for child rights that is slowly emerging from this Special Session process. If conventional aid programs have so signally failed children -- particularly girls -- then why not consider an alternative strategy? Is not malnutrition caused by the denial of food -- and if so, is it not a failure of protection? Why should governments not be held accountable for the promises they made in 1990?

The best argument for the 'rights-based approach' to child development lies in the shocking statistics presented by Carol Bellamy and Kul Gautam. In addition, whatever its flaws, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has managed to unite societies and cultures across the entire spectrum. It studiously avoids controversies, such as where life begins. As is so often the case, American experts were at the forefront of those who pointed this out in New York last week. But their government does not want to hear.

The US delegation was unhelpful in other ways. It announced it would not contribute to the costs of the Special Session -- which could run to over \$7 million. It dismissed any idea of children serving on the US delegation, and described the notion of child participation as 'angels dancing on the head of a pin.'

US delegates even argued behind the scenes for restricting NGO participation at the Special Session, thus playing into the hands of governments like Cuba, which have always opposed civil society playing a role in the UN. Mr. Southwick's argument was that the General Assembly is for governments -- something that gives it 'sacredness,' but this too struck an awkward note. The United States sees nothing remotely sacred about the UN, to judge from the way it has held up the payment of US dues to the UN for years.

The US delegation said it had contacted some 60 American NGOs but that not one had volunteered to join its delegation. This is hardly surprising. This was a chaotic, disturbing performance by the new Bush Administration. Everyone -- friend and foe -- will be hoping for something better in June.

The clearest voice in favor of the 'rights based' approach came from the Child Rights Caucus of NGOs.

The Caucus has grown into a well-organized, disciplined lobbying group that now comprises around 100 NGOs. It presented two documents to the PrepCom -- one, an alternative Outcome document with proposed amendments, carefully underlined. The other was a position paper.

The Caucus argues that the last 10 years since the World Summit have seen growing international consensus around the idea that children have legal rights. This has translated into legal instruments. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is now almost universally accepted, and it was strengthened by the addition of two optional protocols. One forbids the forcible recruitment of children under 18. The other prohibits the sale and trafficking of children for purposes of sexual exploitation.

The ILO recently adopted a new convention banning extreme forms of child labor. Existing conventions on the rights of women (CEDAW) and against racism (CERD) are both being interpreted to bring out the special perspective of children. The draft statute for an international criminal court forbids the prosecution of war criminals under the age of 18.

These new legal standards are all extending the protection of children. They have been reinforced by several major international conferences in the 1990s -- Beijing, Copenhagen, and Stockholm -- which have all provided backing for the idea that children deserve special treatment. Stockholm started to address the international cross-border problem of sexual exploitation and trafficking. This will be followed up by a meeting in Japan later this year.

Such initiatives show that more and more governments, not to mention civil society, feel that governments can and should be held accountable for protecting children. The real challenge now, say advocates, is to implement these pledges more effectively.

At the national level, this means more action -- more ombudsmen for children, more programs, more monitoring by civil society and advocates.

At the international level, it means more resources for the committee of experts who monitor adherence to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Many NGOs would also like to see the Convention itself given sharper teeth. The Convention has a loyal and large following of NGOs, who monitor the meetings of the Committee in Geneva and help fellow NGOs from developing countries to draft alternative reports when their government is up for review.

But many are frustrated by the fact that their comments are often ignored. After submitting an initial report, a government need not report for another five years -- and the UN is so short-staffed that there is a backlog of reports waiting to be processed of at least 2 years. In addition,

individuals cannot lodge complaints against their governments with the child rights committee, as they can under the racism (CERD) and women's (CEDAW) conventions.

It is not surprising that many members of the Child Rights Caucus feel that the entire Special Session should be devoted to shoring up and improving these mechanisms. They would also like better data. One advocate pointed out that plenty is known about iodine deficiency, but much less about children in detention.

Among other things, the Caucus is calling for a new study on violence against children, similar to the Machel study on children in armed conflict. It would also like to see a new focal point in the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who can monitor the situation of children in war, and report to the UN Security Council.

In the face of all these conflicting pressures, UNICEF looked tentative and unsure for much of last week's PrepCom. On the final day, UNICEF officials joined with five NGOs to launch a 'rallying call' that is intended to kick off a 'global movement,' sometime in the spring. This in turn will have the title 'Say yes to Children.'

The plethora of slogans may hint at desperation. Somehow, over the next few months, UNICEF will have to rekindle the spark of 1990, recapture the attention of governments, and place children back on the front burner.

This is not impossible. Several pioneers have managed to convince governments to unite around children, and made the case that following the best interests of the child usually serves the best interests of society as a whole. Eggyntine Jebb managed it in 1924 before the League of Nations. James Grant did it in 1990 at the World Summit.

But Jebb and Grant both burned with a vision. That vision is not apparent in the Outcome document, which reads more like an attempt to strike a balance between conflicting arguments than a true mission statement. In addition, today's world looks more complex than it did in 1990.

It is hardly surprising that so many advocates feel that the 'rights based' approach can provide the missing spark.

### **Networking: New Mexican Website for Children's Rights Created Following PrepCom**

On the Record has been asked to direct readers to a new web site on children's rights that has been created by a group of Mexican NGOs working with children. The site was created last week, following the second PrepCom. The NGOs work to promote the rights of children in Mexico and lobby for child-friendly policies. They also encourage the participation of children.

- Contact [Gerardo Sauri Suarez](#), Address Calzada Xochimilco 4861 Mexico DF tel: 525 673 15 80 Fax: 525 673 3633.

### **Part Two**

## **News: Conservative Religious Groups Complain of Prejudice by UN, NGOs by Gabrielle Engh**

Conservative religious groups are tired of what they claim is 'prejudicial treatment' at the UN -- treatment which they believe is motivated by an anti-religious bias. At the same time, they seem unwilling to concede that their own tactics are straining their relationships with the NGO community.

This was one of the key messages to emerge from a PrepCom panel discussion that was sponsored by the Committee of Religious NGOs, a grouping of some 60 organizations.

The panel brought together Austin Ruse, Director of C-Fam (the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute), Jennifer Butler, representing Ecumenical Women 2000+, and Meg Gardinier of the US Fund for UNICEF.

The topic was the participation of religious groups at the UN and -- more specifically -- during the second PrepCom. But beneath this lay concern at growing antagonism between liberal faith-based groups on the one hand, and conservative 'pro-family' religious groups on the other.

Pro-family groups in particular have been accused of intimidating tactics in the UN, and of turning UN conferences into something of a religious battleground. These tactics disrupted last year's Beijing+5 and are again threatening the Special Session process. Many are troubled that they give religion an aura of intolerance and aggression, instead of stressing the spiritual and reflective side, which can be so beneficial to the development of children.

Ms. Butler said she hoped that meetings like the panel discussion would encourage pro-family and liberal faith-based groups to address issues on which they agree, such as racism and poverty. But she remained uncertain whether 'the pro-family constituency would bring the same zealotry they seem to bring to women's and children's issues.'

Ms. Butler serves as an associate at the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program at the UN. She authored a study last June entitled 'The Religious Right Goes Global' which has been frequently targeted by pro-family groups like C-Fam.

Austin Ruse, her co-panelist, was selected to head C-Fam in 1997 by Human Life International, which is the only pro-life NGO with UN accreditation. He said that C-Fam provides a voice for 'the unborn, the family and for parents' rights.'

These rights, he said, already exist in such UN documents as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Preamble on Child Rights. '(The UN must) go back to what it was originally intended to do,' he said.

Criticizing what he termed the 'lack of a transparent process at the UN,' Mr. Ruse presented a litany of unfair practices, which he alleged had been directed against the pro-family constituency during various UN conferences. In one example, he alleged, a 15 year-old girl had been asked by

a prominent NGO to prove her pro-choice status during the accreditation process for the PrepCom. On the Record was unable to verify this charge.

Mr. Ruse also complained that NGOs change the rules in the middle of meetings when they don't like what's happening. 'Anything we do is perceived as threatening or coercive. People are not used to having opposition but they should find a way to work with us instead of creating barriers.'

Although religious conservative groups in the US benefit from approximately \$40 million that is raised on the Christian broadcasting networks annually, Mr. Ruse said that his constituency is 'limited by money and people.'

Responding to Mr. Ruse, Deborah Moldow, Director of The World Peace Prayer Society, said that constituencies like C-Fam might 'feel less resistance if they participated in the NGO community, instead of coming to specific events to propose their agenda.'

'Faith-based and conservative groups at the UN often work together and are accustomed to disagreement,' she said.

Clearly concerned at the negative image surrounding religion in the UN, Ms. Butler said that last year's summit of world leaders had helped to give religious issues at the UN more prominence than ever before. She reminded the audience that religion could be a positive force for human rights.

Ms. Farida Ali, from UNICEF, also argued that children were not benefiting sufficiently from religion, which could help their spiritual development. Ms. Ali recommended that NGOs form a caucus on religion to bring the voice of religion in from the fringes, and make it more mainstream within the UN.

Ms. Butler agreed that the Committee of Religious NGOs could help people at the UN talk positively about religion. She also recommended educational forums where views could be highlighted because 'it is important that religious views supporting human rights are well heard.'

### **Diary: 'Interviews Like This Were Not So Easy':**

*Peter Lippman was one of the reporters for On the Record at last week's PrepCom. Here he recalls some of the people he met.*

Conferences cost a lot and produce too much hot air. For this reason I think they should all have a section on how to deal with global warming. They don't get much done either, and I avoid them. Still, it's good to develop international law. If only some of it would eventually be implemented.

As I worked through the week of the conference -- meeting people, doing interviews, writing up articles -- I learned more about the pitiful condition of too many children in this world. Over 130 million of them are not in school in the 'developing' world. Sixty per cent of these are girls.

Grownups buy and sell children, traffic them across borders in Asia, enslave them, and draft them into armies. They give them drugs and grown-up diseases. Girls get the worst of it. I'm sparing the most atrocious details.

I listened to a few panel discussions. Everyone came back to poverty as the cause of abuse of children. An 18-year-old Nepalese woman told me, 'If you have money, you can buy your way out of it.' Essam Ali from Egypt said that 'in some places, the fight against poverty has ended, and the poor people lost. In other places the fight against poverty has not started.' During my research on an article about Guatemala, I came across an unforgettable statement in a letter from Covenant House: 'There is no quilt for those who died of 'poverty.' '

Meanwhile a Mexican restaurant on 2nd Avenue displayed a sign in the window that read, 'All you can eat for \$50.'

The Convention on the Rights of the Child needs to be implemented. Children are still used in armies in several dozen countries. Street kids are abused in many parts of the world. And kids suffer the worst whenever there's a war or an occupation.

Which governments have yet to ratify the CRC? I hoped it would not be, but it was -- the United States and Somalia. The United States does not want to ratify the protocol on child soldiers, because it prohibits the use of people under 18 in war. There are estimated to be around 300,000 child soldiers in various countries today. The U.S. has several thousand 17-year-old enlistees, some of whom could enter combat. The government says that military service can be of benefit to these kids. But because of that, we don't want to address the problem of eight-year-olds fighting in Sierra Leone.

I wrote a little about those 'soldiers.' Rebel leaders raid villages and force kids to join them under threat of death. They kill the parents, drug the kids, and get them used to killing and unspeakable acts, and take 12-year-old girls as 'wives.' Now the U.N. is setting up a special war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone, and they are talking about trying some of the child soldiers. Many NGOs feel it would make more sense to prosecute the adults who are most responsible. Organizations like Save the Children are working on rehabilitating former child soldiers.

I interviewed a wonderful activist from Casa Alianza/Covenant House of Guatemala. This group is pressing a claim against the Guatemalan government with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights for violating the rights of street children. The government's infraction has been to look the other way when police or private security employees attack street children. Several thousand children live on the streets of Guatemala City, displaced by the war or just poverty. They get pregnant and sniff glue to dull the hunger pangs. Businessmen complain about them and hire security companies that practice 'social cleansing,' i.e., terrorism, against the kids.

A Palestinian activist from Defence for Children International's Ramallah office told me about the traumatic effect the Israeli occupation has on kids when the Israeli military bombs residential areas at night. There are also over 20,000 Palestinian children working in Israeli factories and farms. The activist called for special attention to children under occupation.

Interviews like this were not so easy. It's hard to stay composed when hearing about kids scavenging for a living and running into land mines, or when writing about the abuse of street children. But the children who were at the conference were an inspiration. They were asking to be heard, and they were able to describe their problems and to propose solutions in a completely articulate way. One girl told me: 'The adults say they want to know what we think, but then they don't listen, because they want to be right. But they don't really know what life is like for us.'

I talked to a 16-year-old boy from northern Guatemala who told me about his work with youth groups in the villages. He explained to me why there are so many street kids in Guatemala. A 15-year-old Girl Scout from New Jersey told me about her work with a national campaign against the tobacco companies, which target young people. They sell tobacco products next to candy, and create subliminal advertisements that go on high school book covers.

This girl was so focused and articulate that I wanted her to hurry up and run for president, so that I could feel good about voting. If we could get some of these young people into positions of responsibility before they become corrupted, it would be a good thing.

The high point of the week for me was talking to the South Africans. I sat at lunch with two adults and three high school kids. They explained to me how racism still exists in South Africa, that it's not that easy to change the system, even though they felt that democracy had arrived. The white schools are much better-equipped than the rest, and the white people still have better opportunities. Even in sports there is a racial divide. The water sports are all white, as only the white people have swimming pools in their yards.

At the same time, my South African friends were positive and optimistic about their prospects. One of them, a 31-year-old teacher, speaks nine South African languages. Another, aged 16, told me that she spoke eight languages, 'not counting English.'

18-year-old Xolane taught me how to pronounce his name, the 'X' representing a tongue click off the top of the mouth. It's not that hard, but I don't recommend trying it with food in your mouth.

### **The Children's Express Interview: Farid, Age 11, Fights for Peace in Azerbaijan**

Sometimes kids don't realize they can really make a difference. Take, for example, the story of 11-year-old Farid from Azerbaijan. Because his country has been torn apart by wars for over 12 years, he started the Child Peace Network. Then, he sent around a petition for peace in his country, and he got thousands and thousands of signatures from boys and girls.

Azerbaijan has been subjected to attacks from neighboring countries like Armenia over the years. Any war means that kids are suffering; they're getting hurt, maimed and killed. Farid said wars were taking over the country and they had to do something to stop them. His grandmother, Elmira Suleymanova, added that a large percentage of people's land had been taken away, leaving over a million refugees and 'internally displaced persons,' and about 30 percent of them are children under 15 years old.

Farid's petition for peace gained strength and it passed across the borders of Azerbaijan where kids from other war-torn countries signed it and joined his network. He was very optimistic that by the time the UN General Assembly Special Session for Children was over, that he would get thousands more signatures on his petition, and he believes 'it will never be war if everybody try for peace.'

His grandmother (who accompanied him to last week's meeting) felt just as strongly about a positive outcome, 'That is why we are very optimistic that peace will win, and all of them [the children] will come to a peaceful future,' she said.

They both felt that wars in all countries must be stopped, not just the war in Azerbaijan. 'If we are at war in one country, it influences the situation in other countries. The globe is not so big as it seems,' Suleymanova said. 'We have to reach peace all over the world. That will be the best chance to develop the capacities of children, the capacities of youth, realize their talents.'

Three generations of Farid's family traveled around Azerbaijan and then to the United Nations in New York to emphasize that war in any country affects everybody in the world, especially kids. 'That is why you have to prevent conflicts, to solve conflicts,' Suleymanova said, 'to be active in peace making and peace keeping all over the world in the name of your happiness, in the name of your future.'

Farid's motto was 'If children need peace, they must do something about it.' He's a great example that child participation does count. He planned on presenting the petition to his government, and also to the UN General Assembly, to show that kids are very powerful, and they know that they need and want peace.

It's great that a kid actually had the courage to go out and do what most adults wouldn't try. He got his point across to other kids and got them involved. Most people would see the problem, and sit around thinking the same thing as him but say, 'There's nothing we can do about this, and we have to just let it be.'

Not many people would have the guts to do what this amazing young boy has done. Farid actually took action, put it into his own hands and made this petition to stop the wars. He should be an example to other kids that doing something could actually change things. 'That is what the youth have to try,' Suleymanova said, 'because in 10 years you will be in our place when we go out from this world.'

(The Children's Express team for this story was Rachel Falkenstein, 18; Esme Rogers, 10; and Stefan Weinberger, 12)

### **The Child Rights Information Network**

The promises of the World Summit for Children remain unfulfilled, and the pace of progress has slowed. The World Education Forum in Senegal was mired in disputes and failures. Virtually all countries under-invest in children.

Money is needed to put this right, along with political will and better policies. An acknowledgement that fuller, better lives for children is their right, rather than a lucky break if those in power happen to feel like bestowing it, would also help -- which is where the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) comes in.

CRIN believes a rights-based approach is the road to follow, and it also believes that information empowers.

'CRIN encourages debate. It provides a location for debate. It gives access to information,' says CRIN Coordinator Andrea Khan. She emphasises that 'it is not a campaign organisation. It's not a caucus. It is not trying to compete. It's neutral.'

But it is not passive. 'We help people get their voices heard. We let people around the world hear,' says Khan. 'It's important that people understand what is being done in their countries to better the child rights situation. CRIN tries to provide that information by supporting the monitoring process of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in cooperation with the NGO group on the CRC.'

For example, she says, 'individuals can come to our site to track down information about child rights' coalitions in their own countries, and can read materials written by NGOs which have monitored conditions there. When that information is placed side by side with information submitted by governments to the CRC, it provides a more balanced picture of what is being done to improve conditions for children.'

For the Special Session and its preparatory meetings, CRIN aims to facilitate networking and capacity-building among its 1,100 member organisations in more than 100 countries - up from 65 members in 1995. This includes providing national NGOs with more information about country and regional-level activities and supporting NGO groups such as the Child Rights Caucus, making their information more accessible through CRIN's website. It also aims to publicise the importance of child rights and to increase participation and involvement in the Special Session process. This is important, says Bill Bell of Save the Children UK, who is on CRIN's London-based management team, 'because the general level of awareness of the Special Session is low. Little is known about it. Some people dismiss it as a talking shop, but my view is that we must make the best of it.'

'If you don't push for action it's no good complaining it doesn't work. If you believe in child rights, get involved.'

CRIN does its job through a website (updated daily), e-mail services, electronic discussion groups and a recently-relaunched newsletter.

More than two-thirds of its members are in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and one of its main aims is to increase support for NGOs in the South. Khan says this will entail identifying key regional players and regional issues, making its information more accessible, and translating more information into other languages.

Membership of CRIN is free. The requisites are involvement in child rights activities, support for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a commitment to information-sharing.

The Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) aims to facilitate networking amongst child rights organizations for the Special Session on Children and its preparatory meetings. The organization has a website for the Special Session.

CRIN is working to provide national NGOs with more information about country and regional-level activities, and support caucuses, national coalitions and other groupings in making their information more accessible throughout the child rights community. Overall this includes promoting the importance of child rights and increasing participation and involvement in the Special Session process through information sharing.

The real challenge at the Special Session for NGOs, young people and other parts of civil society will be to ensure that the UN General Assembly and Member States make a commitment to real action which can be monitored and measured. NGOs should discuss with their governments how to ensure the development of a simpler and more effective action plan, with more ambitious timetables and strategies.

CRIN is working to consolidate information about groups working on the Special Session process. This includes caucuses (regional and thematic), national coalitions, other groupings and organizations. -- meetings, events and other activities organized nationally and regionally, -- key issues of concerns, - contact information, -- additionally, CRIN is ready to provide support to these groups by setting up e-mail groups.

- Please contact **CRIN** for more information: Child Rights Information Network (CRIN)  
c/o Save the Children 17 Grove Lane London SE5 3RD, UK Visiting address: 66 South Lambert Road, Phone: +44.(0)20.7716.2240 Fax: +44.(0)20.7793.7628 or by email.

## **Calendar**

Many events relating to children are planned for the months leading up to the third preparatory committee meeting (New York, June 11-15). The following is taken from the website of the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN).

- Asia-Pacific Television Forum on Children and Youth: February 4 to 7, 2001, Seoul, South Korea.
- **Regional Preparatory Conference for Asia, World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance:** February 19 to 21, 2001 Iran.
- **Child Welfare League of America,** National Conference: March 7 to 9, 2001, Washington DC, USA

- Third World Summit on Media for Children: March 23 to 26, 2001, Thessaloniki, Greece.
- Fourth Scientific Working Group on the Investigation of Persons with Disabilities: March 15 to 17, 2001, Salamanca, Spain.
- 2nd International Conference on Children's Rights in Education: 18 to 22 August, 2001, Victoria, Canada.
- EXIT - Ways Out of Violence for Children and Youth International Conference, May 8 to 10, 2001. Germany, Osnabrück.
- 27th Session of the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**: May 21 to June 8, 2001, Geneva, Switzerland. (The following State party reports will be considered: Bhutan, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Guatemala, Monaco, Oman, Turkey, United Republic of Tanzania.)
- Second PrepCom for World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: May 28 to June 8, 2001. Geneva, Switzerland.
- Children's Rights in Europe - Challenge and Responsibility: May 30 to 31, 2001, Örebro, Sweden.
- International Labour Conference, International Labour Organisation: June 5 to 21, 2001, Geneva, Switzerland.
- Children and Young People in a Changing World: A Holistic Approach: June 9 to 16, 2001, Agrigento, Sicily.
- Third Substantive Session of the Preparatory Committee for the UN Special Session on Children: June 11 to 15, 2001, New York, USA.
- The UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS: June 25 to 27, New York.