

## Children

**C**hild is an asset. Children are the future generation. This month 70 heads of state got together to discuss the problems facing world's children. The main purpose of this summit, organized by the UNICEF, was to look into the problems affecting children all over the world and find solutions to these problems.

Many adults are unaware that children also have rights. Though child labour, child prostitution & child delinquency are more common in the Third World such phenomena are not unknown in the developed world either. To solve or minimize these problems, on 20th November 1989, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The provisions of the Convention apply to four main areas of children's rights:

**Survival** – The first specific right cited in the convention is the inherent right to life. States must ensure "to the maximum possible, the Survival and Development of the child". (the right of access to health care services, to an adequate standard of living, including food, clean water and housing).

**Development** – To allow every child the chance to develop his or her full potential, right to education, to rest and leisure, and to engage in cultural activities.

**Protection** – This deals with mentally or physically disabled

children, refugees, orphaned children or children who are separated from their parents, child labourers and sexually exploited children. Another objective was to prevent children from using and selling drugs.

**Participation** – The child's right to freedom of expression and information, thought, conscience and religion, and to play an active role in the Society.

According to UNICEF findings there are more than 30 million street children and about 7 million child refugees. At least 50 million children work under unsafe and unhealthy conditions, more than 100 million are deprived of primary education and more than 150 million are suffering from malnutrition. Asian children bear the biggest burden. Nearly one child in two is malnourished. Almost half of the world's malnourished children live in eight Asian countries - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The majority of the 40,000 children under five who die every day in the developing world could be saved at an affordable cost. US companies spend US \$2.5 billion to advertise cigarettes. Soviets spend that much for Vodka, and each day the world spends about 2.5 billion (US \$) on armaments. The problems afflicting world's children can be solved. It only needs a bit of feeling.

Compared to other developing countries, Sri Lanka has done relatively well in the area of child welfare. Our social statistics are one of the best in Asia and could compare favourably with even developed countries - Infant mortality - 25 per 1000 live births; population growth rate - 1.3 percent, literacy rate - 91 for males and 83 for females, primary school enrolment rate 100 for both sexes. Over 90% of the children are fully immunized and life expectancy at birth is 68 for males and 72 for females.

But there are still some major problem areas. Our per capita income is only US \$ 360 (1988). According to the Consumer Finance and Socio-economic Survey (1986/87) the poorest 20% of the population gets 3.5% of the national income but the richest 20% get 56.7%. The gap is widening. Malnutrition, high morbidity, chronic undernutrition, poor housing and sanitation facilities and lack of safe water are the major problems affecting our children according to Mr. Mathema - the UNICEF Representative in Sri Lanka.

Every adult has a responsibility to pay attention to these problems and to help find solutions—if we are to ensure the health, well being and happiness of our children.

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