

Speeches

**STATEMENT BY THE HON. BILLIE A. MILLER, M.P.
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND FOREIGN TRADE
AT THE OPENING OF THE UNICEF/BRITISH
HIGH COMMISSION JOINT WORKSHOP ON THE
CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD:
“BUILDING ON THE BELIZE COMMITMENT”,
BRIDGETOWN, BARBADOS, MARCH 9TH, 1999**

Minister Lashley

High Commissioner Baker

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

UNICEF Representative Ngokwey (EN – GOK-WAY)

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen, and Children: I am especially pleased to be with you this morning to participate in the opening of the Workshop on the Rights of the Child: 'Building on the Belize Commitment,' organised by UNICEF and the British Government. I am particularly honoured to have been invited to give the keynote address.

I would wish to express my appreciation to both UNICEF and the British Government for sponsoring this important Workshop and for choosing Barbados as the venue.

I am certain that we can count on your continued commitment to the children of this region.

For over fifty years UNICEF has devoted its efforts to improving and enriching the lives of children around the world. It has highlighted and confronted challenges of malnutrition, disease and illiteracy, among others which we saw on the video just now. These are all problems that have the potential of undermining social and economic development of a nation.

UNICEF operates from the position that the future of a nation resides in its children. And for this reason it has tirelessly sought to persuade governments that the plans for its children and youth must be at the centre of the national agenda and that this should be reflected in the allocation of resources.

The stated aim of the workshop is to allow participants to find ways to implement the letter and spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in an informal way.

The Commitment made for the children at the Caribbean Conference on the Rights of the Child held in Belize was intended to provide a focus of the four days of discussion.

It is envisioned that the workshop will serve as a forum to share experiences and establish practical methods to improve the monitoring of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Government of Barbados recognises the inalienable rights of children. We believe that these must be reinforced by a protective legal system within a supportive social environment starting in the home and extending to the school, the church and the community.

On September 2nd 1990 the Convention on the Rights of the Child formally entered into force. The Convention has become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. Its coverage is nearly universal with only two countries remaining outside its framework. Barbados ratified the Convention on October 9, 1990.'

The Convention has not brought, nor could it have been expected to bring, instant solutions to all of the problems that beset the world's children.

It does, however, provide a set of agreed international standards by which we can structure our national activities in the interest of those children for whom we have responsibility. It also serves as a source of inspiration to all of us to strive constantly to do better.

In our efforts to give meaning to the articles of the Convention we have to take a number of steps. Where necessary we have to make the legislative changes to ensure that our laws take fully into account the rights of our children and serve to protect them. We have also to provide the educational environment to enable the nation's youth to reach their full potential. In Barbados, we have pioneered Edutech 2000, a radical approach to the empowerment of young people through knowledge.

It is structured in such a way as to enhance the range and depth of learning, while utilising the most innovative technology and imparting those skills that the children of the future must have in order to function in the competitive global marketplace.

Governments must also turn their attention to the provision of adequate health facilities.

The continued testing of children for any aural, visual and speech defects, as well as an expansion of the Parent Volunteer Support Programme to all primary schools here in Barbados, are all activities that are directly in line with the tenets of the Convention.

The remedial programme for those children with difficulty at the Common Entrance level and the building of schools with facilities for physically challenged students are all perspectives from which the process can be addressed. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Belize Commitment both place special emphasis on the issue of health.

For several decades we have lived in a Barbados where children are monitored from the antenatal visit through island wide immunization of children against the majority of childhood diseases through the school health and dental service with the advent of the threat of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, programmes have been put in place to inform children of the existence of these new threats to their

survival.

Of course, I recognise that all of our countries are constrained by limited resources.

But it is important, however, that we do all in our power to fulfill our obligations under the Convention bearing in mind the impact on future generations.

The Convention encompasses all aspects of the life of the child. It acknowledges the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that would exist automatically in a perfect world. Unfortunately, the harsh global realities necessitate this instrument to ensure that the suffering of children is alleviated, if not totally eradicated.

In Barbados we are not perfect but we are fortunate to have a sound record in the field of human rights including the care of our children.

The Convention stipulates that children should be able to enjoy their civil rights and freedoms, a healthy family environment consisting of parental guidance, health and education, and the right to be heard and recognised as persons with opinions on their own development.

As an economy that relies heavily on people as our most precious resource, it is imperative that children be given the opportunity to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment which forms the basis for their full involvement in society as productive adults.

With the new millennium approaching, it is essential that children occupy a more important place on the public agenda of all countries party to the Convention.

The Caribbean Conference on the Rights of the Child held in Belize in 1996, concluded with the Belize Commitment to action for the rights of the child. It outlined a number of actions and commitments to be undertaken by the Governments involved, to ensure that the necessary enabling environment would be created to secure the continuation of child centered government and public policy.

As reported by a World Bank study in 1996, the number of poor people in the Latin America and Caribbean region stands at more than 165 million persons. Where there is poverty there are inevitably suffering children. For this reason poverty alleviation must be a priority for all our Governments.

Two of the main issues arising from the Belize commitment were the need for each country to adopt a national plan of action for children and to establish a monitoring Committee to examine the continued implementation of the Convention.

One of its primary objectives is to revisit the previously devised national plan of action and propose amendments as necessary taking account of changed realities as they affect the nation's children.

There is however, a great deal of work to be done.

The process of monitoring the Convention must be systematic, timely and could perhaps benefit from greater publicity and wider community participation. We need to develop mechanisms through which children and youth can be heard and their views taken into account.

I wish once again to express my gratitude for the work of UNICEF and I sincerely look forward to continued commitment and collaboration on issues concerning children. To the British Government,

I wish to express appreciation for your very important contribution to this workshop. The full implementation of the Convention can only be assured through the commitment of the Governments and the continued cooperation of the international community.

Ladies and Gentlemen, and children, it is my wish that one day soon there will be no need for declarations and conventions to safeguard our children. Let us work together toward this laudable objective.

I thank you.