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Unicef: Developing Nations Could Save Millions Of Children's Lives Per Year By Small Cuts In Military & Debt Outlays

by John Neagle

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In its annual report titled, "The State of the World's Children," the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said Third World nations could save 7.6 million of their own children from death by disease every year by shifting a small part of their military spending to health care. According to James P. Grant, UNICEF executive director, developing countries spend a total \$145 billion per year on military establishments. He said nearly 8,000 children die every day in the Third World because they are not immunized; almost 7,000 due to dehydration caused by diarrhea, and about 6,000 of pneumonia, for a total of 7.6 million. In the report, Grant said the cost of immunizing all children and providing medicines for dehydration and pneumonia would be about \$2.5 billion a year. "It is a great deal of money," Grant said. "It is as much as the Soviet Union has been spending on vodka. It is as much as US companies have been spending on advertising cigarettes. It is as much as 10% of the EEC's annual subsidy to its farmers. It is as much as 2% of the developing world's military spending." In the report, Grant pointed out that developing nations spend "almost \$1 billion every day" for the military and interest on foreign debt, "two essentially unproductive activities." In the report, Grant wrote that education spending per pupil has declined by 25% in the 37 poorest countries in the past decade, and health spending has dropped in most of Africa and Latin America. If current trends continue, the report said, more than 100 million children will die needlessly in the next decade. Grant's report provided examples of remarkable progress in solving health problems that is possible in a short time if the political will to do so exists. For instance, 10 years ago, less than 10% of the children in the Third World were immunized; now almost 70% receive immunization, which saves about 2 million lives per year. Oral rehydration therapy for diarrheal disease victims is used by one of three families in the developing world, and saves about 1 million children a year. In the early 1980s, the technique was almost unknown outside scientific circles. The spread of polio immunization in the last decade has meant about 1.5 million children are healthy today, who otherwise would have been crippled. To mobilize the political will to resolve health problems in the 1990s, UNICEF is pushing a "World Summit for Children" to be held in September at UN headquarters in New York. Grant said more than 100 countries had endorsed a summit. (Basic data from AP, 12/12/89)

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