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UNICEF'S MOUNTING TROUBLES

(Updating *Backgrounder* No. 287, "UNICEF, Beware--Dangerous Shoals Ahead," August 30, 1983.)

UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, long has enjoyed a reputation as one of the most effective and professional United Nations agencies. Since its founding in 1946, UNICEF has made direct and dramatic contributions to improving the health and welfare of the world's children, through programs focusing on health and nutrition, support for clean water and improved sanitation, and educational and social services for children and mothers in developing countries.

A series of recent events, however, casts serious doubt on UNICEF's ability to perform its important mission. The most shocking of these events occurred in late June, when Jos Verbeek, the director of the Belgian Committee for UNICEF, was arrested and charged with running a child pornography ring based in the Committee's Brussels offices. Some 14 other individuals, including a UNICEF employee, have also been arrested in connection with the ring, which reportedly employed UNICEF's computers and facilities in its activities. The fact that United Nations officials, responsible for devising ways to protect the world's children, are believed to be involved deeply with child pornography is as tragic as it is ironic.

Delinquent Accounting. This scandal exacerbates existing doubts about the competence and integrity of UNICEF operations. These doubts were largely triggered by a September 1986 Report of the U.N.'s Board of Auditors after its extensive review of UNICEF's finances, administration, and management. The auditors discovered numerous instances of financial mismanagement, delinquent accounting, and failure to comply with both General Assembly and UNICEF regulations. Among their findings:

◆◆ "Two additional office buildings were acquired [by UNICEF in Niamey, Niger, and Port-au-Prince, Haiti] during the year at a cost of \$424,367, although no appropriation had been provided in either the original or the revised budget estimates for 1984-1985."

◆◆ "Our verification of repatriation grants and final settlements revealed that payments were made in the absence of an appropriate evidence of relocation, errors

were committed in the computation of the 80 per cent advance, and amounts were paid in excess of entitlements."

◆◆ "...although the [UNICEF] Administration had the opportunity to submit revised budget estimates for the acquisition of computer equipment at the April 1985 session of the Executive Board, it failed to do so and opted instead to effect transfers from other budget lines to cover the additional requirements."

◆◆ "Contrary to the provisions of General Assembly Resolution 1798 (XVII) of 11 December 1962, UNICEF authorized the payment of travel costs for some delegates to the 1985 session of the Executive Board."

In the U.N. context, these are very serious irregularities. They prompted Joseph Reed, then U.S. Ambassador to the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council, to warn that the United States "...is seriously concerned by the results of the audit of UNICEF's accounts for 1985." Reed added that "We agree with the view of the Advisory Committee that the responses of UNICEF officials to the issues raised by the Board were less than satisfactory, and that the UNICEF management had not attempted to deal with these matters in a serious manner." At a time when the U.S. is scrutinizing closely the U.N. budget procedures, UNICEF should take Reed's warning very seriously.

Avoiding Politicization. Questions have also been raised about the cozy connections between UNICEF officials and officials of the U.S. government, in particular State Department career officials. Many of these officials have had longstanding responsibility for U.S. policy toward such international organizations as UNICEF, and have been highly supportive of both increased U.S. funding for such organizations and the incumbent management. The fact that a number of these officials are now employed by UNICEF and other international organizations has prompted some in Congress to consider introducing legislation similar to the laws which currently apply to officials of the Department of Defense, prohibiting former State Department officials from serving in international organizations for which they recently have had policy responsibility.

UNICEF, unlike many other United Nations agencies, has for the most part avoided politicizing its important task, and has done its job with competence and dedication. If it is to retain its effectiveness, however, greater financial and budgetary accountability and increased management and personnel control are clearly necessary. As UNICEF itself would say, the children of the world deserve no less.

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