Press Release

A million children saved through vitamin A supplementation

12 February 2001: Almost a million child deaths have been averted since 1998 through the distribution of high-dose vitamin A capsules, the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF announced today at the XXth International Vitamin A Consultative Group meeting in Hanoi.

Noting the tremendous success of the campaign so far, UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy urged renewed global commitment to ensure children in countries prone to vitamin A deficiency are given supplements twice a year.

"It is unacceptable for any child to die as a result of deficiency in vitamin A, when a high-dose capsule costing about 2 cents, given twice a year, can provide adequate protection to a child," said Ms. Bellamy. "Our understanding of the role of micronutrients in child development has greatly increased over the last decade. We no longer have any excuse for lack of action."

Vitamin A is essential to the functioning of the body's immune system. Lack of it in the diet increases the severity of childhood ailments such as measles and diarrhoea. Research has shown that child deaths increase by about 20 per cent in population groups suffering from vitamin A deficiency, which is common in about 70 countries worldwide, most of them in Asia and Africa.

The dramatic progress is the result of a global partnership launched in 1997 between UNICEF, The World Health Organization, and the governments of a number of countries including Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom as well as national governments in countries where Vitamin A deficiency is a problem. It is in response to a call by world leaders at the 1990 World Summit for Children for the virtual elimination of vitamin A deficiency by the year 2000.

"Just five years ago, only six of the 72 countries with Vitamin A deficiency had adequate supplementation programmes," said Ms. Bellamy. "Today over 40 countries are reaching the majority of their children with at least one Vitamin A supplementation a year."

The UNICEF chief called on the partnership to develop appropriate strategies including fortifying basic foodstuffs, using child health days or any other health campaigns and programmes in addition to National Immunization Days, to deliver vitamin A to every child at risk.

Ms. Bellamy paid a special tribute to the government of Canada, which since 1998 has donated over a billion capsules to UNICEF through the Ottawa-based Micronutrient Initiative, supporting programmes in more than 60 countries.

The vitamin A campaign exemplifies the mass mobilization and broad partnerships needed to ensure that every child receives the best possible start in life – a key goal of the upcoming United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in September, 2001.

"We are calling on all governments and citizens of every nation, including families, communities, civil society organizations and the private sector to join in our Global Movement for Children to give every child a better future," said Ms. Bellamy.

Visit the Special Session pages.

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For further information, please contact:

Mohammad Jalloh, UNICEF Media, New York,
(212) 326 7516
mjalloh@unicef.org