

Winston-Salem Chronicle

Volume 1, Number 1

Special Supplement

June 16, 1994

DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD JUNE 16, 1994

Day of the African Child: An Overview

By Gwendolyn Calvert Baker

June 16 was declared the Day of the African Child (DAC) by the Organization of African Unity to commemorate the 1976 massacre of children in Soweto, South Africa. As the new president of the U.S. Committee for UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund), I am honored to join the

dedicated organizations and individuals who are bringing attention to the challenges and achievements of Africa.

Given this year's momentous developments in South Africa, the 1994 commemoration of the Day of the African Child takes on special meaning. We recently listened as F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela dedicated their Nobel Laureate speeches to the children of South Africa. And we watched as they reaffirmed their commitment to children by signing the *World*

NELSON MANDELA AND THE AFRICAN CHILD

An excerpt from his speech on the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize - Oslo, Norway, December 1993

At the southern tip of the continent of Africa, a rich reward is in the making, an invaluable gift is in the preparation, for those who suffered in the name of all humanity when they sacrificed everything—for liberty, peace, human dignity and human fulfillment. This reward will not be measured in money. Nor can it be reckoned in the collective price of the rare metals and precious stones that rest in the bowels of the African soil we tread in the footsteps of our ancestors.

It will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of the children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures. The children must, at last, play in the open veld, no longer tortured by the pangs of hunger or ravaged by disease or threatened with the scourge of ignorance, molestation and abuse, and no longer required to engage in deeds whose gravity exceeds the demands of their tender years.

In front of this distinguished audience, we commit the new South Africa to the relentless pursuit of the purposes defined in the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection, and Development of Children.

The reward of which we have spoken will and must also be measured by the happiness and welfare of the mothers and fathers of these children, who must walk the earth without fear of being robbed, killed for political or material profit, or spat upon because they are beggars. They too must be relieved of the heavy burden of despair which they carry in their hearts, born of hunger, homelessness and unemployment.



Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk sign the World Summit for Children Declaration for the Survival, Protection, and Development of Children. Looking on is Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt.

Summit Declaration and Plan of Action, joining more than 150 nations that have pledged to make children a priority and put an end to the malnutrition, illiteracy, widespread disease, and poor living conditions that many children face in the developing world. And now we celebrate the freedom from apartheid, oppression, and violence that the new South Africa has achieved.

Still, much needs to be done for the children of Africa. Although only one tenth of the world's child population lives in Africa, one third of the almost 13 million children who die every year are African. Great strides have been made in cutting the child mortality rate and improving access to education, health care, clean water, and sanitation. But other

problems such as the AIDS epidemic, the enormous external debt situation, and the civil conflicts that plague the continent are taking their toll.

African leaders themselves are committed to improving the lives of their children. More than 35 African nations have ratified the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, an international treaty that guarantees children the basic human rights of survival, protection, and development in all circumstances, including war. And in response to the 1990 World Summit for Children, over 30 African nations have now finalized National Programs of Action to achieve specific goals for the well-being of their children by the year 2000.

On a recent trip to Mozambique, I witnessed firsthand the commitment and dedication to children in that country. Mozambique only recently emerged from years of bloody civil war and now schools, maternity centers, and health training centers are being rebuilt, radio programs are spreading messages of health, safety, and education, and rural women are being taught new methods of food preparation, sewing, stove-making, and language skills. I am moved and encouraged by the hope and resiliency of Mozambique, and by what I saw UNICEF doing in that country to teach children the skills to rebuild their lives and nation. But Mozambique is just one of 51 African countries that, despite

limited access to resources and economic hardship, are prioritizing the needs of their children.

This year, the fourth commemoration of the Day of the African Child, we invite every American to celebrate the future of Africa's children. And in the United States, we see the Day as an extraordinary opportunity not only to advocate for an area of the world in great need, but also to foster cultural diversity and better understanding among children here and in Africa.

Gwendolyn Calvert Baker is the new president and chief executive officer of the U.S. Committee for UNICEF. She is the first African-American to hold this position.