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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO THE 100TH ROTARY INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION
Birmingham, 21 June 2009

Thank you, General Secretary Futa, for your kind introduction.

President Dong-kurn Lee, Foundation Trustee Chair Jonathan Majiyagbe, President-elect John Kenny, Foundation Trustee Chair-elect Glenn Estess Distinguished members and staff of Rotary International, Ladies and gentlemen,

What a wonderful gathering! I am moved by your hospitality. It is a great honour to be in this 100th Convention of Rotary International. I am also excited to be here in the great city of Birmingham. This is known the world over as the workshop of the world -- one of the cradles of the industrial revolution. Today, like so many cities, Birmingham is a green city, blending environmental practices with technologies of the future.

Looking around me, I see so many people from around the world, including my own country, Korea. I am a proud Korean – but I am also a global citizen. I know that all of you, too, may come from different countries but you share a common purpose: to make our world a better place, a more harmonious, more prosperous place.

Allow me to pay tribute to President Lee D.K. for his wise leadership of this organization over the past year.

Rotary International is like the United Nations in many ways. We are both taking action to confront global problems. We both believe in global social justice. And we are both committed to working together.

I have admired Rotary International since long before I became United Nations Secretary-General. You have played a remarkable role in my country for the past 80 years. President Lee, thank you for your contributions, especially for all that you have done to reduce infant mortality.

My appreciation for Rotary International has grown even deeper since I became Secretary-General.

Let me use a simple story to show you why.

Not long ago, a UNICEF colleague had just finished monitoring a polio campaign in Niger. She was feeling very tired and worn out. All she could think about was going home. But then, at the airport in Niamey, she saw a large group of people wearing the polio campaign colours and hats.

They were talking excitedly. Their energy was youthful though many looked of retirement age. My colleague realized these were Rotarians who had chosen to spend time in their golden years traveling to difficult places to help fight polio.

Suddenly, the woman from UNICEF felt uplifted. As she boarded the plane, she smiled and gave the Rotarians a thumbs-up. She wasn't feeling homesick anymore. Instead she felt privileged to be able to participate in this life-saving effort with these inspiring pioneers and volunteers.

Rotarians are in every country that supports polio eradication. Your financial and material contributions are critical, but even more important are your advocacy and your presence on the ground.

Many UN colleagues have told me how hard polio eradication work can be. They are far from home, with a hot wind blowing dust in their face. They are hungry after 10 hours of non-stop field work.

Yet just when they feel too tired to continue, they see a Rotarian at an immunization booth or at a rally, always with a smile on his or her face. As one UN staffer told me, "In that moment, you feel the moral force these Rotarians bring to the polio eradication effort, and you realize that they are the heart and soul of this initiative."

When Rotary International launched PolioPlus in 1985, more than 125 countries were still polio endemic, and at least a thousand children were paralyzed every day. Since then, you have led the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, side by side with the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

Millions of Rotarians have devoted endless volunteer hours in their quest to reach and vaccinate every child all over the world.

You have raised more than a quarter of a billion dollars.

You have met with everyone from village elders to presidents to get their support.

You have met with religious leaders to gain their confidence.

You have inspired business leaders to reach into their pockets and to speak up for this cause in the corridors of power.

And you have done all of this in the face of challenges that would have discouraged most other people: funding shortfalls, cultural barriers, lack of political will, even risks to your personal security.

In the face of such obstacles, you triumphed, and I thank you very much.

More than two billion children have been immunized. More than five million children who otherwise would have been paralyzed are walking. There are now only four countries that are still polio endemic. Rotary's vision of a polio-free world is in sharp focus.

I am with you in this great campaign. I have written to the political and religious leaders of each endemic country – Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan – urging them to protect their children and stop the virus wherever it survives.

Earlier this year, in February, my wife and I vaccinated children in India. I will never forget one baby, playfully touching her mother's beaming face as I administered the vaccine.

It was a moment of joy. But as you know all too well, there have also been terrible setbacks.

We were all outraged when three of our colleagues were killed last September while working for polio eradication in Afghanistan. To honour their heroic efforts, I will continue to call for Days of Tranquility this year in all areas where conflict is preventing access to children during polio eradication drives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now is the time to finish the job. I call on donor governments around the world to help us. Together, we can fulfill Rotary's vision and give future generations a polio-free world.

Distinguished Rotarians,

Friends,

At this time of global economic downturn, we face a crossroads. We face multiple crises.

We can cut back on health expenditures and incur massive losses in lives and capacity for growth. Or we can invest in health and spare both people and economies the high cost of inaction.

The choice should be clear. I need not remind you of the significant returns we see from investing in health. Healthy people have improved life expectancy, go to school,

are more productive, take fewer days off of work, have lower birth rates and thus invest more in fewer children.

Indeed, if we fail to meet our targets on health, we will never overcome poverty and illiteracy, or achieve universal education. Health binds the Millennium Development Goals together.

Nothing will better convince the world that we can succeed than completing the historic effort to eradicate polio. It is deeply encouraging to know that the United Nations family can count on you to continue doing your part.

Indeed, our partnership is a prime example of the “new multilateralism” I have been advocating to address today's global crises. One of the hallmarks of this new multilateralism is cooperation – not just among nation-states but among all stakeholders.

All partners must come together: philanthropic groups, non-governmental organizations, businesses, academics and concerned individuals such as you. At a time of spreading awareness of our common fate, we need a stronger sense of global solidarity.

Partnerships are the way forward. Rotary International has already made tremendous contributions. We need your support in other areas, too.

I hope you will consider bringing to other major global challenges the same creativity and commitment you have brought to the fight against polio. Climate change, hunger, lack of access to energy -- these problems have their greatest impact on the poor and vulnerable. They are areas where even small contributions can make a big difference. They are ripe for your engagement.

As Secretary-General of the United Nations, it is my responsibility to help those who are poor and most vulnerable in developing countries. Helping those poor and vulnerable people is a political and moral responsibility, and I need your support. So let us explore what more we can do together. Let us deepen our partnership.

With your support, we can build strong global coalitions. We can emerge from these multiple crises. And we can usher in a peaceful and sustainable future for all the world's people, for generations and generations to come.

I count on your leadership, your commitment and your support. The United Nations will continue to work with Rotary International to achieve the common goals and objectives which we have to deliver for future generations. I thank you again for the honour of addressing you.

Thank you.