

# James P Grant: A Man Driven by a Dream

by Shah AMS Kibria

THE United Nations has given rise to a new class of people, the international civil servants. Unlike the national civil servants who differ from country to country according to their own distinctive tradition and culture, the UN expects all its staff members, irrespective of rank, to maintain a certain standard of neutrality, efficiency and integrity. Commitment to the UN's principles and purposes is mandatory. These are tall orders for most people. My decade long association with the UN has taught me that the vast UN bureaucracy is a heterogeneous group of people drawn from different professions and backgrounds in different countries who not only bring their expertise and experience to the job but also their habits, outlook, work ethics and prejudices acquired in the cultural environment in which they grew up. James Grant was, however, one rare man I had the privilege to know who symbolized the spirit of the UN, who was truly a citizen of the world. For James Grant his own national identity seemed to mean very little. His commitment to the children of the world was total. Indeed he was perhaps one of the finest examples of an UN official who could transcend national boundaries in thought, outlook and action.

James Grant was the executive director of the UNICEF since 1980. His earlier career was equally distinguished but it was as the chief of UNICEF that the world has come to know him during the last fifteen years. He was a familiar figure in many parts of the world including Bangladesh. There was nothing remote or academic about the UNICEF programmes; these were, and I believe still are, practical, down to earth activities which directly contribute to the welfare of children and mothers. Programmes such as safe drinking water benefited

whole communities though Grant never lost sight of his central goal which was the children of the world. I had the impression, after I had known him for some years, that he did not make any distinction whether a child was white or black or rich or poor. The child represents the future of humanity and Grant made it his business to take care of them. He was no doubt an idealist but an idealist with a difference. He knew how to mobilize the support of the national leaders behind his programmes. The World Summit on Children was a clear proof.

I first met Grant in an inter-agency meeting presided over by the secretary-general of the UN. His accent was American but his concerns were global. Even in the presence of the big UN chief he did not mince his words. He spoke up for his constituents who were the little children around the world. In speaking about their problems his voice did not betray any condescension. I sensed only genuine concern and love. I was so impressed by the man that I went out of my way to get to know him better. Later I initiated in ESCAP a special programme in cooperation with UNICEF and WHO to integrate health planning as a part of national economic planning. While others in the UN system were busy with the cold war or peace keeping or global recession or poverty alleviation, James Grant looked at all these issues from the point of view of the children and their welfare.

I remember, for example, his concern about the economic adjustment programmes of the middle eighties which were dictated by the World Bank and the IMF. This was really a code word for slashing of expenditure on social programmes. A somewhat

philosophical debate on the nature, extent and modalities of these economic adjustment and reform programmes became a central concern for many governments. James Grant realized that in the name of adjustment the social sector was being starved of resources. In order to find an answer to the problem he brought together a group of people for a two-day brainstorming session in Bangkok to which I was invited. The term "adjustment with a human face" was popularized at that meeting. It was recognized that cutting down expenditure on the social sector will not only de-humanize the process of economic recovery but it may also cause long-term harm to the development process itself.

I remember my meeting with him in Bangkok, in the late eighties, upon his return from China. He was deeply disturbed that the break-up of the communes under the reform measures initiated by Deng Xiaoping had removed the protective cover that the poor enjoyed under the old system. He was certainly no lover of communism but he was keen to ensure that alternative measures would be taken to provide the social services that the communes had earlier provided, however, inefficiently. Of course he understood China better than most Westerners not only because he was born there but because he looked upon the Chinese neither as communists nor as capitalist-roaders nor as inscrutable oriental but as ordinary people. He could share their concerns as he could share the concerns of other poor countries effortlessly. As a matter of fact, this is perhaps the greatest secret of his success as the UNICEF chief.

James Grant was so impressed by the oral re-hydration technique developed by the Cholera Research Centre



Photo: Joe Rubino

## In Remembrance of James P Grant

by Munzur-i-Mowla

One had seen you here only the other day  
 here in this land  
 where children abound like drops of rain  
 seen in you in a room with a big hole  
 on its mud wall

Wind had an access to the room,  
 so had the birds  
 and also the moon  
 looking as it did like the brass bell of the school  
 You made no mistake and went in too  
 — what light steps! what a clear sight! —  
 no different from the drop of rain  
 or the shaft of sun  
 that went in before you  
 and that followed you

You looked at the children and  
 asked on to give you her book  
 You whispered in the ears of the child  
 And she whispered back  
 The child smiled and you laughed  
 And then everyone  
 with no exception  
 burst into laughter

Before this new language grew and took a definite shape  
 a language which was only yours  
 and only of the children of the world  
 a language which only you spoke  
 and they did

Why did you have to disappear  
 all on a sudden  
 like a naughty child  
 dropping out from school?

(The poem is inspired by the photograph on the right)

## UN System's Moving Spirit

by Mahfuz Anam

WE have always been told that we, in Bangladesh, were too poor to take care of our children. James P Grant visited us and told us that we were too poor NOT to take care of our children. It was my privilege to interview him twice for my paper. During these two close encounters I was amazed by his empathy for the children of my country. He would speak with such sincerity, earnestness and depth of feeling that there was no way that one could not but be touched by his message. As I would listen to him answering my questions, I would imagine that he would be speaking with the same passion about the children of the next country he would visit, and the next, and the next. In each case he would speak, not as an outsider but as someone who belonged there. It was his capacity to become one's own, to assume the nationality of the country he would visit, and speak as one of us, that made James P Grant the great international civil servant that he was.

He was great friend of Bangladesh. Today I pay tribute to him for what he did for our children, and for the people of my country.

James P Grant was, in my view, the finest of what the ideals of the United Nations, are supposed to represent.

In the UN stands for international cooperation, then nobody can claim to have achieved greater success in bringing the international community to focus on the issue of the child than Mr Grant.

If the UN stands for cultures of the world coming together in a magnificent celebration of unity among diversity, then nothing, absolutely nothing, represents it more strikingly than the work of Unicef under Grant — how practically all the cultures wholeheartedly took up the cause of children.

If the UN stands for making governments of the world work together for a common good, then again it was Grant's Unicef which did the best to bring in governments of the most diverse types and outlooks to work together in bringing the cause of children at the centre stage of the global development debate.

To the extent that Mr Grant was able to

bring the leaders of the world together to adopt a most comprehensive and detailed Convention on the Rights of the Child, he proved to be an astute politician, a gifted negotiator and a most disarming persuader that the world sees only rarely.

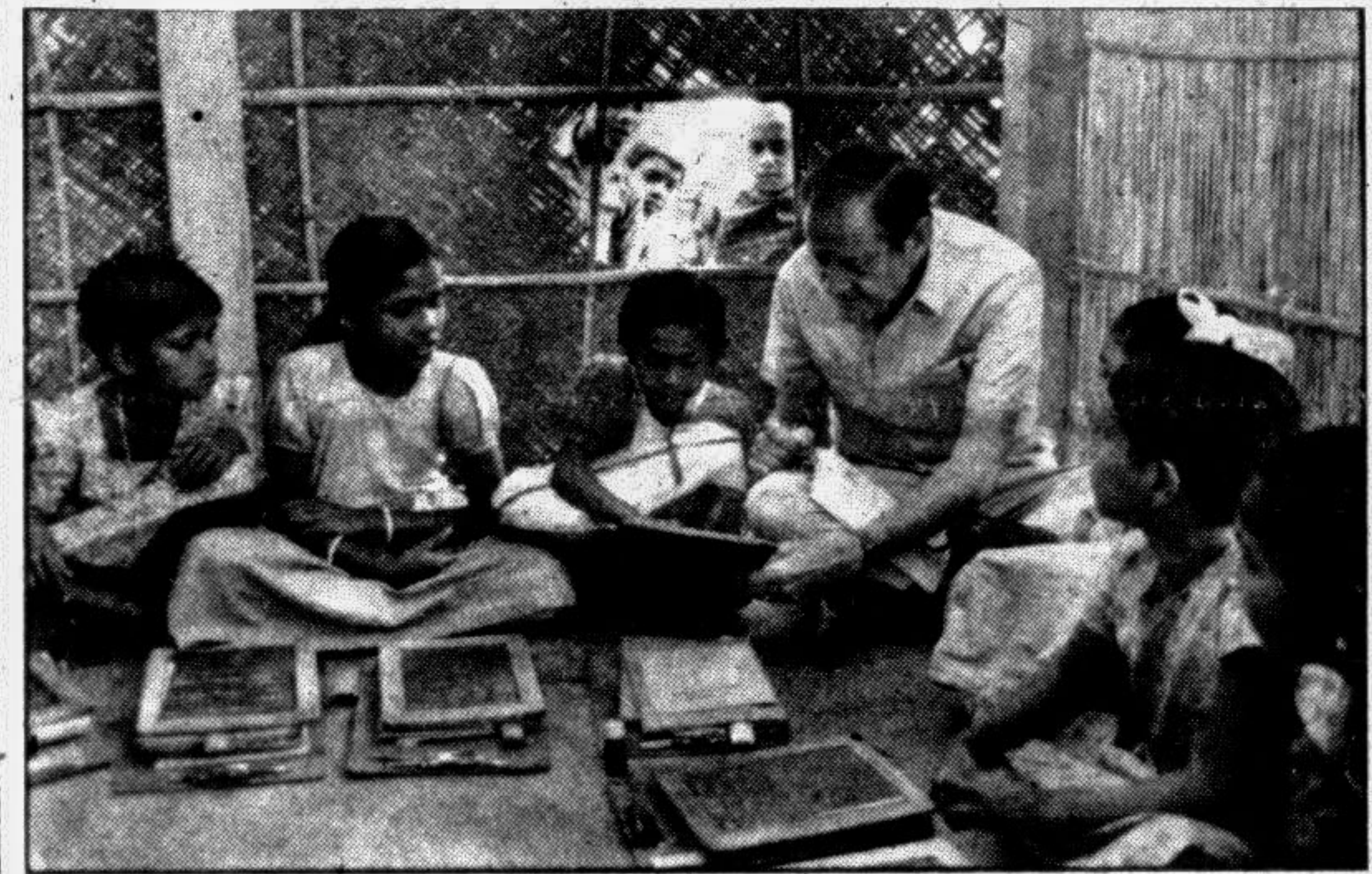
However, to the extent that the leaders of the world not only signed the Convention, but also agreed to prepare national action plans, and submit to periodic evaluation of progress made, showed that Mr Grant did not leave things at the level of ideas but forced their implementation at the ground level. Thus James P Grant epitomised the "Dreamer and the Doer" in a manner that can be found only in great leaders of mankind.

His most magnificent achievement, in my view, was his uncanny ability to link the most grandiose global to the most mundane personal. Thus in his dexterous hands principles found expressions in projects, and projects translated themselves into services that people could touch, feel and be better off for. He gave concepts like "Right to Life" a practical meaning through immunisation campaign and by others such the drive to eliminate iodine deficiency, to reach oral rehydration therapy to remote households, etc.

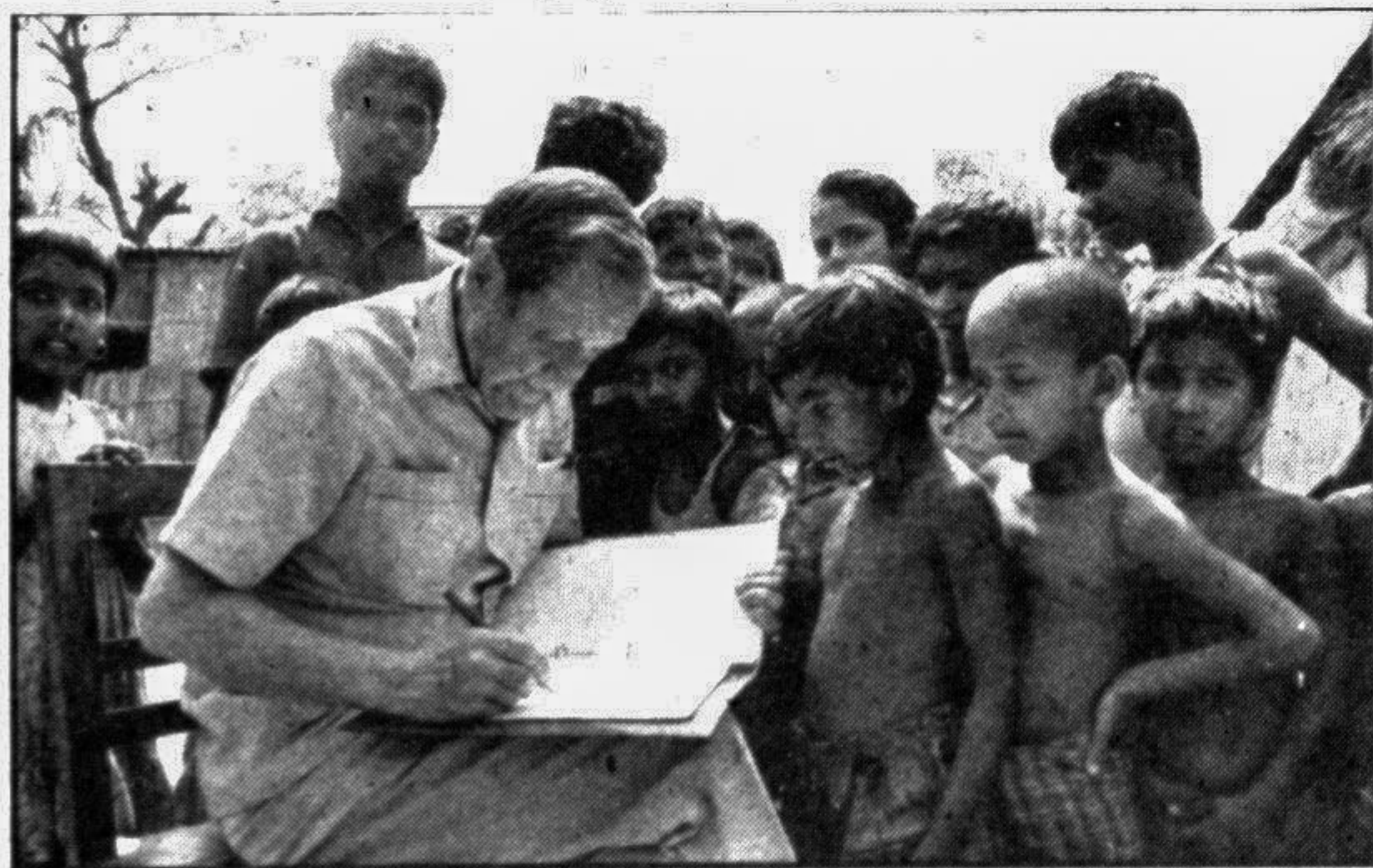
It was the moral message of James P Grant that shook the very conscience of the international community. The innocent, the vulnerable, the frail, and, at the same time, the potential, the creator, and the builder — in one word the future — that a child is what James Grant drew our attention to, and goaded, cajoled and drove us to take action for.

In the magnificence of his vision, expanse of his dreams, depth of his commitment, strength of his resolve, the beauty of his compassion and the gentility of his person, James P Grant stands in my eyes as the finest that the ideals of the United Nations have so far produced. He was, and remains, to me to be the "Moving Spirit of the UN System".

JAMES P GRANT IS NO MORE  
 JAMES P GRANT IS, THEREFORE, ALL THE MORE.



Sitting on the floor amidst girl students, James Grant visits a classroom of a non-formal BRAC school, outside Dhaka. —Photo: Shehzad Noorani



Surrounded by children, James Grant signs the guest book of a non-formal school created by BRAC, outside Dhaka. —Photo: Shehzad Noorani

## A Bit of James Grant in Many a Child in Bangladesh

by Fazle Hasan Abed

FEW people in history through their vision have changed the destiny of humankind and through their actions have transformed the quality of life on this planet. Fewer yet became legend in their own life time. James P Grant, in whose memory we are gathered here today, was undoubtedly such a man.

In a life dedicated to others Jim Grant's achievements both at home and abroad have been manifold. For the last decade and a half, he not only infused a new life and vigor into UNICEF but also profoundly influenced the thoughts and actions of those around the world who had the good fortune of being associated with him. For us he has been a colossus straddling the globe bringing the message of hope and cheer for the sick, the helpless and the disadvantaged.

Jim Grant was a simple man with simple ideas. All great ideas, in order to be understood and accepted by a generation of men and women, must be simple in essence. Jim Grant believed that the children of today are the future of humankind. He, therefore, devoted much of his life and energy to ensure not only their survival but also their growing up in a congenial and healthy environment. We owe it to his efforts that the immunization level in the developing world has risen from a mere 20 per cent in 1980 to 80 per cent today. We owe it to his support and encouragement for the Oral Rehydration Therapy that at least 1 million lives are saved every year. We owe it to his leadership and commitment that two and a half million fewer children die every year.

Jim abhorred the obscenity of 40,000 child deaths a day in the developing world, avoidable he rightly believed, with the available tech-

nologies. "Morality must march with capacity", he used to remind us often. That capacity, he was able to demonstrate in his life time, exists in the packet of ORS he used to carry with him or a simple salt testing gadget that he would pull out from his pocket at a state dinner in a developing country or the growth card, measuring nutrition, that he would use in a field visit in Bangladesh. Jim Grant showed that we can establish goals seemingly impossible, yet through dedication and hard work see them reached.

I have traversed thousands of miles to participate in paying tribute to a man who has, all these years, meant so much to so many of us in BRAC. In our endeavour to make life better for our people in Bangladesh, we have always felt that we are translating some of his ideas into action, that we are an extension of his vision. Each time he visited Bangladesh Jim Grant made it a point to see us and we in BRAC always found his presence inspiring and his dedication to hard work contagious. It is only a year ago that he was with us in a village visiting BRAC's rural programmes, and as I pay tribute to this giant of a man, I can see him in my mind's eye, sitting with an ease on the floor of a BRAC school in a remote hamlet of Bangladesh, surrounded by little children, as if he always belonged there. And in so many ways, I dare say, he does. There will be a bit of Jim Grant in many a child in Bangladesh that grows up healthy and learns to read and write. In that sense Jim Grant will live on in our minds and hearts and will continue to inspire us in our future endeavours. Thank you!

The author is attending the special memorial service being held, today in New York, when he delivered this speech.

JAMES P Grant, Jim Grant, is no more. Or perhaps I should say that Jim Grant is no more in the body. In Tibetan language the word for 'body' is 'lu' which means something you leave behind, like baggage. Jim Grant has now left his physical body.

But Jim's spirit lives on in a magnificent body of lasting achievements and a compelling vision of a better world for children.

What a full life Jim's was, until the very end! Even as his own body began to weaken, Jim, in his inimitable, utterly committed way, ignoring his own physical fragility, strove on, in fact redoubled his efforts, to make life, health and dignity for children everywhere better.

Seldom in history, has one person made such an immensely positive impact on the lives of so many in such a short time. In the 15 years that Jim was at the helm of UNICEF

• he took the issues of children and women out of the realm of charity and sentimentality and brought them into the realm of rights;

• he helped put children high on the political agenda of virtually every country;

• he showed that, with clear goals, commitment and social mobilization, we can achieve miracles — causing millions of young lives to be saved, wars to be stopped, human potential to be developed;

• he enriched development theory by cogently arguing that the vital, vulnerable years of childhood should be given a first call on societies' concerns and capacities; and that this commitment should be maintained in good times and in bad.

Because, as he put it, "a child has only one chance to develop, and the protection of that one chance therefore demands the kind of commitment that will not be superseded by

## While Mourning His Death, Let Us Celebrate His Life and Legacy

by Rolf C Carriere

other priorities. There will always be something more immediate; there will never be anything more important"

Many called him an idealist, an optimist, a dreamer. He was. But he was also a realist, a pragmatist, a doer. Some ridiculed the way in which he, persistently and unapologetically, would take out an ORS packet from his pocket, or his iodine testing kit, to tangibly make his point to a minister or a president, to an NGO leader or a hotel manager. Jim Grant was truly an international civil servant of the rarest kind. His life was one long service, one dedicated 'seva'.

It must often have been lonely at the top, even when surrounded by colleagues and advisors. Jim's vision of what can be achieved NOW was not always shared by everyone, not even by all his colleagues. But the many risks he took were all worth taking, they were part of the mission he had set for himself.

Jim Grant recently wrote that serving as UNICEF Executive Director had been the greatest privilege of his life. Likewise it has been the greatest privilege for me to serve under this inspiring and visionary leader.

He was a most persuasive, articulate, and above all courageous advocate for the needs and rights of children, often using unusually strong language for a UN official. For example, speaking about the persistence of some 30,000 young children dying each day from readily preventable causes, he asked the spiritual leaders of the world: "Why is there not more moral outrage at this obscene daily harvest of

our youngest and most vulnerable? And why aren't religious movements more active towards alleviating this obscene result?"

At another occasion, decrying the fact that in the wars of the last decade far more children than soldiers have been killed and disabled, he questioned the moral tenability of unlimited sovereignty. He said: "We must mobilize to bring to an end the idea that governments can carry on wars in whatever way they choose, or do whatever they want to their own people... Outside pressure or humanitarian intervention may at times be necessary; the international community appears to be moving toward limiting sovereignty in specific circumstances where combatants lack humanitarian aid to people desperately in need of help"

Jim knew how much we all prefer to ignore, and even deny, the true state of the world and the real situation of the world's children. He also saw how much we close our eyes to our own role and responsibility in creating that state of affairs. That's why Jim repeated his repetitions, with ever greater eloquence and urgency. "The time has come to banish in shame the notion that the world can not afford to meet the most obvious and basic needs of all its children. The present neglect is a scandal of which the public is largely unaware."

Jim understood that an idea whose time has come doesn't just happen. Individuals make it happen. Individuals, many of them, in alignment, in concert, create an idea whose time has come. Jim led that

global concert for children. The 13 issues of the annual State of the World's Children Report are all variations on the theme that the "silent emergency", the daily tragedy of millions of children caught in the downward spiral of poverty, social disintegration and environmental degradation CAN be ended, IF we put our minds, hearts and resources to it, many individuals together, creating a movement, a revolution for child survival and development. And since it CAN be done, it SHOULD be done! That was Jim's moral stance.

Through his well-crafted speeches, on which he himself laboured meticulously until the moment of delivery, through his policy papers and reports, he articulated and founded the moral basis of our work, a new ethos and a new ethic for children, as one cornerstone of the emerging new world order. This culminated in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, a Bill of Rights for all the world's children, a code a binding obligations for governments, and a minimum standard of responsible conduct for communities and families with respect to the young. This Convention, now almost universally ratified, stands as a lasting living memorial to Jim Grant's vision and mission, to guide us all at the beginning of the new millennium.

Jim took an intense personal interest in the details of field work, and he also had a special place in his heart for some countries, Bangladesh among them. During my last meeting with him, in November in New York, he queried me in his office for almost half

an hour about progress in the salt iodation programme in Bangladesh. It was already late 8.30 in the evening, with several others waiting outside for their turn. Jim hadn't had dinner yet, looked drawn, pale and shrunk, with big eyes. "Do the possible NOW", he urged. "There is no excuse for delay. Think of the daily IQ loss, loss of productivity, loss in human potential. Find out what the obstacles are, and get all 260 salt manufacturers to iodate all edible salt before December 1995. If we can be successful in Bangladesh, we can be successful everywhere. Let me know if there is anything I can do from here", he said. Total interest in his own discomfort. Total dedication. Total support. But also uncompromising in demanding that we hold ourselves to the highest standards. An extraordinary leader. A superb role model.

For many programme areas, Jim regarded Bangladesh as a pioneer, a test case, and he often referred to this country's remarkable achievements in immunization, non-formal education, rural water supply, family welfare and rural credit for women. He fervently hoped that Bangladesh would achieve the goals for children it has set for itself for the end of 1995, en route to the goals for the year 2000. Nothing was more important to him, in the final year of his life, than for all countries to achieve these World Summit goals. Jim deeply believed that these goals are all milestones on the critical path towards population stability, sustainable human development and fulfillment of human rights. That was his last message. In the 1995 State of the World's Children Report. He called it the "unfinished business of the 20th century". Completing that unfinished business would be the greatest tribute to Jim's memory. We owe that to the children, and we also owe that to him.

Continued on page 12