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AGAINST EVIL – IN THE NAME OF GOOD
Address to the 57th Conference of UN-associated NGOs

Dear colleagues!

These are the days when Russia is burying her children who have fallen innocent victims to terror. We have got used to burying grown-up men and women, though we cannot stop being horrified. This time terror has come to a school. A little bit more, and it will come to a baby's cradle.

People in the civil society in Russia, as well as people in the government are asking: What's to be done? – and are unable to come up with an answer.

In 1989, in this very auditorium I was lucky enough to participate in the signing of the Convention on Children's Rights. Delegations from all over the world adopting the Convention were overwhelmed with hope. On that very day there was a reception at the topmost floor of one of the twin-towers. There I met the beautiful Audrey Hepburn, UNICEF's Goodwill Ambassador. Now when I happen to be in New York, I come to the pit, where the twins used to tower, and I'm looking at an empty space in the sky, trying to figure out the place where I was once standing, talking to Ms. Hepburn about children's future, and a little sinfully I'm thinking to myself: "Perhaps it's been a good thing that this kind woman didn't live long enough to see the gaping emptiness and to learn how terror had pulverized the towers together with thousands of innocent adults and has become a force that kills kids."

So, what's to be done? That is the question asked by the Russians and Ossetians standing by the graves of their sons and daughters, asked by Americans, Spaniards, Israelis – and all those who had had a personal feel of the grip of terror.

There is no articulate answer, though the words are plenty. It goes without saying that steps are being taken. Security is tightened. We are getting more suspicious, casting paranoid glances at a pregnant woman – what if she's hiding explosives under her dress? The world is getting no kinder, it's getting more merciless, and that mercilessness is inherited by our children who transform it in their own ways. Merciless adults cannot leave benevolent children behind them.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a classic of Russian literature noted back in the 19th century that no matter how noble a cause might be it is not worth even a single teardrop of a child. Today, a century and a half later, humanity seems to have had little change, if children's tears, especially those of other people's kids living in a distant land remain an abstraction and do not touch people's hearts.

The civil society in Russia, as in any other country is a multi-faceted one. There are people who get united within organizations not unlike our Russian Children's Foundation. But there are many more million people not united by anything. This mass of people has its own opinion, energy and inertia and acts under circumstances.

It shrank, often in an aggressive way, mistrustful of everyone. Human openness is disappearing. These are harsh words, but many have turned into nonentities.

The most vivid example of that low-key shrinking is that fact that the number of children in Russia dropped by 10 million from 1991 to 2004. There are 30 million left instead of 40.

There is a statistical explanation to that, but we think that people stopped having kids because they are scared about the future of their unborn children. Our opinion is also confirmed by the pitiful fact that there are 709 thousand orphans in Russia deserted by their parents. After World War II we had 678 thousand of them, but that was a war. Those dreadful figures are a direct result of pauperisation. In 2003, 50.7% of families, that is a half of all the families, were families with kids living below the poverty line.

Russia has been plagued by narcotics: 20% out of 3 million drug addicts (according to data from public organizations) are schoolchildren. The number of HIV-positive and those with AIDS has risen to 271 thousand since 1987. According to statistics there are 4 thousand homeless children, however public organizations think there are about 1 million unattended children, however, that does not mean they are homeless.

UNICEF reports on the situation of children in the world, as well as its social monitorings give a reliable account of the status of children in the former Soviet Union. However, perhaps out of political correctness they say nothing about the spiritual reason behind the degradation of the children's world. Which is the moral degradation of their parents, their economic weakness, professional inadequacy and a feeling of being defeated in life.

There are over 400 thousand public organizations in Russia, but the legislation does not facilitate their work. For example, a child receiving financial assistance from us, regardless of the age, has to pay an income tax to the state. Very often we find ourselves in legislatively absurd situations.

It is not seldom that our President speaks about the civil society. Different conferences take place. There are attempts at managing public organizations. But all of them occur in an administrative not a notional level.

Our Foundation has been in existence for 17 years. Over those years we have raised funds and provided assistance to children to the tune of 170 million dollars. This is the highest result in the country.

Our "Family Orphanages" program aimed at orphans was personally supported by the President on more than one occasion. However, bureaucrats from the Ministry of Education stand in the way of that program. It's a paradoxical situation, when the President is in favor and bureaucrats resist.

Among our programs are operations on children's hearts. Many of the kids were operated on in the United States free of charge, and we are very grateful to our American partners – because here we have virtually saved 550 kids from death. Now the project has been relocated to Russia.

Together with the spouse of our President we have provided assistance to all the babies living in babies' homes at female correctional facilities in Russia. We also work in Chechnya and brought to Moscow hospitals for treatment 500 sick kids, including those who had been wounded there.

I've started with speaking about kids' deaths at the hands of terrorists. With the fact that a lot of people feel very much depressed and we know no answer to the question – what's to be done.

I hope that the only answer lies in people uniting with one another. The future lies not with suspicion of one man towards another.

As for NGOs, I can only thank the United Nations for having united us.