

Making a Child's Life Better in Every Corner

By TANYA MOHN

THE United States Fund for Unicef is one of 37 national committees around the world that support the work of the United Nations Children's Fund, an international development relief organization that provides vaccines, health care, nutrition, water, education, child protection and emergency response in more than 150 countries and territories.

The U.S. Fund raised an estimated \$442 million in private contributions in its last fiscal year, well over the previous year. It was a challenge in a tough economic climate, when many nonprofit groups had difficulty reaching their goals, said Caryl M. Stern, who joined the U.S. Fund in 2006 and became the president and chief executive in June 2007 after 18 years at the Anti-Defamation League.

It was a year of crises — from earthquakes in China and Peru to flooding in Mozambique, to conflicts in Darfur and Haiti and water and food shortages in many countries. Below are excerpts from an interview with Ms. Stern in the aftermath of the cyclone in Myanmar and the earthquake in China.

Q. What is the advantage to giving to Unicef?

A. In the first hours after an emergency, governments are looking to Unicef to take the lead. No other child-focused group has that access. Unicef is part of the United Nations. We have been present in Myanmar since 1950, and the emergency response was operational immediately after the cyclone hit. We were working in Sichuan Province in China before the earthquake. Also, Unicef works in partnership and finances many local grass-roots organizations in countries around the world.

Q. After crises, there is such urgency about contributing money quickly and online. Why?



DAVID FORBES

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A. It's not enough to get America to write that check. We've got to get that check in the system, we've got to be able to bank it, we've got to clear it and get it to where it's got to go. If you make a donation on your credit card online, it transfers so much faster. Within 24 hours, that money can be actionable on the ground. Supplies like sheeting, water purification tablets and medical supplies can't be ordered if there is no money.

When the tsunami hit, all you heard

about is the rising death toll. But not one preventable child death occurred in the first 48 to 72 hours afterward, which is usually when we see the spread of diseases like diarrhea, malaria and cholera.

Q. When Unicef was created over 60 years ago, there weren't as many organizations doing similar work. Is there more competition for funds now?

A. There are roughly two million nonprofits in the United States, but only 3 per-

cent of America's philanthropy goes to international causes.

You often hear: "Why should I give to children there? Children here need money, too." But the poorest child in the United States has a tenfold advantage over a child in a developing nation. Here there's a welfare system. Education is a right, not a privilege.

Take a child in the bush in Africa or even in an almost middle-income nation like Vietnam, where there is a limited social welfare structure and birth registry. Nobody even knows you exist. Your parents die of AIDS, you could be 8 years old. There isn't a social worker that's going to come to see you. Your childhood is gone. And on top of that, there's trafficking of children. There's the drug trade.

When I went to Darfur last year, I did not meet a single woman who had not been raped. Not one. But I didn't realize that it was happening to girls 8, 9 and 10 years old and younger in some cases.

Q. *Is much national attention given to the state of the world's children?*

A. No, not enough. We as Americans have not made it a priority. For the first time since the U.N. began recording statistics, the number of children who died

from preventable causes dropped below 10 million. This year it was 9.7 million. It was 20 million in the 1980s.

On the one hand, that's cause for celebration. It's a serious reduction. But every day, 26,000 children die of preventable causes; 5,000 are due to lack of access to clean, healthy water. This is not the heart fund, the cancer fund, where maybe we'll find a cure. We're dealing with things we know how to solve but we don't have the resources or the political power to be able to.

Q. *Do most people know what Unicef does?*

A. We did our brand study and we found that we were way up there in brand recognition. Americans trust us and they know that we have trick-or-treat boxes. But nobody really knows what we are after that. That's part of what we're trying to change. We're using YouTube, Facebook and MySpace. We're going to hit you where you are. We're not going to make you come to us.

Q. *Is Trick-or-Treat for Unicef still an effective fund-raising campaign?*

A. It's been stagnant for the past couple of years. One reason is because you don't have as many kids going door to door.

And we used to be the only thing kids fund-raised for.

We also changed our volunteer structure in the past 10 years. So our prominence in some communities fell off. But you are going to see some changes in the fall. We'll be making use of virtual trick-or-treat boxes. We'll be partnering with Major League Soccer's youth clubs to be trick-or-treaters this year in addition to going through the schools.

We're also going to make trick-or-treat not just about kids. This year, there will be a program on some college campuses. I hope to entice one of the major banks so that you'll have the opportunity to donate right at your A.T.M. machine. On Halloween day, it will say, "Trick-or-treat for Unicef?"

Q. *What's made the most lasting impression on you?*

A. I am awed by the sheer tenacity of the human spirit. What we want for our children is universal. It doesn't matter what country you're in, when a baby is born, whether it's in a displaced persons camp, in the bush, in the city, in the ghetto. Everybody celebrates. There's hope that that child's life is going to be better than the one that preceded it.