

Audrey Hepburn at the National Press Club, April 7, 1989



Audrey Hepburn, April 7, 1989. Photo by Stan Jennings. National Press Club Archives

Audrey Hepburn (1929-1993), Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF, spoke at a National Press Club luncheon a few days before journeying to Sudan, where she publicized the organization's attempt to distribute food, medicine, and supplies to more than two million people in the southern portion of that war-torn country before the rainy season made conditions impossible for relief efforts to operate. UNICEF's director, James P. Grant, had negotiated an unprecedented agreement with government and guerrilla forces to allow aid workers safe corridors through which to transport materials. Hepburn's role was to act as a witness to the effort, named Operation Lifeline Sudan, and thereby attract the press's attention to the plight of children in danger, a cause to which she dedicated herself during the last five years of her life. In her talk to the Press Club, she urged reporters to focus on the Sudan. A day earlier, she appealed to a House appropriations subcommittee to take action to help relieve the mounting third world debt problem, arguing that children, the principle victims, "are too fragile to wait until the economic crisis is past."

The voyage to the Sudan was Hepburn's sixth since she joined UNICEF in 1988, a decision motivated in part by the deprivations she herself had suffered as a child in occupied Holland during World War II. Her uncle was executed by Nazi troops. Her brother was sent to a forced labor factory in Berlin. Hepburn, who aided the Dutch resistance as a courier, had only a limited food supply during the last six months of the war. In the postwar period, she benefited from UNICEF's precursor relief organization.

Driven, as she said, "by the need to work," Hepburn trained in ballet, modeled, danced in British musicals, and played bit and supporting roles in British films. The French author Colette, observing her by chance at a film shoot in Monte Carlo, recognized Hepburn as the embodiment of her fictional creation "Gigi" and insisted she star in the upcoming Broadway play based on her novel. Hepburn's surprising success

led to her first leading role in a motion picture, *Roman Holiday*, for which she received the Academy Award in 1954. A few days later, she won a Tony award for her performance as a water nymph in the play *Ondine*. She starred in fifteen more films before going into semi-retirement in 1966 when her first child entered school. Once her children were grown, Hepburn began her work with UNICEF.

The fan magazine *Photoplay* called Hepburn “the most phenomenal thing that’s happened to the film capital since Marilyn Monroe.” The typical Audrey Hepburn part presented in a single character the melding of two very different worlds, often involving role playing and transformations that merged innocence with worldliness. She turned from naïve school girl to knowing courtesan in *Gigi*; princess to feigned runaway in *Roman Holiday*; chauffeur’s daughter to chic sophisticate in *Sabrina*; bohemian bookworm to fashion model in *Funny Face*; hillbilly to female gigolo in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*; and cockney flower seller to fake aristocrat in *My Fair Lady*.

Feminist critics have valued Hepburn’s film portrayals as providing a welcome alternative female role model to the dominant sultry siren of the 1950s. The average girl could identify more easily with Hepburn’s appealing physical features—wide elfin smile, boyish skinny frame, large doe eyes—and a personality that conveyed intelligent curiosity, exuberant impetuosity, delicacy combined with strength, and authenticity that often emerged behind a knowingly false facade. “She came along in the age of the sex bomb – the Monroes, the Mansfields – and blew most of them away,” a *New York Times* editorial remembered at the time of her passing.

Hepburn often expressed surprise at her remarkable rise to fame. “I never considered myself as having much talent or looks or anything else,” she remarked. “I fell into my career. I was unknown, insecure, inexperienced and skinny.” A few weeks before the Press Club talk, she exclaimed, “My success – it still bewilders me.” Yet she understood that audiences liked to identify with her. She told one interviewer, “People have recognized something in me they have themselves—the need to receive affection and the need to give it.” She put this quality to effect as ambassador for UNICEF.

As in her films, Hepburn’s role with UNICEF involved links between two worlds. She traveled to Ethiopia, Turkey, South America, Central America, Sudan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Somalia to call attention to UNICEF programs in those areas and to raise consciousness in wealthier nations that endemic poverty resulting from international economic trends and social injustice could be remedied. While some cynics in the press dubbed her “Mother Teresa in designer jeans,” Hepburn’s speeches, which she wrote herself, displayed a sincere and passionate commitment to UNICEF’s goals.

UNICEF, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965, was established in December 1946 by a UN General Assembly resolution as a provisional organization to help feed, clothe, and shelter children in postwar emergency situations. In 1953, the UN made UNICEF a permanent organization to help children regardless of emergency conditions. During the 1970s, UNICEF’s mission shifted to a “basic services approach” of training community members to address basic needs and instruct in preventive health care. Two

months prior to Hepburn's Press Club talk, the UNICEF document "Strategies for Children in the 1990s," signaled a shift to an approach marked by quantifiable goals to be sought by the end of the century.

Hepburn's Press Club talk reflected UNICEF's new agenda. She focused on UNICEF's vaccination program to halt rising death rates from childhood diseases; the distribution of vitamin A capsules to forestall blindness caused by malnutrition; controlling population growth through family planning; preventing death from dehydration caused by diarrhea; and mobilizing support for children's rights. Hepburn emphasized the need for nations to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 1990, this became an internationally binding treaty that recognized children as having legal rights as individuals and additional rights pertaining to the "special care and assistance" required by children. All UN member states, with the exception of the U.S., have ratified the document. While the U.S. has signed the Convention and ratified two optional protocols, no president has submitted the treaty to the Senate for ratification.

Operation Lifeline Sudan succeeded in delivering 88 percent of its relief supplies by October 1989. Although the Lifeline has continued, the Sudanese government's repeated interference in its relief efforts has led to large-scale famines. Audrey Hepburn's last mission for UNICEF was to Somalia, a country without a working government and engulfed in drought, famine, and civil war. "I saw more suffering in Somalia than in Europe during the Second World War," she told reporters. Although she herself had fallen ill from what later was diagnosed as colon cancer, Hepburn focused world attention on the tragedy, saying, "I don't believe in collective guilt. But I do believe in collective responsibility. Somalia is our responsibility."

UNICEF official Christa Roth speculated that Hepburn's efforts might have prompted the UN's "Operation Restore Hope" in December 1992, in which U.S.-led military forces provided security for the distribution of humanitarian assistance in Somalia. The operation marked the first time the UN had sanctioned a military intervention into a country without first securing its agreement. Four months following her trip to Somalia, Audrey Hepburn died of colon cancer.

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