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UNICEF Scales Back, May Exit Russia

By Jonathan Earle

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Children playing doctor in a UNICEF-sponsored preschool in the Karelian town of Sortavala.

UNICEF, the United Nations children's agency, is cutting back its presence on the ground in Russia and might even exit the country, a development experts described as a significant blow to children's welfare.

The decision reflects a failure to negotiate a new operating agreement with the Kremlin, which is increasingly eager for Russia to be regarded as a donor country rather than a recipient of aid.

A UNICEF spokesman told The Moscow Times on Wednesday that negotiations were ongoing about a "new form of partnership," but it was unclear which of the agency's activities — research on children's issues, spreading best practices or funding projects — would continue under any new arrangement.

The former head of UNICEF in Russia, Bertrand Bainvel, left Sunday for a new posting in Myanmar, two people close to the organization said.

UNICEF, which has operated in Russia since 1997, has 12 staff members in Moscow, most of whom are applying for other positions in Russia and within UNICEF globally, regional spokesman John Budd said in e-mailed comments Wednesday.

The move by UNICEF does not appear to be linked to the departure of the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, which ceased operations in Russia on Monday after the Kremlin accused it of using grants to meddle in politics.

Former partners and people close to UNICEF said that the scaling down of the organization's operations would be detrimental to child welfare and that the government's willingness to see UNICEF activities decrease was peculiar given its focus on children's issues.

"I think it's a shame and a major political mistake," Alexei Golovan, a former children's ombudsman and current member of the presidential human rights council, said by telephone Wednesday.

Golovan said UNICEF provided valuable research as well as information about best practices and guidance for improving policy on childhood poverty and the treatment of orphans and children with disabilities.

"The situation for children remains fairly alarming, and there are many negative tendencies," he said.

UNICEF closed its country program and office in Russia on Dec. 31, 2011, when it also stopped allocating resources from the organization's regular budget, including financing for projects implemented by Russian nonprofits, Budd said.

The partnership office, which is managed from Geneva and has the 12 employees in Moscow, has been operating since Jan. 1 and is fulfilling existing obligations. The agency's only other office outside Moscow, in the North Caucasus city of Vladikavkaz, was closed down last year.

"It's just finalizations negotiated with the government," one UNICEF employee said of the nonprofit's current programs.

Money raised in Russia before 2011 will be spent in Russia by the end of the year, Budd said. Contributions in 2011 and 2012 from Ikea, UNICEF's largest corporate partner, will be allocated to Save the Children and spent in Russia.

Experts and partners said the organization's downsizing and possible departure was senseless and would seriously harm efforts to improve child welfare.

UNICEF's main goals in Russia — improving preventive health care, reducing the number of orphans and promoting children's rights — continue to be major concerns.

UNICEF put the number of children in Russian institutions at "more than 140,000" in a February survey, a figure it says has not changed substantially since 2000. State statistics suggest that the number of children in institutions is falling.

There are no tracking mechanisms for the 20,000 young adults leaving orphanages every year, but experts estimate that only about 10 percent successfully adapt to normal life.

Alcoholism, drug addiction, criminality and suicide take the rest, experts say.

UNICEF's departure could also hurt Russia's ability to implement an ambitious national children's strategy, the first of its kind in Russia, which was approved this year.

"Now that we're beginning to put this strategy into action, I think UNICEF's presence is more important perhaps even than it was during the 1998 crisis," Golovan said.

UNICEF's negotiations with the Foreign Ministry have been dragging on for more than a year.

Russia received large amounts of international aid after the economic hardships of the 1990s, but prosperity in recent years has prompted the government to seek to become a donor nation and reduce inflows of aid from abroad.

"Russia is one of the 'new donors' now and refuses to accept the status of a recipient of development aid from all international organizations," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said last month when explaining the expulsion of USAID.

The Kremlin has stepped up its foreign aid contributions fivefold over the past six years to $470 million in 2010. It has also offered funds to help Europe claw out of its financial troubles and extended billions of dollars in loans to neighbor Belarus.

Last year, the Foreign Ministry even drafted a proposal to establish its own international development agency to finance projects in poorer countries.

A new law effective Nov. 20 requiring foreign-funded NGOs involved in "political" activities to register as "foreign agents" has also raised concerns about nonprofits' future in Russia.

UNICEF operates in 157 countries across the globe and has extensive programs in large emerging markets like China, Brazil and India. It also conducts educational campaigns and political lobbying in developed countries like Britain.

"The most important thing is that we're not leaving UNICEF or the UN," children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov said by telephone, indicating that Russia will continue to give funding to UNICEF for programs in other countries.

"We continue to work with international organizations," he said, adding that UNICEF's exit wouldn't have any impact on his own work.

But both state organizations and NGOs told The Moscow Times that projects run jointly with UNICEF, in some cases for a decade, stopped receiving funding from the body this year.

UNICEF helped to bankroll a kindergarten at the Moscow-based Center for Curative Pedagogics where children with disabilities are educated alongside their peers. The support lasted until this year, when the funding was discontinued, said Roman Dimenshtein, chairman of the board at the nonprofit.

"It's a pity but not a shock," he said of UNICEF's drawdown. "Western money is leaving, but we haven't educated our businessmen about why they need to help."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited the Center for Curative Pedagogics during a trip to Moscow last year.

UNICEF's shrinking role has been a significant loss for children, especially those living far from the relatively affluent capital, said Denise Roza, head of Perspektiva, a nonprofit that campaigns for people with disabilities.

Roza added that UNICEF had been particularly valuable for "hands-on" work, and its strong government contacts meant that policymakers paid attention to its research and activities.

Perspektiva lost about a third of its funding when USAID was kicked out of Russia. Now, facing a loss of UNICEF contracts, Roza said the organization is going to have to start looking for new opportunities.

"We need to do some heavy-duty fundraising," she said.

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