

Bush Urged to Back the Rights of Children

By ROSS SNEYD
The Associated Press

MONTPELIER — A coalition of children's, civil rights and labor groups on Monday called for President Bush to sign a United Nations agreement protecting the rights of children.

Their call to arms was timed, in part, to ensure that the issue is one of the themes of the 1992 presidential election, several children's advocates said.

"We urge everybody to write to the president (to tell him to) do everything he can do to protect children," Margot Sayah of Ben & Jerry's said at a news conference on the State House steps. Ben & Jerry's has adopted the "Leave No Child Behind" campaign as a corporate project.

The children's advocates met with Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., to express their support for a

resolution he introduced in the House that urges Bush to sign the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The convention is a bill of rights for the world's children. It was approved unanimously by the U.N. General Assembly nearly three years ago with the support of the United States, but Bush has never signed it.

The State Department said the administration agreed with the goals of the convention but was concerned the agreement might usurp the rights of states, which typically are responsible for such things as child custody and adoption. Nonetheless, the administration has not rejected the treaty and may still sign it, the State Department said.

Sanders rejected the State Department's position. "We find them doing it (rejecting states' rights) everywhere else when it's

in their interest," he said.

Several children's advocates pointed out that the United States was the only industrialized nation and one of only about 30 worldwide that had not signed the treaty.

The Bush administration joins the governments of Iraq, Libya, Cambodia and South Africa in refusing to adopt the treaty, Sanders said.

Among the organizations that said they supported Sanders' resolution were the Vermont chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Education Association, the AFL-CIO and the Vermont Children's Forum.

"There should be no child who is not receiving an appropriate education, food and shelter and health care," said Marlene Burke, president of the Vermont NEA chapter.

Kate Goetz, 15, who will be a sophomore at Mill River Union High School in the fall, said she had written a letter to the president two months ago asking him to support the U.N. Convention.

A letter she got in return did not address her concerns about the Convention on the Child, she said. "I got a very upsetting letter. It was a form letter," she said.

"Kids are going to bed hungry and not educated," she said. "He's a world leader of a strong country and he's just not doing anything."

Leslie Williams of the ACLU said her organization had taken up the cause of the U.N. agreement because "children can't vote. They don't give money to politicians."

"This nation owes its children at least a fair start," she said. "We should have been the first to sign this, not the last."