

22 September 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Conclusion of the General Debate of the 55th General Assembly**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by again emphasizing the uniqueness of this Millennium General Assembly, coming as it does after the historic Millennium Summit attended by 147 heads of State or Government, the largest gathering ever of world leaders.

The challenge facing this Millennium General Assembly is to put into action the commitments made by the world's leaders in the Summit Declaration. The Assembly must maintain the "millennium spirit" and proceed with a sense of urgency, not with business as usual.

The Secretary-General reinforced this in his statement opening the General Debate where he set the tone for the two-week discussion. He said it was vital to find the means to make the Summit's promise a reality and to turn the UN into a more effective instrument in pursuing the priorities outlined by the heads of State and Government.

Let me now turn to some of the themes of the past two weeks:

The most critical issue facing the international community – the maintenance of peace and security and the role of the UN in it - was the focus of many speakers. The need for improving the Organization's peace-keeping capacity was emphasized. In this regard, the debate reaffirmed the mandate given by the Summit to consider expeditiously the recommendations by the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations.

It was noted that today, peace operations are often comprehensive and complex, involving disarming and demobilizing of combatants, supervising elections, monitoring human rights and training local police forces. Some speakers referred to the need to develop a "culture of prevention" in order to combat conflict. In the context of peace-keeping, reference was also made to the need to "close the gap between the tasks we ask the UN to carry out, and the resources we make available to it".

The importance of promoting and respecting human rights as a prerequisite to international security was also emphasized.

The issue of Security Council reform and the need for its composition to reflect the realities of today, in order to make the Council "more representative and more legitimate", was a theme

repeated by many. Work for the comprehensive reform of the Security Council in all its aspects was also called for in the Summit Declaration. The statements made, indicate, I hope, that there is willingness by the membership to move forward on this issue.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A strong call was made in the Debate to implement the goals and commitments of the development agenda of the 1990's. This agenda was reinforced in the Millennium Declaration, expressing the commitment of our Heads of State and Government. Many statements rightly pointed out that we are far away from the mutually agreed global development targets: still today, almost one half of the world's population live on less than two US dollars per day. There were several calls to bring to fruition the commitments made in the Millennium Declaration to reduce poverty levels by the year 2015.

It was also reiterated that conflicts and poverty go hand in hand. Sustainable development not only addresses the economic and social needs of people, but also contributes towards a lasting peace. The same goes for tolerance and respect for diversity within societies. I strongly share the view expressed that respect for human rights is one of the cornerstones of development.

Many statements referred to the unsustainable debt burden of the poorest countries and to the unfavorable terms of trade for many developing countries. The need to address the debt burden of heavily indebted poor countries was reiterated. The current General Assembly needs to address development financing and the roles of various forums and institutions in the forthcoming financing for development event. In my view, decisions on the format, timing and venue of this event must be made without delay.

The discussion touched upon many other aspects of human life, which require our common attention - the situation of the children of the world, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, racism and racial discrimination, deterioration of our environment, pollution of soil, water and atmosphere and lack of food security. Many of these issues will be addressed during the on-going General Assembly.

To mention one of the most acute ones, there is a need for an early decision on the HIV/AIDS special session. I have sensed from the floor the urgency to address this particular issue. To put this plea into perspective, we should remember that every minute several people, mostly young, very often girls and young women, are infected with HIV. The pandemic also underscores the need to include health issues in national educational and literacy programmes.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Globalization and its impacts, both positive and negative, was one of the overriding themes of the discussion. Globalization provides both opportunities and challenges. Positive impacts have been identified, such as increased economic growth and an improved standard of living. The major

challenge, however, remains. That is how to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor within and among countries, and how to share the benefits of globalization in a more equitable way.

In the course of the debate it was reiterated that to address globalization we have to think in a multidimensional way. Globalization encompasses not only economic but also political, social, environmental, technological and cultural dimensions. That is why the responsibility for shaping globalization cannot be left to market forces alone. There is a need to guide the process of globalization with political decisions. This is where the General Assembly has a role to play.

As mentioned during the general debate, all this requires enhanced international co-operation, building bridges between societies and also improved global governance. International and multilateral actors, such as the United Nations, the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Trade Organization and various regional organizations are becoming increasingly important in harnessing the positive powers of globalization.

Information and communication technology has an important role in managing globalization and as a vehicle for development. Helping to bridge the digital divide by making information and communication technology a servant of development is one of the challenges ahead. No one should be denied access to knowledge.

Many spoke of the importance of environmental protection and sustainable development issues, pointing ahead to the Rio plus ten-review conference to be held in 2002. In this context, global warming, climate change and water were among the specific issues referred to. The special concerns of small island states were also raised.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another important theme of the debate related to disarmament issues. It was noted by many that lasting peace will not be secured until weapons of mass destruction have been eradicated and the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons has been addressed. Concerns about trade in “diamonds of conflict” were also raised.

Some speakers stressed that in the face of massive human rights violations the UN must not remain paralyzed. Others felt that the principle of State sovereignty and non-intervention in their internal affairs was a basic principle of the UN Charter.

A number of speakers referred to the need to look afresh at the application of economic sanctions: although they could be used as a tool for peace, sometimes they were counter-productive and penalized the population rather than the targeted rulers. Some said that time had shown that economic sanctions had been unable to achieve their objective. Others pointed to their burden on third parties. There were calls for a review of the sanctions regimes to make them more effective and better targeted.

Finally, let me say that I was pleased to listen to the statements appreciating the need for civil society - in the broadest sense - to participate in the work of the United Nations. I believe that the significance and relevance of the United Nations in the future will depend on our ability to involve civil society in our work. It has played a pivotal role in setting our global agenda. We must let them also participate, as our valued partners, in its implementation.

Overall, to quote one distinguished speaker, the Debate reaffirmed the commitment of the international community to the validity and importance of multilateral action as being “the most realistic approach to transnational problems in an increasingly globalized world”. I echo this sentiment and look forward to this being a most productive 55th Session of the General Assembly.

Thank you.