

25 September 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the United Nations Association of the United States
Board of Directors lunch**

First of all, let me thank the Board of Directors for having invited me as a speaker today. It is an honor to be able to share my thoughts with such a distinguished audience. You represent an internationally minded, bi-partisan and well-respected constituency for the United Nations in the United States. Your efforts in support of the Organization are invaluable. They stem from a belief that not only does the United Nations need the United States but also that the United States needs the United Nations and that multilateral solutions can serve the national interests of countries big and small alike. I share this view and wish to emphasize that for the United Nations, the United States is, truly, indispensable.

Let me dwell a little longer on the issue of multilateralism. I come from a small country whose very existence was at stake some sixty years ago, and whose near-demise came after the collapse of the precarious and weak international order between the two World Wars. The League of Nations never matched the expectations for security guarantees that Finland had pinned upon it. Had the United States joined the League after the First World War, the fate of Europe might have been different.

In a Europe increasingly dominated by predators, and in the absence of collective security, other solutions such as a collective Scandinavian defense arrangement could never materialize either. In the end, we were left to our own devices all but alone. Only with great sacrifice and skillful exploitation of the rivalries in the European military and diplomatic theater were we able to survive as a nation. Finland was one of only three warring nations in Europe, whose capitals were never occupied by a foreign power. The other two were Britain and Russia.

Our historical experience is, therefore, that in order to be a means towards national security, multilateralism must be effective and have the widest possible backing. It also comes with hard-nosed realism about the need for vigilance and resolute action in the face of aggression, as well as with a certain sense of self-sufficiency.

Finland joined the United Nations in 1955 in a “package deal” on expanding the Organization’s membership. This deal was made possible by the thaw in East-West relations after Stalin’s death. From the start, we made every effort to be as active a Member State as possible, one example being our participation in UN peacekeeping virtually since its inception in the 1950’s. Not being able to fully participate in European integration, the United Nations – along with Nordic cooperation – became Finland’s window to the world during the early post-war decades.

Today, the concept of national security is fast changing. Even if the hard core of military security remains, other, more amorphous but no less serious issues and potential threats have emerged. I'm talking about issues such as climate change, mass-scale migration, spread of infectious disease, and, in particular, widening rift between the haves and the have-nots. These are global threats where the size of a country will not shield it from the adverse effects.

As with past threats, there must be a multilateral approach to deal with the new ones and that approach must be effective. There already exists such an approach - the Global Agenda as set by the global conferences of the 1990's. Sometimes unfairly mocked as "globaloney", the Global Agenda simply reflects the need to deal multilaterally with the effects, opportunities and challenges of globalization.

At the Millennium Summit, world leaders committed themselves to an ambitious programme of action, which reaffirms the key goals of the Global Agenda. The Summit Declaration aims at making the already existing multilateral approach more effective. It is an ambitious and historic document, adopted by consensus. It contains most of the key recommendations of the Secretary-General, as contained in his Report. It may be noted that this has the effect of reinforcing the authority of both the Secretary-General and the General Assembly. The Declaration also commits the world leaders to the concept of good governance - for the first time at such high level and in such unambiguous fashion. This is important because - and as noted by the Millennium Report - economic success depends so considerably on the quality of governance that a country pursues.

The main challenge facing this Millennium General Assembly, then, is to put into action the commitments made by the world's leaders in the Declaration. The Assembly must maintain the very positive "millennium spirit" - which I witnessed at first hand and which was very real - and proceed with a sense of urgency, not with business as usual. As called for by the Secretary-General, it is 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 Summit. This is a test of the political will of the Member States.

During the past two weeks, I had the privilege of presiding over the General Debate of the General Assembly. One message that came out loud and clear during the debate had to do with improving the Organization's peacekeeping capacity. The debate reaffirmed the mandate given by the Summit to consider without delay the recommendations by the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations - the so-called Brahimi Report. The consideration of the Report is clearly one of my top priorities as the President of the General Assembly. In the context of peacekeeping, we must also close the gap between the tasks we ask the UN to carry out, and the resources we make available to it.

Another important issue that the Summit Declaration called for was the comprehensive reform of the Security Council in all its aspects. There were several calls - both in the Summit and during the General Debate - for the Council's composition to reflect the realities of today, in order to make it "more representative and more legitimate". I hope that the statements made indicate a willingness by the membership to move forward on this issue.

Implementing the Summit Declaration is not a one-year affair, nor can it be done by the United Nations alone. In several respects, the onus is on the Member States themselves. In the end, it is they who must work towards the implementation of the goals every day. To give an example, without a Member State's commitment to reducing poverty there is very little the UN can do. However, if the commitment is there, the UN can help, it can give advice, it can encourage the Member State to improve its governance and fight corruption, and it can monitor.

Even this requires enhanced international co-operation. 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. It is my intention to try and build bridges with the international financial institutions (IFI's) on such important issues as financing for development. This issue should be the topic of a high-level meeting next year and in my view, the best way for the event to be a success is through participation by the IFI's and also by the national finance ministries of the donor countries.

Another topic that will be close to my heart during the next twelve months has to do with information and communication technology. In my view, it has an important role 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. In an increasingly knowledge-based global economy, those countries, where a maximum amount of knowledge is available to a maximum amount of people at a minimum cost, will experience the fastest growth rates.

Let me now turn to a subject, which I consider extremely important for the United Nations. The issue is about outreach. In recent years, the Secretary-General has called for better participation of civil society – in the broadest sense, including the private sector - in the work of the Organization. Better governance requires better and wider participation. It is my belief that in the era of globalization, the UN and national governments cannot do their work alone.

The UN and its specialized agencies liaise with NGOs and other international organizations on issues of shared interest and potential for joint activities. NGO's provide information, which is crucial for our work in many fields such as human rights. They do advocacy work among the citizens and help implement the Global Agenda. I would also like to note that information technology has an impact on our work with civil society. In this regard, I welcome the UN Information Technology Service – UNITes - where high-tech volunteers train people in developing countries to use information technology.

Another commendable initiative of the Secretary-General is the Global Compact. Businesses are called to observe such core values as human rights, labor standards and environmental standards. Implementing these values is not only good policy – it is also increasingly good business.

Finally, let me touch very briefly on the one thing, which has unfortunately complicated the UN-US relationship for a good many years. United States arrears to the UN continue to compromise the US agenda in the Organization. They obscure the fact that the US remains the largest contributor to the Organization. The conditionality of arrears payment helps anti-reform activists in the UN argue against the reform benchmarks.

It would be an immense boost to US prestige in the UN if this issue were finally laid to rest. It is very hard to envisage any other durable solution but an unconditional payment of all arrears. In the meantime, it remains to be seen whether the Helms-Biden benchmarks, first and foremost a lower maximum assessment rate, will be met. On my part, I consider reaching a negotiated settlement on both the regular budget and peacekeeping scales one of my top priorities during this fall.