

23 October 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the occasion of Fourth Annual Race Against Poverty Awards
"Breaking the Silence on HIV/AIDS" United Nations Development
Programme**

I would like to convey my special greetings to the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and congratulate him for the work his organization is doing, together with a variety of partners, in the race against poverty. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable work of the Goodwill Ambassadors.

The theme of this year's poverty event, "Breaking the silence on HIV/AIDS" is an extremely timely one. The vicious circle of silence and fear of stigma around HIV/AIDS needs to be broken, before we can overcome this human tragedy of our time. HIV/AIDS and poverty are accomplices. In fighting against the root causes of poverty we also fight against HIV/AIDS, and vice versa. Poverty brings many social problems, such as drugs and prostitution, which are conduits to the spreading of AIDS.

My special greetings and congratulations go to the awardees and honourees of this year. They are here today, because of their immense personal courage and because, against the risk of scorn, discrimination, isolation, deprivation of human dignity and sometimes violence, they have come forth and spoken of their disease - they have broken the silence. The courage of the awardees will save lives of their compatriots, and serve as an encouragement for others, who are now better informed and who can better protect themselves against this deadly disease.

Worldwide more than 34 million people have been infected with the HIV virus, men, women, and children, who lost their future to this degrading disease. There are a growing number of orphaned children, today already over 13 million, who lost their parents to AIDS. At the same time, they lost the care, love and support of their families. HIV/AIDS is an economic problem - it harvests people in their prime working age. It has already reached such a magnitude that it threatens the development and future of entire nations. It is a social problem touching societies in all four corners of the world, but is most acute in the developing world.

In various occasions I have spoken of the need for education. I want to reiterate my strong conviction that by educating people, we also provide them with the best weapon in the fight against HIV/AIDS. We can say that knowledge is the best vaccine against it - and knowledge is available now. We need to ensure that it is made available to everyone. In fact, it is our common duty to do so.

Young people, in particular young women, are at the greatest risk. I would like to remind you of the commitments made by Member States of the United Nations at the 5-year review of the International Conference on Population and Development last year. We decided that by the year 2005 at least 90%, and by 2010 at least 95% of young men and women, aged 15 to 24, years will have access to the information, education and services necessary to develop the life skills required to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection. We have committed ourselves to reduce globally the prevalence of HIV in this age group by 25% by the year 2010.

The exemplary work of the awardees and honourees of this year will be a source of inspiration and courage for all of us to help break the deadly silence around HIV/AIDS.