

15 November 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Forum of Small States (FOSS) The Role of the General  
Assembly President In reforming and revitalizing the United Nations**

It is a great pleasure for me to address the Forum of Small States today. Coming from a relatively small state myself I can well understand the rationale for this Forum in the United Nations context. It is also fitting that I should discuss the revitalization and reform of the UN with this group of countries, given that it is many times the smaller delegations that bear the larger burden if things do not function effectively.

Throughout my Presidency I have emphasized that the Millennium Summit provided a momentum for the strengthening of the United Nations. It generated a high measure of collective political will in support of the central role of the United Nations to tackle the new challenges of the 21st Century. The Millennium Declaration constitutes an authoritative mandate for our work and for my Presidency. The Declaration reaffirmed the central position of the General Assembly as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations. Furthermore, at the Summit the Member States resolved to enable the General Assembly to play this role effectively. It is in this context that I would like to share with you some thoughts on how I see the role of the President in revitalizing and reforming the United Nations with particular attention to the work of the General Assembly.

In my acceptance speech I stressed that in order to add value and make a difference, the General Assembly must address, in a focused, meaningful and timely manner, the challenges of rapid change and globalisation. In doing so, it must respond to the current priorities of its Member States. This requires courage, by the Member States, to look back at the original legislative intent of the General Assembly. But it will require more than courage to decide on how this could be best reflected in the practical work of the Organisation today. This will need political will and compromises by all parties. Unless Member States accept that to achieve the so-called common good they need to let go some of their own individual priorities, nothing will move.

In my discussions with Member States and in listening to the statements made so far, I sense that there is a renewed acknowledgement that we need to reinforce our efforts and equip the Organisation with appropriate tools to achieve the goals we have set.

I have from my part tried to give some impetus to this process in my earlier statements. On my web page I have posted a lay out on 'progress so far in the reform of the work of the General Assembly'.

When one goes through the work done so far, it is striking how many decisions have been already taken by the General Assembly to improve the work of the Assembly and that of its main Committees. The real challenge for the Member States is in implementing these decisions.

My office and I have discussed with several delegations the effectiveness of the work of the GA on many occasions. During these discussions some new ideas have been expressed on how the implementation of these decisions could start.

Many have stressed that despite some successes in the rationalization and streamlining of the agenda, the General Assembly has not achieved a reduction of its overall workload. The fact remains that the total number of items on the agenda increased from 164 at the forty-ninth session to 183 at the present session. Furthermore, the number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly has increased, from 328 at the forty-ninth session to 341 at the fifty-fourth session.

I am pleased to note that work has already been undertaken by the Main Committees to review their respective agendas, and this should continue. Some have suggested that we should focus now on the review of the agenda of the General Assembly. If the Assembly and the Main Committees are to take further steps to rationalize and streamline their agenda, it has been suggested by many that greater use of clustering, biennialization or triennialization of agenda items should be made. Agenda items of closely related substance could be merged within a single agenda title or be incorporated as sub-items. Items that cover related matters or issues could be considered in clusters.

Furthermore, it has been proposed that to rationalize the agenda we could try to apply a system similar to that of the Security Council, that is 'active and non-active' agenda items. The practice has shown in the Security Council that some items can, indeed, be removed from the agenda through this system (refer S/1996/603\* and S/1996/704, latest note A/55/366).

Many have pointed out that the division of labour between the Plenary and the Main Committees has been blurred. Whilst the Plenary should be the place where issues of high importance are debated in the presence of all Member States, it is in fact often discussing issues of a routine character, often with only a half full audience. Surely, this is not what was foreseen as the role of the Plenary.

One of the important issues is the continuity of the work of the General Assembly. Some delegations have suggested a form of 'GA troika' with the present, previous and next Presidents of the General Assembly, or at least representatives of those States from which the President came/comes/would come, to be involved in major issues of reform and of planning the work of the General Assembly. Another suggestion that has been made to the same effect is to arrange joint meetings of successive General Committees.

How to move ahead? It has been suggested that the General Committee could be used as a 'business committee' to oversee the smooth and effective functioning of the General Assembly. This of course is an idea that the Member States need to consider and discuss. I intend to call an

informal 'brain storming' session of the General Committee to discuss this idea with the Committee members.

The experience of the round tables at the Summit has inspired some to suggest that maybe we should make the annual general debate more interactive and focus on issues of particular importance each year rather than cover the whole of the global agenda.

My own experience in life is that it is often the practical and small things which count and ultimately add up to a change in any process. One such small step that I have introduced is to always start the plenary meetings of the Assembly on time. Another small step that I have introduced was the amendment to the Rules of Procedure to allow for certainty as far as the closing and opening dates of the main sessions of the General Assembly are concerned.

So now you might ask, what is the role of the President in this process? As I have said, I see the role of the President, as one of a facilitator, conciliator and consensus-builder. He must lead, but without the Membership on board, that leadership will fail. In the reform and revitalization of the General Assembly this is of utmost importance. It is for this very reason that I have 'thrown the ball' to you as the Member States and I have urged you to engage in discussions to implement decisions taken and make new initiatives to further the reform.

I will in turn be very happy to support and implement initiatives emerging from discussions amongst Member States. It is my firm belief that reform of the United Nations is not an option, but a necessity.