

1 December 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the occasion of World AIDS Day**

I am greatly honored to address this distinguished gathering today. This day observes World AIDS Day, and it also launches the preparations for a Special Session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS that will be held in June 2001.

The theme of today and this town-hall meeting is a very timely one. I should like to congratulate and thank the organizers and all of those who contributed to this important event by their presence or in some other way. The theme selected this year for World AIDS Day is key to our efforts to stop the spread of this devastating disease.

We need to address specifically men. Why? Because, men are involved in almost every case of HIV-transmission in the world and because they have the power - power to protect themselves and their partners. Furthermore, the theme, AIDS: Men make a Difference, is also important, because we need to recognize those who already behave in a responsible and considerate manner. Yet, we need to address and convince those men who still perceive protection against HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases as unmanly. Masculinity is a positive force and we need to harness its full potential to stop the spread of AIDS. This event today contributes towards a positive change of attitudes and behavior.

I strongly believe that educating young people on HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases is the best life insurance we can give them. I also believe that essential life skills should constitute part of every school or training curriculum. Why? Because every day about 15,000 people are infected with the HIV virus. The majority of them are young - young women and girls being more vulnerable than boys. We have more than 34 million people living with HIV/AIDS now, and in 1999 alone about 5.4 million new infections occurred. Young people, between the ages of 15 and 24 years are at the greatest risk and they represent over half of the newly acquired infections. In the 5-year review of the Cairo Programme of Action, we the Member States of the United Nations, committed ourselves to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection by ensuring that at least 95 per cent of young women and men in this age group have access by 2010 to preventive methods and information on this disease.

At their Millennium Summit, Heads of State and Government resolved that HIV/AIDS is a threat to development and a serious cause of poverty, and that it represents one of the three major issues to be tackled in Africa, the continent presently most severely affected by this pandemic. I should like to recognize and pay tribute here to the valuable work already done by many agencies and

organizations of the United Nations family and by many others, nationally, regionally and globally, especially the many voluntary groups working to combat HIV/AIDS.

I should like to finish by addressing my words to us all - mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters or friends of young persons. Role models and attitudes are molded at home, and therefore, we should serve as examples and cultivate the spirit of responsibility, tolerance, non-violence, gender-equality and compassion in the upbringing of children. We can help boys and young men recognize the positive potential of the power they have and the positive role they can play as future fathers, husbands, brothers, sons and friends. Let us help them make the difference, and break the spread of AIDS.