

3 December 2000

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

There is much talk these days about divides. One of these divides is the divide between those who have equal opportunities and those who do not. Those who are deprived from fully developing and harnessing their personalities, talents and potential, and who lack services and treatment as equal members of society are people with disabilities. We tend to think that they are somewhere else, not among us. However, the number of disabled people is increasing rapidly. Today almost one in ten of the world's population has a physical or mental disability.

Equal opportunities for disabled persons is a basic human right. This was reaffirmed by the World Conference on Human Rights a few years ago: "all human rights and fundamental freedoms are universal and thus unreservedly include persons with disabilities". Any discrimination or negative treatment, therefore, constitutes a violation of these rights.

We all know that there is yet another divide - that between the solemn declarations of commitment made at high-level conferences and reality. We need to join forces to bridge this divide and work towards national action and legislation to ensure equal treatment for people with disabilities. There are sad examples of social barriers erected and beliefs that hinder people with disabilities to act and participate, and to enjoy life fully as members of their society and families. Social equality does not only mean physical access to buildings or means of transport. It also means access and acceptance for disabled people to share and participate in all aspects of a society, including in the labor force, education and decision-making.

I wish draw attention to particularly vulnerable group of people with disabilities. They include women, children, the elderly, refugees and ethnic minorities - they need special protection and support. The United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities, adopted in December 1993, have clear instructions for governments on how to improve the situation of people with disabilities, how to integrate them into society, and on how to offer employment, education and social activities on an equal footing.

Many governments have taken positive action already, but much remains to be done. United Nations bodies, many other international and national organizations and voluntary support groups are actively pursuing the issue of equal treatment of people with disabilities. I commend all of them for their work towards achieving the goal of equality and justice for all people.