

8 December 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
to the Student Conference on Human Rights**

At the outset, I wish to say that I am very pleased to see young people in this building. It shows that the United Nations is relevant and significant for the future.

Since you have already debated the issue of the Culture of Peace, I will focus my remarks on some aspects of Human Rights that constitute the other half of the theme of your conference.

First we should clarify, what are the human rights? Frequently, human rights or the violation of human rights, are understood in a narrow sense - limited to physical abuse and violence. Human rights include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights in the agenda of the United Nations, also include, the right to food and adequate nourishment, the right to shelter, the right to live free from poverty, the right to health and life without HIV/AIDS, the right to education, the right to equal treatment regardless of your nationality, gender or physical abilities and the right to rebel against tyranny and abuse of the rule of law.

Human rights protect individuals against violations of human rights by states that are responsible for human rights violations. Human rights are universal, and cultural differences should not be used as basis from deviating from respect for them. Our responsibility is to protect these rights. Sometimes human rights are not respected, because people do not know about them. People need to be educated, to be aware of their human rights. I think your conference is one excellent example of awareness building.

As for the United Nations, the basic concepts of human rights lie in the Charter of the United Nations, and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Even if both of these documents are already more than 50 years old, their wisdom and words are relevant today. According to the Universal Declaration of Human rights everyone is entitled to all equal rights, without distinction of any kind, such as colour, race, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

After the Declaration, several other Human Rights instruments and declarations have been adopted. Just to note here that the word "instrument" means a legally binding international agreement which has been signed and ratified by states.

I may mention here a few of these legally binding international agreements or treaties: the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. To some of these international treaties have been recently added so-called protocols - that in a way are up-dates of the original convention or declaration. Last September, the protocols to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, were opened for signature during the Millennium Summit. These related to child soldiers, child pornography and sexual abuse and exploitation. You may have heard about this Millennium Summit. It was held by the United Nations to mark the new millennium and was the largest ever gathering of the Heads of State and Government. The outcome of this Summit, the Millennium Declaration, reiterates the message of equal and universal human rights for all.

Within the United Nations the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has the lead role in this field. There are also Special Rapporteurs on human rights. In addition, there are committees that follow the implementation of the international agreements and conventions.

To assist the General Assembly, preparatory work takes place in six Committees of the General Assembly. The third committee deals with human rights in different countries, implementation of human rights instruments, racism and racial discrimination, promotion and protection of the rights of children and many other human rights issues. In fact, more than half of all resolutions and decision made in this committee deal directly with human rights. Also some other committees of the General Assembly may address various aspects of human rights, such as political rights.

The United Nations has many specialized agencies, funds and programmes that implement human rights at the practical level. In UN jargon we speak about a rights-based approach. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, for example, addresses the right to food and adequate nutrition; the United Nations Development Programme, the right to live without poverty; the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the rights of women, and so. The work of these organizations underscores the fact that human rights are not only a legal issue - they are an everyday issue, a question of being able to live a decent life without poverty, hunger, illness, persecution or abuse of any kind.

Finally, let me say that the theme of your conference, "Human Rights and the Culture of Peace" is a very important one. It goes well with the International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, which will be observed next year. And of course the theme of this year's Human Rights Day, the 10th of December, the day when the Universal Declaration of Human rights was adopted by the General Assembly in 1947, is "Human Rights Education: a Contribution to a Culture of Peace". Your conference is one valuable milestone towards the goal of universal human rights education and awareness building.

It has been a pleasure to share these few thoughts with you.