

29 January 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Second Substantive Session of the Preparatory Committee
for the Special Session on Children**

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Special Session on Children. I wish to welcome everyone, in particular the children and young people whose attendance and participation here is highly appreciated by all of us.

I am inspired by the work already undertaken by many in this room on behalf of children and optimistic about what can and will be done in this new Millennium. Last September, at the Millennium Summit, we re-affirmed a set of universal values, such as freedom, equality, non-violence, and shared responsibility. These universal values include respect for children - for their rights, voices, and lives. In the Millennium Declaration, we agreed that children have the right to live in dignity, free from hunger and poverty, and free from fear of violence, oppression and injustice. According to the Declaration, children everywhere should be able to complete primary schooling and have equal access to all levels of education. Children are entitled to participation, development, and a clean environment, and to have protection from natural disasters, genocide, armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies. Now it is our duty to act and implement these goals of the Millennium Declaration.

As President of the General Assembly, I am entrusted to follow-up the implementation of the Millennium Declaration. The Special Session on Children is one of the tools in this implementation process and a successful outcome is one step towards meeting our Millennium commitments. The Special Session on Children is an opportunity - but not our only one - to reaffirm our commitment to the rights of children and to develop a wide variety of partnerships. The Millennium follow-up is an over-arching theme, which links different conferences and special sessions together in a meaningful and holistic way.

My personal interest in the Special Session on Children, however, goes back a decade, when I had the privilege to serve as Head of the Finnish delegation to the 1990 World Summit on Children. I can still recall the atmosphere and commitment that filled the discussions during that exciting week. We believed then that we could make a difference in the lives of children. And I think we were right. Over the past decade, we have accomplished a great deal.

Of all the successes of the past ten years, the near universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of the most significant. Child rights are now recognized as human rights, to be protected by governments as a matter of legal obligation, social responsibility and economic imperative. The role of civil society is crucial to advance the rights of every child to live a healthy life in a climate of peace and security.

But we have unfinished business from the 1990 Summit. Poverty has spanned still another generation. Divides within countries and across nations - educational and digital - have deepened. Political and social unrest cast dark shadows over the lives of millions. HIV is evermore rampant.

Too many children are without access to basic social services. There are numbers of girls and boys working in hazardous occupations, instead of attending school. Children are being exploited, abused and trafficked. Girls and women often suffer especially from conflicts and violence. Young people still fight adult wars and die adult deaths. We must implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and underline the importance of ratifying and implementing the two Optional Protocols adopted last year.

And yet, I share with many in this room optimism that springs from several sources.

I am happy to note that the outcome document drafted for this meeting identifies three overarching goals for children: the best possible early childhood for all children, a good-quality basic education for all children and the opportunities for all children and young people to participate in their communities.

I find hope in the fact that we now know some things with more certainty than ten years ago. Providing children with the best possible start in life is one of the most important steps to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Healthy children learn better, have more energy and skills, and are able to articulate their needs and plan their future constructively. We need to enable the creative energy and curiosity of children to be translated into change by respecting diversity - and by turning away from aggression and frustrations caused by the prospects of a bleak future.

We know a great deal more today about breaking barriers stopping girls going to school, ranging from parents' attitudes, girls' workloads at home, long and unsafe journeys, and lack of sanitary facilities at school, to insensitive curriculum and lack of teachers due to HIV/AIDS. Within the UN system, we have learned how much can be gained from combining the expertise of individual agencies and other partners into joint programmes and policy support. The Girls' Education Initiative is one example. The initiatives and mechanisms of co-ordination have helped mobilize additional resources and secured high visibility and commitment by the international community.

I find my greatest hope in the participation of children and young people in the Special Session. I am also encouraged to see here today so many Personal Representatives of Heads of State, who have an important role and specific tasks in national societies.

With you all, I look forward to an outcome from the Special Session that is concise, innovative, action-oriented and time-bound, translating commitments and resolutions concerning children into decisive actions. I welcome the national level preparations and reports, which will assist us to define national targets, differing from society to society.

Hopefully, a decade from now, when today's girls and boys sit here in our place, they will be able to say that the world was made a safer, healthier, and richer place by our actions. I strongly believe we have the ability, and most importantly, we have the will, as has been demonstrated over the past ten years and throughout this preparatory process.

My best to you as you take on your work.