

19 March 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
“Towards a Stronger United Nations” at the American Scandinavian
Society**

It is a great pleasure for me to address the American Scandinavia Society. I should like to thank you for this opportunity to share my views as President of the UN General Assembly on strengthening the United Nations. It is the first time that Finland holds the Presidency of the Assembly, an honour that occurs about once in 200 hundred years for any Member of the United Nations.

The topic for this evening could not be more timely - nor the audience for it more appropriate. The Nordics have a long history in the UN and a reputation as forerunners for reform. I believe that we are also regarded as 'runners' in the real sense relative to the slow pace of the UN. The Nordic proposals for the reform of the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies in the early 90's were instrumental in bringing that process forward. So it should have come as no surprise that as President I have taken reform as one of my priorities.

The topic is also especially timely in the light of the ongoing follow-up to the historic Millennium Summit that took place last September.

At the Summit, the largest gathering ever of Heads of State and Government, a set of values, principles and goals for the entire international community in the early 21st century was agreed. The Summit provided a momentum which will reinforce the implementation of the global agenda and its development targets, as defined in the global conferences of the 1990's .

At the Summit Member States also reaffirmed their commitment to the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations. They reaffirmed that the Organization is not meant to serve only Member States, but also the peoples of the world, in particular the most vulnerable. The Summit stressed the inter-linkages between development, peace and security as well as the need to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for everyone.

Furthermore, Member States pledged to strengthen the UN, the only truly global organization today. I believe that strengthening and revitalizing the organization is a prerequisite to achieving all the priorities agreed in the Summit Declaration and to enable the UN to carry out the tasks entrusted to it.

One particular area of reform where Member States resolved to intensify their efforts at the Summit is Security Council reform. The point that is repeatedly stressed in reform discussions is the need for the Council's composition to reflect the realities of today, compared to those of 55 years ago, to make it more representative and more legitimate.

Just last week I was chairing the first round of discussions this year on the reform of the Security Council. I am fortunate to have my fellow Nordic, Ambassador Thorsteinn Ingolfsson of Iceland, as one of the Vice-Chairpersons to assist me in this challenging task. This shows that the Nordic co-operation and reform tradition is still very much alive at the UN.

Discussions on Security Council reform have been going on now for over 7 years and this seems like a long time, which it is. But one has to remember that the issues at stake are at the very core of the United Nation's structure and functioning. Some improvements in the working methods of the Security Council have been accomplished, but the main issues still remain open. The need for reform is still very much a current matter.

Our discussions of last week focused on the veto as a voting instrument and the working methods of the Council. There is no doubt that the veto is one of the questions that needs to be addressed in order to reach general agreement on the reform. The papers submitted by the Vice-chairs and me guided the discussions and participation was active and constructive.

The Millennium Summit outcome indicated that there is a renewed willingness by the membership to move forward on reform. But concrete results regarding expansion of the membership of the Council, decision making, including the veto, working methods and transparency are still awaited. The aim is a comprehensive reform of the Security Council in all its aspects. Discussions will continue in May, and as you will understand it would be premature to make any comments now on possible outcomes.

On the more general question of strengthening the UN I have as President tried to lead and keep the process of reform moving forward. To achieve concrete results on the reform and revitalization of the UN, it is of the utmost importance to have the whole Membership on board. I have urged Member States to engage in discussions, to implement decisions taken and make new initiatives to further the reform.

During the fall session of the Assembly I was very pleased to see how promptly Member States responded to the challenge. The implementation of the Summit Declaration was launched in December by consensus.

The Assembly rose to the challenge in other important ways to strengthen the UN. Firstly, it was able to agree on new scales of assessments both for the regular budget and for UN peacekeeping. This was a longstanding and complex issue that had generated a lot of heated discussion. Despite the complexities, the Assembly reached consensus.

The agreement will soon lead to the payment of a substantial portion of arrears owed to the UN by the United States. The goal must be a payment of all remaining arrears by the US. Putting the arrears question behind us will not only strengthen the relationship between the US and the UN but also help advance the American agenda in the UN.

Last fall, the Assembly also adopted a package of emergency measures to reinforce the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, an important step towards strengthening one of the core functions of the Organization. This is necessary in order to close the gap between the peace keeping tasks given to the UN, and the resources Member States make available to it. Decisions were also taken to improve the security and safety of UN personnel, and to move towards results-based budgeting and on other issues that will contribute to strengthening the UN.

Reform has been underway for the past few years under the able leadership of Secretary-General Kofi Annan. But it needs to continue throughout the Organization in order to make the UN stronger and more effective.

As President of the Assembly I have started, if I may put it, in my own 'backyard', that is, the General Assembly. I have made an effort to guide its work in a more effective manner.

Many decisions have been taken over the years to improve the work of the Assembly. But it is striking to note how many of these decisions have not been implemented. So I have put this issue now to Member States and they have responded positively to my call. Consultations have started to find common ground to move forward in a concrete manner in implementing decisions made towards improving the working methods of the Assembly.

My own experience is that it is often the practical and small things that count and ultimately add up to meaningful change.

One of these issues is reviewing the agenda of the Assembly. Despite some successes in the rationalization and streamlining of the agenda, the overall workload has not been reduced. The fact is that the total number of items on the agenda has been increasing over the years. The same goes for the number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly. What is needed is an agenda that enables the Assembly to focus its work more on current priorities and not on those of years gone by.

The division of labor between the Plenary session of the Assembly and its six Main Committees has become blurred. Whilst the Plenary should be the place where issues of high importance are debated in the presence of all Member States, it often discusses issues of a more routine character and, I dare say, often with only a half full audience. Some have also suggested that the Assembly's annual general debate could be working sessions and real debates on issues of current and global importance, rather than reading aloud pre-written statements covering the whole agenda.

The lack of continuity in the work of successive Assemblies is an issue that I have personally experienced. To provide some continuity, the model of a 'troika', used in other organizations, has been suggested. The 'GA troika' would include the present, previous and incoming Presidents of the General Assembly or representatives of these States, to be involved in major discussions of reform and of planning the work of the General Assembly. Another suggestion that has been made to the same effect is to strengthen the office of the President by providing on a continuous

basis substantial backup from the secretariat designated to support the office of the President as an institution.

Let me now turn to the issue of opening the UN to the outside world, another means to strengthening the Organization. Better governance requires better and wider participation. In the era of globalization, the UN and national governments cannot do their work alone. Therefore, one of my priorities as President of the Assembly has been to reach out to civil society in order to fully benefit from its expertise and to ensure its involvement in our work.

In the resolution on the implementation of the Summit Declaration, a call was made for enhanced partnership and co-operation with civil society, including the private sector. To fulfill this commitment, I have emphasized that we need to explore innovative ways to enable civil society to contribute to the work of the UN system. I will continue to keep this issue on my agenda and support all efforts to implement this commitment.

In addition, international and multilateral actors, such as the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Trade Organization and various regional organizations are becoming increasingly important in harnessing the positive powers of globalization. It is my intention to further strengthen the bridges to foster co-operation and coherent policies with the international financial institutions on such important issues as financing for development. This issue will be the topic of an International Conference next year in Mexico. In my view, the participation by the international financial institutions and by the national finance ministries of the donor countries is vital for this event to be a success.

To conclude, I should like to stress that the challenge is to identify and develop the core strengths of the UN. The Organization needs to adapt constantly in order to respond to the new priorities established by its Membership.

This requires compromises by all parties at a very practical level. Unless governments at the highest political level acknowledge and agree that to achieve the common good they need to let go some of their own individual priorities, nothing will move. I thank you for your attention.