

22 March 2001

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

Water and health are two very basic needs for every individual - water is one of the most important global resources, and health is probably the most precious resource for an individual. I should like to applaud the World Health Organization (WHO) for the very timely theme of this year's water day: "Water for Health". As we prepare for the International Year of Freshwater in 2003 we must create greater awareness of the significance of protecting our fresh water resources. Their preservation, conservation and protection need more attention. Greater awareness of the need for water conservation must be encouraged. In the current international situation, where fresh water resources are scarce and at the point of being depleted, there is a possibility of conflicts arising because of shared water resources.

Contaminated water is a direct health risk. Water-related diseases are many, including Trachoma, which is the world's leading cause of preventable blindness, and the under-reported Leptospirosis, occurring especially after natural disasters. The mosquito-borne infection Dengue has become a major international public health concern in recent years, affecting especially tropical and sub-tropical urban areas in more than 100 countries worldwide. Furthermore, Schistosomiasis is the second most important parasitic infection after malaria. The impact of these illnesses on public health and the economy are enormous. According to the Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000, carried out by WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2.4 billion people still lack sanitation, while 1.1 billion persons are lacking improved water supply. In addition to having devastating effects on public health, water scarcity can create also severe limitations to economic development.

Water-related socio-economic problems are a constant threat to the well-being of the global population, and they should be addressed efficiently and with determination. On the other hand, we all can do our share - conserve water and use it sparingly.

The World Day of Water on 22 March serves well to remind us all that solutions are possible, but we must first show that we understand what is at stake - water and health.