

24 March 2001

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

The theme for this year's World Tuberculosis Day is "DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment, Short-course) - TB Cure for All". The Director-General of WHO, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland has said we should work together to ensure that no one is denied access to an effective cure for tuberculosis. Being able to access equitable services should not be a question of race, gender, or economic means.

In a world where one third of the population is infected with tuberculosis - whether they know it or not - and with someone in the world becoming newly infected every second, providing effective testing and other services must be our priority. We should not allow two million people to die annually from a curable disease. The escalation of the TB epidemic may partly be due to a misconception that TB is not a modern illness - we think that it belongs to the past. It is not so.

Without active screening it is impossible to know who carries the disease. We may need new approaches, both effective and affordable, to combat tuberculosis. In my view, we should do everything we can to contain the illness, to be able to move beyond Directly Observed Treatment (DOTS) and start turning the epidemic around by focusing on education and awareness.

People infected with HIV are also more vulnerable to the spread of tuberculosis - one epidemic supporting the other. Yet, TB is curable even for people living with HIV/AIDS.

TB and HIV are obstacles in our fight against poverty. Uncontested links exist between TB and lack of development, between ill health and poverty, and between improved health and development. It is clear that TB affects the poorest; 95% of new TB cases occur in developing countries prompting them to fall further into poverty.

Also, tuberculosis carries social stigma, which is a major obstacle for treatment. Public education and awareness building can help prevent a deepening epidemic. Political leaders and decision makers should be harnessed for this work as well.

It is clear that tuberculosis is more than a health concern, and that it should be identified for what it is - a socioeconomic challenge, and an obstacle to human development. Tuberculosis cannot be defeated by the health sector alone - the battle against TB requires government collaboration and action across all society. And we are not there yet.