

9 April 2001

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

The World Health Organization (WHO) has designated the 7th of April as the World Health Day. I commend WHO for a very acute theme this year "mental health and the fight against stigmatisation caused by mental health problems". Indeed we must "Stop Exclusion and Dare to Care".

Mental health problems occur everywhere in the world. It has been estimated that twenty percent of the population suffers from mental disorders, and therefore, mental ill-health holds a central position in the global burden of disease. The estimated number of suicides in the world is one million yearly. In many countries suicide is the leading cause of death among young men. People with mental health problems have increased morbidity and mortality from physical illness as well.

Consequently, mental health problems add to health expenditures and contribute to disability, mortality loss of economic productivity, poverty and low quality of life. We should not underestimate the social burden of mental health problems on individuals, families and communities. The social burden has significant effects. Stigmatization caused by mental health problems and failures of the health systems in providing appropriate care, has led and is leading to severe violations of basic human rights.

Yet, too often mental health comes second to physical health. We must empower the health systems to respond to mental health needs, and we must develop our societies so that they are conducive to issues concerning mental health. I agree with the Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundlandt, who in her message on the World Health Day encourages us to "take stock and advocate for policy changes on the one hand and attitude changes on the other".

Indeed, today's leaders are accountable to future generations, and we must now pave the way for sustainable development also in mental health. The European Union's health ministers adopted recently a resolution on mental health, which states that "there is no health without mental health". Positive mental health is a prerequisite for the well-being of the individual - it is the basic social capital for the nation and needs to be reflected in national health policies.

In my capacity of spokesperson of the member states of the United Nations, I wish to draw attention to global matters affecting mental health. Peace, and freedom from conflict, indeed, is

an important determinant also of mental health. Poverty and ill-health go together. Thus, combating poverty by all available means is equivalent to fighting for better mental health also.

I should like to congratulate the WHO for making an explicit commitment to mental health and providing worldwide leadership and new momentum in this issue of utmost importance to all of us.