

9 April 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century
at the United Nations Association of China**

I should like thank you for this opportunity to share my views as President of the UN General Assembly on the Role of United Nations in this Century. As you may be aware 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. As President I endeavour to do my best to advance the purposes and principles of the United Nations, as enshrined in the Charter, in order to promote peace and security, greater social equality, democracy and human rights, sustainable human development, the alleviation of poverty and combating global environmental threats.

It gives me a great pleasure to start my official visit in China with a seminar at the United Nations Association of China and it fits very well with my priorities as President. Throughout my Presidency, I have stressed the important role civil society and organizations such as the UN Associations play in making the UN more relevant to the world outside. I was impressed when I learned before coming here about the variety of activities, that the UNA China has been involved during the past year, including disseminating information about UN and making international contacts. I was also glad to note that you have had the opportunity to visit my own country Finland. I encourage you to continue your efforts.

The topic given to me is not easy, and I will not even attempt to answer it in full. But I will try to outline some observations that I have made during my time in office.

But let me add that while difficult the topic is indeed very timely in light of the follow-up to the historic Millennium Summit that took place last September. In fact the Summit presented us with the role for the UN in the 21st Century: the Declaration adopted at the end of the Summit lays down the global agenda for the United Nations for the years to come. I could simply refer you to the Declaration and end my address here. But as you might guess, based on the mere amount of paper I have with me, and remembering that I am a former politician I am tempted to expand a little more on this issue. And if you allow me, I will continue another bit.

The Summit was the largest gathering ever of Heads of State and Government and it agreed on a set of values, principles and goals for the entire international community in the 21st century. Member States reaffirmed that the Organization is not meant to serve only Member States, but also the peoples of the world, in particular the most vulnerable. It laid down the fundamental values that guide our work: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. 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, 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 .

One of the issues where the Summit stressed the importance of the UN is globalization. The Organisation can play a critical role in making sure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all and offers benefits in a more equal manner. I should add that a key issue in globalization is how information and knowledge could be made available to all. This is of course a relevant question also in China. The United Nations has been active in this field for sometime through its specialized agencies and funds and programmes and the Economic and Social Council. The focus has been on the issue of bridging the so-called "digital divide", and making knowledge available and accessible to all.

The Summit also reaffirmed the key role that the UN plays in maintaining peace and security. The nature of conflicts has made this task even more complex and the question of improving the UN's capacity to respond more effectively to crises was one of the Summit's themes. The so-called Brahimi report contained specific recommendations to enhance the UN's capacity to conduct peace operations more effectively. In short it proposed that the UN be given the resources and tools it needs to carry out peace operations. The proposed reform is a comprehensive package, including additional resources, organizational and management changes as well as changes in the way the Security Council works. As President of the Assembly I urged Member States to consider the recommendations urgently. Member States saw this as an opportunity for the UN and its Member States to show that they were serious about enabling the Organisation to do the job it has been mandated by the Charter, namely that of maintaining international peace and security. The first emergency package of reforms was adopted last fall which was encouraging, but the work needs to continue.

Development and poverty eradication will have to remain high on the agenda of the UN for years to come. Many of the forthcoming conferences and Special Sessions, such as the Conference on Least Developed Countries and Special Session on HIV/AIDS, will address these issues and I am hopeful that governments will adhere to their commitments made at the Summit and that we will see concrete results emerging from these and other events.

In light of the above the challenge, I believe, is to identify and develop the core strengths of the UN. This means also that the Organization needs to adapt constantly in order to respond to the new priorities established by its Membership.

Moreover, I believe that strengthening and revitalizing the Organization is in fact a prerequisite to achieving the priorities agreed in the Summit Declaration and to enabling the UN to carry out the tasks entrusted to it. Consequently, the pledge by Member States to spare no effort to make the UN a more effective instrument and to strengthen, it becomes very important and urgent.

In this connection I should like to take up briefly some of the relevant issues in strengthening the UN.

One particular area of reform where Member States resolved at the Summit to intensify their efforts 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.

Discussions on Security Council reform have been going on now for over 7 years. This reflects the fact 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.

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.

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 utmost importance to have the whole Membership on board.

Many important decisions were already taken last fall to strengthen the UN. The Assembly 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, but in the end the Assembly reached consensus.

I already mentioned the decision adopting emergency measures to reinforce the Department of Peacekeeping Operations thus strengthening one of the core functions of the Organization. Decisions were also taken to improve the security and safety of UN personnel, to move towards results-based budgeting and on other issues that will contribute to strengthening the UN.

As President of the Assembly I have made an effort to guide its work in a more effective manner. But there is an overwhelming consensus that a concerted effort needs to be made in improving the working methods of the Assembly. Many decisions have been taken over the years to improve the work of the Assembly. But it is striking to note how few have 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.

Any reform 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.

To conclude I should like go back to where I started: the role of civil society. In the Summit Declaration a call was made for enhanced partnership and co-operation with civil society, including the private sector. 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.

I thank you for your attention.