

26-27 April 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the African Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other
Infectious Diseases**

The topics of this Summit of African leaders, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, are central to the Millennium Declaration, in which the world leaders not only decided to halve the proportion of the world's people living in poverty, but also by 2015, to have halted and begun to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases. The Millennium Declaration made specific reference to Africa, which in the past and also today is plagued with many problems, including slow economic growth and devastating diseases.

Poverty, health and social and economic development are all intimately linked. The economic impact of tuberculosis alone is estimated at about 12 billion US dollars in loss of income in poor communities. When HIV/AIDS prevalence in a country is 20% or higher, it may cause a decline of 1% in its annual GDP. In some African countries these figures are a reality today.

The spread of HIV/AIDS epidemic has exceeded all estimations. Largely due to this disease, life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is declining: from 59 years in early 1990 to only 45 years by the year 2010. At the same time, it is estimated that the number of AIDS orphans will rise to 40 millions in Africa alone. These simple figures illustrate the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS - it not only destroys individuals, it destroys entire societies.

I believe that knowledge is power - also in combating the spread of infectious diseases. Efforts must be strengthened to reach out to young people and those who still have not contracted tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS or some other communicable disease. Information and communication technologies must be utilized: new methods of global knowledge sharing coupled with the use of community radios and other traditional ways of communicating, are effective ways of sharing information and experiences and learning from each other. Millions of people have died in their prime because they did not know - they did not know how tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS is transmitted, they did not know how to protect themselves, even if opportunities may have been there, and they did not know that they carried the disease and that they were spreading it. Schools may be used as vehicles for knowledge. I believe that information on these killer diseases included in school curricula, together with efforts to improve basic services and living and nutritional conditions of people, may bring about positive change.

It has been indisputably proven that the single major contributor to better health of children, families and nations at large, is raising the educational level of girls and women. Therefore, any strategy to eradicate poverty and improve people's health necessarily needs to include strategies for the education of girls and women. Schools are more than just places to learn how to read and

write; they may be used for health education, inoculation campaigns and nutritional programmes; they are places where children and young people should receive necessary life skills.

This Summit of African leaders is a strong expression of the will of this continent to tackle the problems of tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases. There are success stories within African nations showing how strong leadership can multiply the impact of meager resources, and harness the capacities of ordinary people to fight disease. We know that prevention pays off. We have success stories from low-income communities, where deaths from tuberculosis have been reduced five-fold, and HIV infection rates reduced by 80%. These success stories can and should be made known to serve as inspiration to others.

The General Assembly of the United Nations decided last autumn to hold a Special Session on HIV/AIDS. The outcome of this Abuja Summit will be an essential and invaluable input to the final outcome document of this Special Session which is currently being prepared through an intergovernmental process, facilitated by two distinguished and able ambassadors, Ambassador Ka, the Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations, who is also here at this Summit, and Ambassador Wensley, Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations.

The preparatory process of this Special Session is following an unusual modality reflecting the urgency of addressing the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. Innovative approaches using information and communication technologies are being utilized to involve people from all parts of the world in the preparations.

The Special Session will hold interactive round tables which will assess and discuss prevention, care and access to drugs, human rights aspects, economic and social development, and resources. These topics represent the fundamental values of all of us as spelled out in the Millennium Declaration: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, and shared responsibility.

The Special Session on HIV/AIDS will be an expression of partnership between governments, multilateral and international organizations, non-governmental actors, and the private sector. The outcome document of the Special Session will be an expression of commitment by all to combat HIV/AIDS.

Fighting tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and other major infectious diseases requires more than willpower, it requires resources and capacities. This Summit and the Special Session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS will be important inputs to the preparatory process for the Financing for Development Conference, scheduled to take place during the first quarter of next year.

Let me finish by mentioning another special session of the General Assembly, the 5-year review of Habitat on human settlements, which will precede, in early June, the HIV/AIDS session. In the Millennium Declaration the world's leaders resolved to achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers. By doing so we will also decrease the risk of the spread of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. - The Millennium

Declaration is an expression of political will of world's nations - it is the duty of the world's nations now to implement this will.