

24 May 2001

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

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address the commemoration of Africa Day which marks the 38th Anniversary of the signing of the OAU Charter.

At the Millennium Summit Member States pledged to strengthen the United Nations as an indispensable common house of the entire human family. The challenges facing us are huge and to be successful the United Nations must deepen its relationship with other organizations.

I have stressed the important role that regional organizations play in promoting the UN's goals and fulfilling the Summit outcome. I also believe that we need to do more to improve these relations in order to intensify co-operation not only through words but also by deeds. I look forward to working with the OAU and its members in this respect.

When we celebrate Africa Day we should note that Africa enters the new millennium with hope and optimism. After a long period of stagnation and slow growth, witnessed not only by negative per capita income but also deterioration in the social situation, per capita income in several African countries has grown at a positive rate since 1994, peaking at 4.8 per cent in 1996. This was made possible because the majority of African countries are pursuing economic policies, aimed at reducing macroeconomic imbalances and providing an enabling environment to stimulate private sector development. It should also be stressed that economic reforms have been accompanied by political liberalization and a movement towards participatory forms of government. This in turn is giving rise to improved relationships between the State and civil society.

However, economic growth has not been sustained in the majority of African countries. Since 1996, growth has slowed down, though it has remained positive. But growth projection of 3.1 per cent for 2001 and 4.3 per cent for 2001 provide cause for optimism.

Recent improvements in economic performance notwithstanding, Africa remains the poorest and least developed region of the world, the least developed technologically, the most indebted in terms of external debt to GDP ratio, and the most affected by civil conflict. And yet, overseas development assistance to Africa has fallen, from \$32 per head in 1990 to \$19 by 1998. This decline took place despite the efforts by African countries to undertake economic and political reforms. ODA can catalyse development, especially through investment in the social sector and the infrastructure. The donor community must meet the ODA target of 0.7 per cent. So far is only a few countries have met or exceeded this target.

It is in this connection that I should like to recall that at the Millennium Summit we resolved to support the consolidation of democracy in Africa and assist Africans in their struggle for lasting peace, poverty eradication and sustainable development. The observance of Africa Day this year gives us all an opportunity to recommit ourselves to fulfilling the commitments we have made at the Summit.

The Third United Nations Conference on the LDC's, which was part of the follow up process to the Summit, reinforced some of the critical issues relating to financing for development in the LDCs, including, among others, debt, market access, ODA and foreign direct investment. A number of concrete promises were announced in the Conference, and we must ensure an effective follow up in order to implement the outcome which will benefit the African region, which hosts 34 out of 49 LDCs.

One important issue raised at the Summit was the need to tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic, also addressed by the recent Abuja Summit, which I had an opportunity to attend. Largely due to HIV/AIDS, 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 figures illustrate that HIV/AIDS not only destroys individuals, it destroys entire societies. At this very moment negotiations on the action plan for the HIV/AIDS Special Session are going on in another room. We all must make our best effort to focus the discussion on the core issues, which would ensure that the outcome is relevant also to Africa.

Let me now briefly touch upon the role of regional organizations in conflict prevention and peace building. The role of regional organizations, such as OAU is particularly important in conflict prevention and post-conflict peace-building. The OAU with its Mechanism for Conflict Prevention and Resolution and together with other regional organizations and civil society can make an important contribution towards peace in Africa. The UN will continue to support the OAU in its efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts in Africa. I hope to benefit fully from the experience of OAU and its members next week when we discuss conflict prevention and post-conflict peace building in the Working Group on Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa. I count on your active participation and support in making that discussion productive.

African development remains the UN's priority and in line with the spirit of the Millennium Declaration, the UN system has an important role to play in building and strengthening partnerships for development and peace in Africa. Only by working together with African leaders and the OAU can we achieve this goal.