

20 June 2001

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

On the occasion of World Today marks the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Today we also join the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) in observing the first World Refugee Day.

The issue of refugees is no less important to us today than it was fifty years ago; the number of refugees recognized by UNHCR in the world today exceeds 22 million. Over the last decade, the number of refugees peaked in 1995, due to several acute crisis which accelerated the exodus of people escaping war and conflict, persecution, human rights violations and abuse. The largest number of refugees and internally displaced people are currently in Asia, Europe and Africa.

Refugees are ordinary people, our fellow citizens of the world, facing extraordinary difficulties, sizable enough for them to leave their homesteads and their every-day lives. After the trauma of leaving their homes, refugees have to cope with and manage the pressures of starting over in another country, in another culture, frequently in distant countries and sometimes even in hostile environments. Refugees oftentimes have no information about their family members left behind in their home country. Many suffer irreparable physical disabilities and psychological trauma, bearing scars to tell the story of their voyage to safety. Refugees also face language barrier and have to adapt to communicating through and relying on interpreters for information on immigration, medical and legal status, and other practical issues, having only the hope that their messages are understood correctly and handled professionally.

Resettlement offers one solution for a refugee. But the waiting period for the decision on granting asylum is often long - several months or years. During this time it is crucial that the mental and physical capacities of refugees are maintained and rebuilt. There are many examples of refugees who have successfully worked as volunteers, or, for example, taken up and completed vocational or academic studies. Such endeavors must be supported and opportunities for self-development offered.