

25 June 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
to the special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS**

I should like to welcome you all to the twenty-sixth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly. I should like to thank H.E. Mr. Osmo Soininvaara, Minister of Health and Social Services of the Republic of Finland, for presiding over the opening of this meeting, prior to my election to this position. I am most grateful, and pledge to see this session to a successful conclusion.

Today the international community has gathered in this hall to mount a global response to the worst epidemic in our history, that of HIV/AIDS.

Unknown until twenty years ago, HIV/AIDS has turned into a crisis that touches us all - and that needs action by every one of us. 58 million people have become infected with the virus. Of these, 22 million have died, leaving families, communities and entire nations seriously affected. More than 36 million people around the world are living with HIV/AIDS and every single day another 14,000 people become infected. Despite consistent efforts to-date, the epidemic continues its rapid spread on all continents.

The statistics are overwhelming and difficult for us to comprehend. We simply cannot imagine 10 million children orphaned by AIDS and the figure is expected to rise to 40 million in less than ten years from now. It is hard to imagine that in some regions one in five or one in four adults is living with the virus and is likely to have his or her life cut short in its prime.

Today, at this special session of the General Assembly, we may welcome the many courageous people, men and women living with the virus, who have come to New York, and whose presence here makes this special session unique.

The decision of the General Assembly, alarmed by the accelerating spread of the epidemic, to convene a special session of the General Assembly as a matter of urgency, proves that the world is committed to intensify efforts to contain the epidemic and tackle the crisis.

We can have the best technical strategies in the world to combat this disease, and still make no difference, if we do not have strong leadership. In this session we will galvanise political commitment and leadership. Such leadership is represented here today - from all corners of the world and from all levels of our society.

Prevention, care, treatment and support, the efforts to find a vaccine and care for children orphaned by AIDS are also critical. These are additional reasons why this special session is so important in the history of the epidemic. This special session is a landmark in the history of the United Nations. With our concerted efforts we will be able to turn the tide and contain the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Preparing for this special session has been a Herculean effort for all of us, not the least for the two co-facilitators, Ambassador Wensley of Australia and Ambassador Ka of Senegal. I wish to thank them wholeheartedly for the enormous and tireless work and effort they have done. As we still have not achieved full agreement on the text of the declaration of commitment, I should like to appeal to all delegations to make every effort to reach an agreement on the remaining issues.

Let me now call on the Secretary-General of the United Nations, His Excellency, Mr. Kofi Annan.