

7 August 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on "The role of International Organizations in coping with cultural
conflicts" at the Summer Seminar: Cultural Borders and
Multicultural Societies by the United Nations Association of Estonia
in Saaremaa, Estonia**

It is a great pleasure to participate in this summer seminar. I should like to express my gratitude to the United Nations Association of Estonia and my Estonian friends for the opportunity to take part in your discussions on multicultural societies.

The topic of this seminar is very important and timely, as the peoples of the world are more interlinked than ever before. Globalization has been driven by the dynamism of the market economy, but the end result means more than just creating bigger markets. To sustain, globalization must also have a basis in shared values and advancement of social development and of greater participation.

The role of the United Nations in promoting common understanding and tolerance among peoples from all cultures is enshrined in the Charter itself. The determination of Member States to pursue these goals was clearly demonstrated at the Millennium Summit last year. At the Summit it was acknowledged that further efforts are needed to make the benefits of globalization more evenly shared. In the Millennium Declaration, the world leaders affirmed their common vision on global values and principles, including equality, tolerance, protection and promotion of human rights, as well as respect for human beings in all their diversity of beliefs, culture and language.

Implementation of these Millennium commitments requires that both national governments and international organizations bear their responsibility. No single country alone can resolve these global challenges. Nor can we live in isolation any more. Global issues need global solutions. But actions should start at the local level.

We have all observed that while societies are increasingly pluralistic and multicultural, tendencies towards intolerance have grown, and have even led to violent acts in many countries. The international community has also become more and more aware that many times the seeds of conflicts are initially sown in an atmosphere of intolerance.

Less than a week ago the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on my initiative on the consideration of the important report by the Secretary General on prevention of armed conflict. The Secretary General urges the UN and Member States to move from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention. He stresses the need to address the root causes of conflicts. These causes are manifold and include social and cultural structures and aspects. One cannot emphasize

enough the crucial importance that respect for human rights plays in creating an environment of stability and harmony. The report rightly stresses the importance of promoting a broad range of human rights, including not only civil and political rights but also social and cultural rights. Culture should not be used as a pretext for not allowing people, in particular women and minorities, to enjoy their human rights.

The report underlines the primary responsibility of governments in preventing armed conflicts. The logical consequence of this is that prevention must have national ownership. The United Nations and the international community can and should assist governments in their efforts. Since we are here as guests of the UN Association of Estonia, I should like to note that civil society has an important role to play in conflict prevention. I believe that this is true in particular in the prevention of cultural conflicts. Confidence building between different communal groups with the assistance of NGO actors and women's groups has been the first step towards conflict resolution in many conflicts of cultural, religious or ethnic origin.

The media has been cited many times as a source of intolerance and instigation of violence. And as we know this has obviously been the case with so called "hate radios". At the same time it is difficult, if not impossible, to regulate the flow of information in the Internet age. Moreover, one needs also ask to what extent control is even desirable, or compatible with freedom of expression. Societies that inhibit freedom of expression also inhibit the full enjoyment of human rights and foster intolerance. Yet even when freedom of the press is guaranteed, it does not ensure that incidents of racism, discrimination and xenophobic behavior will not occur. Indeed, it is a sad commentary on our world today that such incidents are on the rise. Respect for freedom of expression and the press is also an important element in conflict prevention. On the other hand, more information does not necessarily result in better understanding among people.

But with freedom comes responsibility. Freedom of expression should not be interpreted as the freedom to incite or promote racial hatred or violence. On the other hand, our efforts to combat xenophobia and related intolerance must strike a balance with the need to protect freedom of expression. Hate speech, like hate sites on the Internet, can be countered only by fostering free access to information which exposes these ideas for inciting hostility and discrimination.

Education is the essential tool to foster values of tolerance and non-violence in a multicultural society. In this light, it becomes crucial that every child should have access to education in such societies. Designing educational policies and training material on human rights education and elements of democracy and intercultural understanding are key issues to be included.

Governments' responsibility in this framework is to try to educate people and promote a culture that fosters tolerance and an understanding of our differences. Here the media can have an enormous influence. In my view, the media has an obligation to make a positive contribution to the fight against intolerance. But decisive action and necessary criminal procedures against those that do not obey the rules is also necessary.

One of the pillars of international and regional cooperation is continued intercultural and intercommunal dialogue to promote exchange of views and raise knowledge about different cultures. The culture of peace also requires the willingness by all parties to solve conflicts in a constructive and timely way. Peace is not simply the absence of war and violence, but a concept founded in a sense of justice and societal harmony. It includes the concept of empowering all citizens for democratic participation in political processes, because peace, democracy and development are fundamentally intertwined with each other.

The United Nations emphasizes that partnerships with civil society, involving especially young people and the media, has a crucial role in combating intolerance and discrimination. To improve local and global governance, we need to build on interaction and mutual trust among all actors in given communities.

To conclude, and to illustrate the positive force that culture and cultural ties necessarily carry with them, I should like to take an example from the Finnish-Estonian context. This is also to underline how important it is to respect and tolerate other cultures and cultural customs.

Finland and Estonia have a common cultural background, but very different political history. The relations and cultural ties between the peoples of Estonia and Finland have continued and flourished throughout history, even during the difficult times of the cold war. At times it seemed that these ties were the only relations between our two nations. But they were strong, and remain strong, and they also played a role in the later political history of this country.

The power of culture should never be underestimated. It is a potent factor that can be used as a positive engine to promote understanding and to bring nations and peoples together. But it can also be misused to instigate suspicion, intolerance and hatred. Political leaders bear the main responsibility for countering such misuse.