

31 August 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the opening of the World Conference against Racism, Racial  
Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance**

I should like to congratulate you on your election as the President of the Conference. I am confident that with your experience and wisdom, you will be able to guide this important conference to a successful outcome.

I am honoured to address the opening of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in my capacity as President of the General Assembly. This conference is one of the five United Nations conferences and special sessions convened since last September's Millennium Summit. As President, I have been mandated to follow up the implementation of the Millennium Declaration adopted by the Heads of State and Government. This conference should rise to the challenge and prove that Member States are truly committed to the implementation of the Declaration.

The Millennium Declaration brought together the global development agenda of the 1990s, but it also reflected a unique consensus on the values and principles of the international community. Many of the goals and principles of the Declaration are closely linked to the outcome of this Conference.

In the Millennium Declaration, governments committed themselves not only to respect human rights in general but explicitly to respect equal rights, without distinction. The Declaration reaffirmed the respect for each other in all our diversity and our determination to eliminate acts of racism and xenophobia. It also obliged us to protect those who can find themselves in situations of vulnerability.

Racism and racial discrimination are among the most powerful assaults on human dignity and freedom. No society can tolerate racism without undermining peace and justice. The fight against racism and racial discrimination has been at the forefront of the United Nations since its creation. The inclusion into the UN Charter of the promotion and protection of human rights for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion, was based largely on the world's experiences before and during the Second World War.

The General Assembly has throughout the years played a significant role in addressing racism and racial discrimination - not only as a political forum for debate but also as a policy-making instrument for the creation of programmes to tackle these evils. The three Decades to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, the two previous World Conferences against racism and racial

discrimination, and the current Year of Mobilization against Racism and Racial Discrimination have all served as tools to achieve results in the fight against racism.

The United Nations played a key role in ending apartheid. It was a major achievement of the international community as a whole, and marked the extinction of institutionalized forms of racial discrimination. And yet, while mass media, international travel and technological progress bring people closer and closer, we are witnessing a resurgence of intolerance, manifestations of xenophobia, racism, racial discrimination and ethnic conflicts across the world. The fundamental rights of migrants, refugees, ethnic, national and religious minorities and indigenous peoples are being denied. This resurgence of ethnic conflicts in many parts of the world is a source of concern. New theories of racial and ethnic purification have emerged. Inequality has become the pressing challenge of our time.

It is against this background that in February 1998, the General Assembly decided that it was time for the international community to confront the rising tide of racism and racial discrimination. It decided to convene this World Conference to formulate concrete recommendations to further action-oriented national, regional and international measures to combat all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

We have gathered here to take a big step forward in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. I have followed the preparatory process of this conference with great interest. Substantial progress has been made in shaping the final document. I encourage you all to work hard to make the outcome a landmark for further action by Member States and the United Nations. A great deal of political will and leadership is still required to reach an agreement on the remaining outstanding issues.

Durban - a truly symbolic forum for this conference, and a reminder for us all that when there is political will and determination, changes can be made - offers a unique opportunity to make our century a century of understanding among people, a century of acceptance of diversity, and a century of respect for differences. We have reached a critical moment where each individual should be an equal member of the human family.

We have a great responsibility, and I remain confident that we have the potential to shape attitudes and resolve the basic question of human relationships - how people should relate to each other - with respect and tolerance.