

3 December 2002

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on the International Day of Disabled Persons**

The theme that marks this year's observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons, "Sustainable Livelihood and Independent Living," is a reflection of the progress achieved in the two decades since the General Assembly's adoption of resolution 37/52 in December 1982, whereby Member States agreed upon the World Programme of Action concerning disabled persons.

Today, we celebrate this observance with a different perspective towards disabled persons than when this issue was first brought to the attention of the world. It is pertinent to note that disabled persons are now viewed, not just as a burden to society, but as individuals, and many of whom, if assisted, can contribute in the economic and social life of the community and become self sufficient. There are some 600 million disabled persons in the world constituting nearly 10 percent of the global population. This population needs positive action on the part of governments, private sector and the civil society. The issue requires policy strategies, legislation and incentives at national levels.

The recent High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Conclude the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, that took place in Japan this past October, reviewed the situation of disabled persons in the region and concluded, that despite the decade's progress in identifying disability as an issue needing much attention and resolution, implementation remains elusive. About 400 million of the world's disabled persons live in Asia and about 160 million live below the poverty line. Another sobering figure shows that less than 10 per cent of children and youth with disabilities are attending school. Persons with disabilities continue to face institutional, environmental and attitudinal discrimination.

At this critical juncture, it is imperative that relevant governmental and regional institutions focus on the issue of sustainable livelihood and independent living through infrastructure for education, training, capacity building, rehabilitation, medical and social services, safety nets and promote employment opportunities. Information and communication technologies could be important facilitators, provided the tools and equipment is made available. Through initiatives that support the access by disabled persons, to such mechanisms, I believe we may move towards the goal of a "Society for all" by the year 2010, as endorsed by the Assembly in its resolution 45/91.

Prevention is equally important as a strategy. The victims of landmines and HIV/AIDS represent significant percentages of the population, particularly in Asia and the Pacific region and Africa respectively. The United Nations system has played a powerful catalytic role, firstly to place this

issue on the world agenda more than a generation ago and secondly through regular monitoring and reporting of the progress achieved at national and international levels. The United Nations General Assembly also created a United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. Several United Nations agencies continue to be engaged actively in many regions around the world with technical and financial assistance. Two important aspects of this issue remain to be addressed. These are the lack of a comprehensive database on disability statistics and the application of benefits of treaties and conventions dealing with human rights and elimination of discrimination of populations with disabilities.

I appeal to all Member States, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations, to work alongside the United Nations to further address the needs of the disabled persons. Today, let us reaffirm our commitment and our promise to make some progress in equalization of opportunities by, for and with persons with disabilities.