

5 December 2002

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development**

Today we celebrate the volunteers and their important contributions to society. Volunteerism has an important place in our society and the potential for its role in attaining the United Nations Millennium Goals is untapped and unlimited. Local voluntary involvement is a valuable and indispensable contribution to the betterment of social conditions, promotion of economic development, and empowering people to take charge. It covers every human activity, from the informal sector to the formal sector. It spans all areas, ranging from supporting democratization and peace-building initiatives, electoral assistance, verifying human rights, humanitarian aid, education, gender mainstreaming, health-care or sustaining the environment. Volunteerism is inclusive of all ages and reinforces a sense of collective responsibility and makes a tangible difference to the lives of people in a community. In the process the individual volunteer experiences self-fulfillment, thereby creating a win-win situation.

The International Year of Volunteers ended on 5 December 2001. It was launched with a view to achieving four main objectives: recognition, facilitation, networking, and promotion of volunteering. Achievements in all of these areas have been remarkable. The recognition of volunteerism was advanced by a number of research studies that were conducted globally and nationally through international support and cooperation. The highest authorities in most countries have recognized the crucial role of Volunteers in human development programmes. Several concrete actions have been taken by them to incorporate this volunteerism into their development strategies. The Year helped to facilitate volunteering through a number of specific measures, such as enactment of new, or strengthening of existing, legislation which will make the volunteer action in many countries easier. Consultations on policy options and creation of new volunteer-support mechanisms and infrastructure such as volunteer centers, volunteer corps, national commissions as advisory bodies and national forums are already in place in several countries.

For networking, the International Year of Volunteers was a milestone in recognizing the tireless work of volunteers. It generated and mobilized public awareness. It helped to connect volunteers of various parts of the world, and most importantly, it created an environment conducive and motivating to volunteer action. Many more governments now see volunteerism as a valuable asset that needs to be strategically factored into development policies and programmes. The International Year, in addition to building networks of volunteers, provided the volunteers in individual countries, a sense of inter-connective support and mutuality. It gave an opportunity for organizing a number of meetings, workshops and training courses, to share and exchange information and best practices. Very importantly, it engaged persons who may have been

perceived as passive recipients only of volunteer help, such as older persons, persons living with HIV/AIDS, and large populations of refugees and displaced persons. Volunteerism was promoted through the media, including radio stations, television programmes, journals and newspapers. Promotional events were organized internationally and tools such as booklets, posters and commemorative postage stamps were published and distributed. We hope that the media will continue this trend of promoting volunteerism.

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, which was established over thirty years ago, had the responsibility to coordinate and plan the activities during the International Year of Volunteers and will continue to promote this essential component in the formula to eradicate poverty. The United Nations agencies, are also committed to increased involvement to promote volunteerism.

The International Year of Volunteers has enhanced the concept of volunteerism by invigorating and energizing the movement of volunteer action and by putting volunteering on a more solid basis for the years to come. In this respect, governments, international organizations, civil society, and private sector should continue to support and develop the volunteerism infrastructure and technical cooperation. The unique relationship between volunteerism and the United Nations will continue to be reinforced and developed.

The International Volunteer Day is an occasion to recognize the invaluable contribution of volunteers and to thank the women and men who devote themselves to voluntary service. We pay tribute to all those performing volunteer services and particularly to the United Nations Volunteer programme and its UN Volunteers, who have set a noble example through their services in various capacities around the world.