

9 December 2002

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,  
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary  
of the Opening for Signature of the Law of the Sea**

Excellencies  
Distinguished Delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to open this session. We must remind ourselves that life itself arose from the oceans. Ocean covers 72 per cent of the earth's surface. Since ancient times, domination of the sea and maritime trade has symbolized and attributed power and prosperity. From the fifteenth century onwards, great discoveries gave further importance to domination of the sea, as also an extraordinary impetus to seafaring. Modern technologies of the last century offered the opportunity to exploit the mineral resources of the sea and speeded up the industrial and economic development. The use of oceans has evolved from basic provision of food and as a medium of transportation, resources for energy and minerals. The great importance of the ocean remains. Thus it is no surprise that the supremacy over the oceans has also been a source of conflicts and for many years it was law of the strongest that ruled.

Tomorrow, on 10 December it will be 20 years since the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was opened for signature, as a result of the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea that took place from 1973 until 1982. Aware of the extreme importance to elaborate a new and comprehensive regime for the law of the sea the international community worked together and mutual cooperation overcame numerous conflicting interests of various countries. More than 150 participating delegations, representing all regions and all legal and political systems, representing coastal countries, island states as well as landlocked countries, made great efforts. The text of the Convention was adopted by consensus having in mind and (let me quote the preamble paragraph of the Convention): "the historic significance of this Convention, as an important contribution to the maintenance of peace, justice and progress for all people of the world...believing that the codification and progressive development of the law of the sea achieved in this Convention will contribute to the strengthening of peace, security, cooperation and friendly relations among all nations in conformity with the principles of justice and equal rights, and will promote the economic and social advancement of all peoples of the world, in accordance with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations as set forth in the Charter."

The elaboration of the Convention represents an attempt to establish true universality in the effort to achieve a "just and equitable international economic order" governing ocean space. For the first time the Convention offers universal and complex legal framework for sharing the oceans as

a common heritage of mankind. The text of the Convention is not only the result of codification of customary law, but it embodies the progressive development of international law as well, and also constitutes the International Seabed Authority and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. The high number of states parties to the Convention is the best proof of the magnificent success of all those who participated in the work.

With deep regret, I would like to take this opportunity to commemorate the eminent persons who created the Convention but some of who are no longer with us to participate in today's session. We are grateful to them and their presence is ensured through the fruit of their work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The new law of the sea established by the Convention is based on the idea of the oceans as a common heritage. This concept must be understood not only as sharing the benefits offered by the sea but, above all, as sharing the responsibility for its protection and conservation in order to enable the ecological balance of our planet and for the future generation to maintain and enjoy.