

21 February 2003

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

In order to preserve the cultural heritage of humanity, in November 1999, the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed the 21st day of February of every year as International Mother Language Day. In a world of globalization, where a few languages take priority, the United Nations and UNESCO sought to protect and promote linguistic diversity and multilingual education.

In recognition of the tremendous creativity involved in formulating a language, given that there are some 6,700 languages spoken amongst our planet's population, mother language was acknowledged as an important and precious element of the cultural heritage and identity of a community. The date 21 February was chosen in homage to 3 "language martyrs" from Bangladesh who were shot on 21/22 February 1952, during public demonstrations to promote their mother language, Bangla, as a national language along with Urdu, in the then newly created Pakistan. The origin of this day is attributed to an organization known as "Mother Language lovers of the World" in Canada who proposed this idea to the United Nations and UNESCO and were told by UNESCO that this request should be presented through a member state. The Government of Bangladesh obliged.

On this day it would also be appropriate to pay homage to the memory of Professor Stephen Wurm, an Australian of Hungarian origin, who spoke some 50 languages himself, and who compiled the "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing." In this work he has described the 3000 mother languages that are endangered and the processes leading to their gradual extinction. Examples of successful initiatives to save some of them are also provided in this atlas. One such example is the mother language Cornish in England that is said to have become extinct in 1777. Recent efforts to revive it have been successful and now over 1000 persons speak the language.

As a tool of communication, the mother language has a powerful role in the formation of the individual, and is " the most powerful instrument of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage." In recognition of this phenomenon, in November 2001, UNESCO followed up the proclamation of the International Mother Language Day, by promulgating the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. Protection of traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and combating illicit traffic in cultural goods and services are some of the several aims of this Declaration. Member States are encouraged to foster multilingual education. Switzerland, Norway, The Netherlands and India are some examples of countries where the populations are encouraged to be multilingual.

The Internet is a powerful tool to facilitate universal access to cultural information, currently only available in libraries and museums, to enhance knowledge and respect for cultures other than one's own. Similarly Member States may adopt policies in support of translation tools and multilingual electronic resources as positive initiatives in defense of cultural diversity.

I hope that the International Mother Language Day will inspire peoples of the world towards mutual respectful tolerance of our rich cultural traditions of which mother language is one of the most precious.