

31 May 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,  
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,  
on World No-Tobacco Day**

On 21 May 2003, the 192 members of the World Health Organization (WHO) unanimously adopted the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control aimed at curbing tobacco-related deaths and disease. The Convention requires countries to impose restrictions on tobacco advertising, sponsorship and promotion, establish new labeling and clean indoor air controls and strengthen legislation to restrain tobacco smuggling. Considering the strong power and opposition of the tobacco industry, the birth of this Convention can be seen as an important victory in the battle against tobacco. All those who contributed to this achievement rightly merit our congratulations and admiration for their courage, vision and perseverance.

However, the war against tobacco is by far not yet over. Probably by coincidence, but very significantly, 21 May 2003 will be remembered not only because of the Convention on Tobacco Control but also as a day when a Florida appeals court reversed a landmark \$145 billion judgment against major U.S. cigarette manufacturers that at the end of the day resulted in very strong gains in the tobacco stocks at the stock market. The fact that this newly adopted treaty is just a first step in a long process, could hardly have been better illustrated.

The war against tobacco started some 400 years ago. In 1600, Pope Urban VIII threatened excommunication for those who smoked or took snuff in holy places. This threat was in 1624 broadened for snuff users everywhere. A Chinese Imperial edict forbade planting and use of tobacco in 1612 and it was made a crime punishable by decapitation in 1638. The Mongolian emperor decreed the death penalty on those using tobacco in 1617. Persian Shah Sefi punished two merchants for selling tobacco by pouring hot lead down their throats. Tsar Alexis of Russia created severe penalties for smoking in 1634; whipping, a slit nose, and transportation to Siberia for the first offence, for the second offence, execution. However, none of these measures worked in the long run.

Smoking is "a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless" wrote King James I of England in his famous essay "A Counterblast to Tobacco" in 1604. In order to eliminate smoking, he taxed very heavily the importation of tobacco. But instead of eradicating tobacco, he suddenly realised that however hateful smoking was, its pleasant power was that it could bring him huge profits. That smoking stinks and causes cancer and death has been said a million times since. Nevertheless, the huge profits connected with the production and distribution of this drug continue to take precedence over its deadly consequences. According to the World Health Organisation, tobacco now kills

some five million people each year (this is more than 13,000 men and women every day!) and the death toll could double rapidly to reach 10 million by 2020 if countries do not implement the measures adopted in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

I am aware that the long war against tobacco will not be won over night. Users of tobacco currently represent one third of the world's adult population and, as Sir Francis Bacon wrote in 1610, "tobacco use is a custom hard to quit". However, the health, social, economic and environmental consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke are so devastating that I am deeply convinced that the war on tobacco must go on and it is a duty of every responsible politician to support it. The cruel methods of the middle ages have not solved the tobacco epidemic. The measures proposed in the new Convention are indeed much more humane, nonetheless they are based on convincing experience from countries that have witnessed considerable successes in their battles against tobacco and it has been proven that these methods obtained results. I hope that now there will be a chance to prove their efficiency worldwide. I therefore urge all the member countries of the World Health Organisation to sign, ratify and, most importantly, to implement the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control without unnecessary delay. Hopefully, the month of May 2003 will be remembered in the future as a real "Counterblast to Tobacco".