

5 June 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on World Environment Day – “Water, two billion people are dying for
it!”**

Each year on 5th June, the international community commemorates the World Environment Day in the framework of their broader thoughts about the state of the Earth's environment. This year we also celebrate the International Year of Freshwater and therefore the theme of World Environment Day is “Water, two billion people are dying for it!” Water for drinking, hygiene and food security is one of the most essential elements for sustaining life in general and human life in particular. Water is also crucial for the economic growth and development activities of mankind. The Millennium Goals of the United Nations have incorporated this issue as a part of eradication of poverty. This was re-affirmed by all the participating leaders at the World Summit on Sustainable Development last year with the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. They agreed on the key targets to tackle water and sanitation problems for an estimated 1.2 billion people without access to safe drinking water and the estimated 2.4 billion people who lack proper sanitation because of shortage of adequate supplies of water.

We in general, have an image of the world as a blue planet, because more than two thirds of the surface is covered by water. But according to UNESCO studies related to the International Year of Fresh Water, 97.5 percent of all water on earth is salt water. Furthermore, nearly 70 percent of the freshwater is frozen in the icecaps and most of the remainder is present as soil moisture. Currently only about 0.3 percent of all water on Earth is readily accessible for direct human use. Therefore management of existing water supplies and development of future water resources should take priority in our national and international planning.

Every day tons of human waste finds its way in watercourses and affects the health of large populations. Water related diseases are a growing human tragedy killing more than 3 million people each year. The majority of all infant mortality worldwide is linked to water related infections and parasitic diseases. Water borne diseases such as cholera, typhoid, meningitis, hepatitis A and B can be controlled easily through better hygiene practices and availability of water. Riverine ecosystems are endangered virtually everywhere by non-sustainable development and misuse of limited freshwater resources. According to the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, of the world's 500 major rivers, 205 are seriously polluted and depleted from overuse leading to millions of environmentally displaced people. Water is used for transportation and energy generation. The regions most vulnerable to domestic water shortages include those that presently have poor access to water, and have rapid population growth, uncontrolled urbanization, financial problems and which lack a skilled workforce.

The urgency and the need for treating waste water and containing the industrial and other trans boundary atmospheric pollution harmful to public health and damage to ecosystems, requires our collective and individual attention and action. Implementation of the Polluter Pays Principle should be applied broadly and a culture of accountability more widely legitimized. Let us pledge to practice sustainable and conservation habits in our daily lives so as to enhance the opportunities for those deprived of this precious resource and dedicate ourselves to finding new technologies to meet this challenge.