

21 October 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,
to the Women's International Forum**

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is indeed a pleasure for me to join the Women's International Forum at your meeting today, and especially to have the opportunity to address you on the issue of United Nations Reform. I wish to thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to a frank and rewarding exchange of views with you on this matter. As most of you are not directly involved in the daily diet of debates, consultations and negotiations that take place in the United Nations and are accomplished members of the non-governmental community, I know that you will bring fresh and important perspectives on the issue of United Nations reform.

Over the ten-day period of the General Debate of the Fifty-eighth session, one hundred and thirty speakers - over half of whom were Heads of State and Government - urged that the pace of United Nations reform be accelerated. I made clear in my policy statement to the General Assembly on 16 September that reform of the organization remained an imperative which, in the current international environment, assumes greater urgency. Reform of the United Nations is, of course, one of the priorities of my Presidency.

What I have found interesting, however, is that while every one believes that reform is necessary, "reform" means different things to different people. Some focus on reform of the United Nations generally. They contend that a fifty-eight year old organization created in a post war scenario by fifty-one states soon to be would be divided by the Cold War, and that has seen a dramatic increase in its membership, needs an overhaul of its principal organs in order to deal effectively with current realities.

Others place the revitalization of the General Assembly at the heart of their reform concerns. For some this entails enabling the General Assembly to better perform its Charter functions. It also bears centrally on the Assembly's authority as the only United Nations organ with universal membership, the relationship of the General Assembly to other organs and the further institutionalization of the Office of the President, for example.

From another perspective, the focus of the revitalization issue should be the work methods and procedures of the General Assembly. This includes ideas such as reducing the Assembly's agenda; streamlining the work of the Main Committees; improving the form and substance and reducing the number of resolutions; improving the quality and reducing the quantity of

documentation; adjusting customary 'set piece' debates to make them more interactive; and establishing genuine partnerships with non-governmental organizations.

Security Council reform has been more challenging. Two essential elements have emerged from the various viewpoints of what the focus of Council reform ought to be. There are those for whom expanding the membership of the Council to make it more representative of the general membership of the United Nations is the key issue.

For others, the focus is on the further democratization of the Council, including dispensing with the veto of the permanent five members or at least confining it strictly to Chapter VII issues. Still others are of the view that new permanent members should be appointed to the Council to ensure that all regions are represented among the Council's permanent members. Some take the position that such members should also have the veto, while others are of the view that they should not.

While I have attempted to break down the essence of the debate on United Nations reform, let me hasten to say that, for most, what "reform" means would not be one or the other of the positions I have outlined, but a combination of several of those positions.

Whether we speak of reform of the General Assembly, the Security Council or of the United Nations generally, the reform agenda is the responsibility of the General Assembly. Both the Working Groups on Revitalisation of the General Assembly and Reform of the Security Council function out of the Assembly and United Nations reform is brought to the Assembly to be decided on by member states. Therefore, as President of the Assembly it is my responsibility to provide leadership to the reform exercise during this Fifty-eighth Session.

In addressing the reform issue, I ask myself: what has led to the current fervour for United Nations reform? After all, the idea of reform is not new. For the General Assembly it is an ongoing undertaking, with varying intensity since the Forty-fifth Session of the Assembly in 1990. The Security Council reform initiative is a decade old this year.

I believe I am on safe ground in saying that the reform debate has gained considerable impetus because of what many regarded as the United Nations failure to reach a decision in respect of military action in Iraq. In light of the action taken in Iraq, questions were raised about the relevance of the organization, particularly its ability to maintain international peace and security. Ongoing crises, particularly in the Middle East but worldwide as well, also caused the organization's relevance and effectiveness to be called into question.

In respect to the General Assembly, in particular, charges of an Agenda overcrowded with outdated issues, resolutions that called for no particular action, the lack of energy of its debates, the low level of participation of Permanent Representatives in its work and the overshadowing of the Assembly by the Security Council, remain among the issues underpinning the call for urgent reform. There is validity to these charges.

We must recognize, however, that progress has been made in response to the demands for reform. The office of the President is one good example. A structured and institutionalized Office of the President is a recent development and a product of a reform initiative. The early election of the President and the General Committee is also making a contribution to the smooth transition from one President to the other. And considerable efforts have been made to reduce the agenda of the General Assembly.

There can be no dispute, however, that much more needs to be done in the area of United Nations reform. But we must ask ourselves the question: reform, with what purpose? Any reform must, I believe, make the United Nations a more credible, a more representative and a more effective organization. It must be directed towards reaffirming the United Nations relevance as the sole global organization that can take decisions on all issues on the international agenda, including the maintenance of international peace and security.

Reform should ensure that the Organisation can take decisions swiftly and efficiently and that its decisions can and will be fully implemented by member states. Reform should also provide a space for external actors, including NGOs to participate in the Assembly's work.

The Secretary-General has made known his intention to assemble a panel of eminent persons to advise him on United Nations reform, and to make recommendations that he may bring to the membership for consideration and decision. I, too, have clear ideas in respect of United Nations reform. I am proceeding with the reform initiatives currently before the Assembly on which I have clear ideas.

However, as President, I am mindful of the need to consult widely so that reform initiatives would receive the widest possible support. I began that process on 17 October in an informal meeting on Revitalisation of the General Assembly, in which representatives freely exchanged views on the matter of reform, on the basis of issues I had put to them for consideration on the range of reform issues. I will conduct a similar exercise in respect of the Security Council next month.

I must say, however, that the process of reform is not easy. If it were, the General Assembly would have been revitalized, the Security Council reformed, and the United Nations transformed a long time ago. But I do believe strongly in the need for reform, in our reform efforts, and that substantial progress is possible. Certainly, I intend to make every effort during my Presidency to pursue the reform agenda.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that institutional and procedural reform is not a panacea for the world's ills. It takes political will not only to reform the organization but also to ensure that a reformed organization functions as the Charter intended - to maintain peace and security, promote development, protect human rights and uphold respect for international law.

I thank you.