

17 November 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Presentation of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International
Disability Award to Italy**

His Excellency Roberto Maroni, Minister for Social Welfare and Labour of Italy, Mrs Annan, Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The global mandate of the United Nations gives it a key leadership role in action to ensure the full participation and equalisation of opportunity of persons with disabilities. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights constitutes an important framework within which the United Nations, its member states and the international community as a whole, must respond to the hopes and aspirations of all the world's people. As such, the Declaration provides a sound basis for the United Nations to work with, and on behalf of, persons with disabilities.

In proclaiming the rights of humankind, the Universal Declaration does not distinguish between people having disabilities, and those that do not. The Declaration is in fact clear in its affirmation that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Therefore, people with disabilities should, by right, contribute to the fullest extent in the development of their countries and societies, and should expect an appropriate response to their needs and well being.

The United Nations benefits from the support of the World Committee on Disability and other organisations in its efforts for the full participation and equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities. The Committee has contributed in concrete ways to the initiatives of the United Nations General Assembly to elevate world consciousness concerning the rights of the persons with disabilities, in line with the 1982 Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons. As the international arm of the National Organisation on Disability, itself a direct outgrowth of the International Year of Disabled Persons, the Committee has proved itself adept at matching its words with deeds.

Coming as it did one year after the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons, the Programme of Action reflects the outcomes of important initiatives taken during that year. Also, its adoption in the year immediately preceding the proclamation of the 1983-1992 Decade of Disabled Persons established the Programme as an invaluable framework for action at the national, regional and international levels.

The Programme imbued our disability initiatives with a new sense of urgency, and remains at the centre of international action, even as consultations proceed on the matter of adopting a convention on the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.

It is important that we recognise and celebrate successes that meet the objectives we set ourselves in all areas of human endeavours in this United Nations. Today, we recognize and celebrate decisive and exemplary action the Government and people of Italy have taken, to affirm the human rights and fundamental freedoms of people with disabilities and to greatly improve their lives, thus implementing the objectives of the Programme of Action.

Minister Maroni, I am pleased to be part of this celebration. I commend the Government and people of Italy for the considerable gains that have been made in this area. I congratulate Italy on receiving the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Award, presented jointly by the World Committee on Disability and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. This award, given in the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man of strong courage and determination, is also a tribute to him.

President Roosevelt transcended disability to provide, from his wheelchair, distinguished leadership to his country for more than a decade, to influence the peace after the destruction of World War II, and to contribute significantly to the vision that has evolved into the United Nations. He stands as an inspiration for people with disabilities, their families and organisations and as an example to the world of what can be achieved when equal opportunities are provided for all.

Now, more than ever, our disability initiatives need to be imbued with the spirit of President Roosevelt. The stark reality is that some six hundred million people in the world are living with disabilities, eighty five percent of them in developing countries.

We cannot say with any degree of certainty that we will decrease the number of people with disabilities, when we consider the number of injuries that occur each day, including from accidents in the home, on the job and on the road; from incessant as well as intermittent conflicts and war; and from deadly landmines and terrorism. When we consider, also, the crippling effects of deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS and birth defects the need to give new impetus to the promotion and protection of the rights of disabled persons becomes self-evident. The needs are particularly acute in the developing world.

Progress is, however, being made. Attitudes are changing, tolerance is taking root, and the space is increasingly being made, to the extent possible, for the disabled to articulate and realise their hopes and aspirations, including participating in nation building. Disability issues are also being incorporated into national development plans.

The Programme of Action is in common language we all understand. Let us use it to the greatest effect in keeping our commitment to ensure the full participation and equalisation of opportunities for disabled persons. This is the objective of the United Nations, an objective supported by the World Committee on Disability, and one to which the Government and people of Italy have given exemplary effect.

I thank you.