

17 November 2003

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

Minister Maroni, Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This and other events held in connection with today's awarding of The Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award to Italy, highlight three particular reasons why we should be optimistic about the protection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities.

The first reason is that United Nations initiatives in respect of disability - the outcomes of the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons, the 1983-1992 Decade of Disabled Persons and importantly, the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons - have brought disability issues to the forefront. This United Nations framework, including the work of the Special Rapporteur on Disability, continues to provide a firm foundation for, and to give impetus to, national, regional and international efforts in this area.

The second reason for optimism is the commitment of organisations, among them the World Committee on Disability, that work tirelessly, hand in hand with the United Nations and people with disabilities to achieve United Nations objectives concerning disability. High priority is given, in this context to full and equal participation of people with disabilities in the socio-economic development of their countries, and to ensuring that they are beneficiaries of development.

The third reason is the progress that is being made by countries the world over towards the goal of full and equal participation of people with disabilities in the economic, social and cultural life of their countries, and internationally through sporting and other events, such as the Special Olympics. Italy has made significant progress in this area, and today is recognised for its exemplary accomplishments by receiving The Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award of the World Committee on Disability and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. The award is given in the name of an accomplished statesman and world leader, whose triumph over disability is an inspiration for people with, and without disabilities.

Our optimism must, however, be tempered by the reality that millions of people the world over are living with disabilities, a vast majority of them in developing countries, and the numbers who are likely to become disabled as a result of accidents, conflict and terrorism, deadly disease such as HIV/AIDS, and other causes.

Another champion of people with disabilities, Helen Keller, commented regarding blindness that there was nothing worse than having sight, but being unable to see. After all, it is not sight, but vision that matters. It is a vision of equality of opportunity, of better standards of life in larger freedoms that we must all share, and which must be our guiding light in our endeavours for the full integration of people with disabilities into their countries and societies.

I thank you.