

20 November 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,
to the Council of Non-governmental Organisations “The General
Assembly: A Commentary on Progress in the Work of the 58th
Session”**

Madam Chair, Members of CONGO, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The community of non-governmental organisations is increasingly being recognised for the important contribution its members can, and are, making as partners with the United Nations over the wide spectrum of human endeavours within the organisation's mandate. Therefore, as President of the General Assembly, I consider this opportunity to exchange views with CONGO on matters of mutual interest on the General Assembly's agenda, and particularly those that have been addressed to date, to be important to the growth of cooperative networks to accomplish the organisation's objectives. I wish to thank CONGO for inviting me to address this meeting, and for warmly welcoming me here today.

I believe that one of the most important decisions made by the General Assembly in recent times was that made by the fifty-sixth session to elect the incoming President of each session some three months in advance of the session. The period following my early election in June 2003, and leading up to my taking up office in September 2003, was a period of reflection, preparation and consolidation. It was a period during which I engaged in upwards of eighty consultations - with Permanent Representatives, Chairs of regional and other Groups, senior United Nations Secretariat officials, and others concerned with the work of United Nations in general and the General Assembly in particular. These consultations were significant to bringing perspective to my Presidency.

A disturbing degree of pessimism, and even cynicism, about the state of affairs of the General Assembly, particularly its role and functioning, was evident in the early stages of my consultations. This atmosphere seemed to coincide with a questioning of the relevance of the United Nations, in the period leading up to and immediately following the military action in Iraq. Concerns were being expressed about the organisation's role, and particularly that of the Security Council, in the maintenance of international peace and security.

Ironically, a strong undercurrent of optimism was also evident in my consultations - it was thought to be an opportune time to reaffirm the role of the General Assembly as the only universal organ of the United Nations, having central policy making and supervisory functions. It was emphasised, also, that the time had come to bring development back to centre stage on the Assembly's agenda. Those consulted were also emphatic in their view that decisive action had to

be taken in the area of United Nations reform - particularly the revitalisation of the General Assembly - to better equip the organisation to carry out its critical global tasks.

The three overriding issues of immediate global concern that were self-evident from the early stages of my consultations - development, United Nations revitalisation and reform, and peace and security - were the areas in which I set priorities for my Presidency. Development was of particular concern for me since it impacted centrally on the socio-economic well being of peoples and of nations, particularly in the developing world.

I took as a critical starting point for my leadership of the General Assembly the views expressed by the more than eighty Heads of State and Government, as well as other high-level officials, who participated in the 23 September - 2 October General Debate of the Fifty-eighth Session. This was the most extensive participation of Heads of State and Government in the General Assembly since the Millennium Summit, and underscored the critical juncture at which the global community now stands.

Of all that we heard in the General Debate, the most encouraging pronouncement was the support, overwhelmingly stated, for multilateralism, the key, I believe, to our survival as nations and as a community of nations. Speaker after speaker emphasised that multilateralism was the essential and primary means for dealing with critical global problems. In that context, there was a tremendous outpouring of support for the United Nations, the premier universal organisation capable of addressing the most challenging problems of our times.

The General Assembly was also recognised by speakers in the General Debate as the leading forum for discussion of the full range of issues on the global agenda. There was significant support for the United Nations and the General Assembly to make meaningful progress in the three areas I outlined: development, United Nations reform and revitalisation and peace and security.

Our work in the Assembly to date, therefore, has been in accord with the pronouncements of Heads of State and Government and other high-level officials. It has also sought to sustain the momentum within the Assembly to achieve significant progress in areas of particular concern to the world's people, including sustainable development, poverty alleviation, the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, the maintenance of international peace and security and combating terrorism, and a United Nations capable of delivering on international mandates, for which organizational revitalization and change would be essential.

Regarding development, two important international events were convened early in the Fifty-eighth Session - a High-level Plenary on HIV/AIDS and a High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development. With respect to the High-level Plenary on HIV/AIDS, issues such as stigma and discrimination, the impact of HIV/AIDS on development, and the need to adequately fund action to combat HIV/AIDS were extensively addressed, both in Plenary statements of Heads of State and Government and other high-level officials and in the important interactive roundtable of Heads of State and Government.

Civil society, in particularly non-governmental organisations accredited to the United Nations, was extensively consulted in respect of the High-level Plenary on HIV/AIDS. Civil society representatives were active participants in this important initiative. We now have only to focus on delivering the important prospects that this gathering generated for meaningful progress in confronting this deadly pandemic. The General Assembly is endeavouring to give a sense of direction in this matter, through the resolution it is currently negotiating.

Progress in the development area should also be advanced subsequent to the High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development, to follow up the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002. In the lead up to, and preparation for, the High-level Dialogue, I chaired informal hearings and an interactive dialogue with representatives of non-governmental organisations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, and/or accredited to the Financing for Development process. Key issues such as commodities and tax cooperation, of critical importance to the developing world, were addressed in this context.

Major stakeholders - representatives of Governments, the heads of international financial institutions, members of civil society, including the business community - together reviewed implementation of the Monterrey Consensus adopted by the Financing for Development Conference. Following these deliberations, how we proceed to chart a course for the future becomes critical. At this time, the Assembly is actively engaged in determining follow-up action, with the objective of better financing development and with the Millennium Goals firmly in view.

I believe it fair to reiterate, in respect to the HIV/AIDS Plenary and the High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development, that the participation and contribution of non-governmental organisation significantly enriched the meetings and contributed to their positive outcomes.

It is important, though not enough, that we recognise the serious challenges impacting the development of African countries, ranging from civil conflict to slowed growth and development to the explosive HIV/AIDS pandemic. What is significant is that the matter of Africa's development has been brought to the forefront of the United Nations agenda, so that concrete action can be taken.

Strong support is being advocated for the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the framework within which African leaders themselves have proposed courses of action to address the continent's challenges. To pull together the perspectives expressed by member states on NEPAD and to ensure the widest appreciation of the issues involved, I summarised the discussion of this issue in the General Assembly.

I subsequently invited the Special Adviser of the Secretary General on African Affairs to address an open-ended meeting of the General Committee on the subject of NEPAD and other issues of importance to Africa. Our hope is that these initiatives will elicit the support necessary to accelerate the pace of Africa's development.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are also urging cooperation and support to assist them in addressing the myriad issues affecting them, including those that require special and differential treatment if they are to be adequately addressed. In particular, the SIDS hope for the broadest participation in the Conference to follow-up the Plan of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, when it takes place next year. Given the challenging economic outlook for many Least Developed Countries (LDC) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), building support for these countries in their sustainable development efforts is also a matter receiving the attention of the General Assembly.

There is general agreement that the fifty-eight year old United Nations must change, if it is to remain dynamic in a world very different from that of its inception. Consequently, the reform and revitalisation of the United Nations, particularly the General Assembly and the Security Council, has been a recurring theme for more than a decade. As President of the General Assembly, I have responded to the calls for decisive action to be taken on revitalization of the Assembly to effect change that will be integrally linked to the effective functioning of the Assembly over the broad range of issues within its mandate.

The Assembly has debated the revitalisation issue at length, and we have engaged in a detailed, frank and open discussion on the matter in two open-ended informal meetings of the plenary, the most recent being held this morning. There is widespread optimism that we are well on our way to reaching important conclusions in this area. Even as I speak, facilitators are carrying out consultations to reach agreement on a resolution we hope will be presented to the Assembly this December.

The reform of the Security Council is a very different matter. Central issues such as permanent membership and the veto are exceptionally challenging to resolve. In that regard, it is instructive that nations, like people, will act or refuse to act when they think that their interests are being advanced or jeopardized. I must, however, respond to the request of Member States for action in this area. We are now taking stock of ten years of debate on this issue, after which we will present proposals for consideration. The significant momentum for revitalization and reform gives hope that Member States will take up the challenge where it might be indicated, including in respect of Security Council reform.

The NGO community is aware of the initiative recently taken by the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, which will lead to proposals for United Nations reform. He has appointed a group of eminent persons to advise him on reform matters, principally in the area of peace and security. This is a matter on which the United Nations membership will pronounce and take decisions in the fullness of time.

In the meantime, I continue, with the cooperation of Member States, to implement elements of earlier reform resolutions on which action had not been taken and to advance other proposals that had been put to the Assembly. In that regard, much has been said about the better utilization of the General Committee. I have begun this process, through the convening of open-ended informal

meeting of the General Committee, to hear briefings from senior secretariat officials on critical matters on the Assembly's agenda. To date, the General Committee, meeting in informal sessions, has been briefed on the budget by the Comptroller of the United Nations, on NEPAD by the Special Adviser on Africa, and on the critical issue of safety and security of United Nations personnel by the Deputy Secretary-General. The objective of holding these briefings is to ensure that as much information as possible is shared with Member States to assist their consideration of the matters in question.

In the political and security area, the situation in Iraq has been a major preoccupation for all at the United Nations. The United Nations is uniquely placed to carry out the obligation of the international community to provide support to post-war Iraq, and there is general agreement that it must. A primary objective of that support is to enable the Iraqi people, as soon as possible, to take charge of their own country and destiny.

The deterioration of the situation in the Middle East is also cause for grave international concern. This accounts for the support given to initiatives aimed at bringing peace to that troubled region, and that would lead to the creation two states - Israel and Palestine - living side by side in peace.

I want to take this opportunity to express my condolences to the Government and people of Turkey and the United Kingdom, as they seek to address the senseless tragedies which have taken place in Istanbul. The threat of terrorism is a global problem, making the fight against terrorism a multilateral effort. It requires collective action to track the flow of illicit capital, the financing of terrorist groups, the illegal flow of arms and to confront the belligerence of transnational organized criminals, including those involved in illicit drug trafficking, if we are to this seemingly intractable problem

Fighting terrorism can be a burden for countries, particularly developing countries, as scarce resources must be diverted from economic and social development to security. Shortfalls have not readily been made up from outside, nor has indirect support, such as better terms of trade or greater access to technology been readily forthcoming.

Even as we grapple with terrorism and its human, economic and social consequences, yet another ominous development seems to be taking root. The United Nations and its staff members are being singled out as targets of terrorism. We saw this disturbing trend in Baghdad, and more recently, in Afghanistan. The grave implications of these developments for our collective security policies and systems accounts for the urgent attention these matters are receiving here at the United Nations.

The United Nations is also continuing its standard setting work, including through the codification of international law in areas of particular concern to the international community. In that regard, arrangements are being made for the Convention on Corruption, adopted recently by the General Assembly, to be opened for signature in Mexico next month. The Convention represents an important step forward and sends a powerful signal that corruption has no place in the conduct of government or any other business.

Up to this point, the cooperation and collaboration of Member States have allowed consensus to emerge around a broad range of issues on the General Assembly's agenda. Our primary task, now, is to ensure that this consensus finds expression in resolutions and decisions of the Assembly. Time has shown that resolutions that are vague or that seek to accommodate multiple points of view generally do not meet their objectives. The challenge to this Assembly, therefore, is to translate consensus into specific, implementable action.

I hope that this brief outline of the activities to date of the Fifty-eighth Session of the General Assembly will give you a general idea of the work we are doing to advance the global agenda through the Assembly. I welcome the assistance provided by NGOs to the Assembly, and the United Nations as a whole, in helping us to reach our shared goals and objectives.

You may have heard that I am a strong supporter of interactive discussion on international issues, particularly those before the General Assembly. I especially look forward to our exchange of views on the issues I have raised, and, indeed, on any other issues of concern in respect of the work of the General Assembly. Therefore, I will now conclude to permit me to hear your comments and take your questions.

I thank you.