

10 December 2004

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jean Ping,
President of the 59th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the Plenary Session Commemorating the Decade of
Human Rights Education**

Mister Secretary General,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we commemorate an historic event for humankind, the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose preamble consecrates legitimate and fundamental rights inherent to all of us as human beings "as a common standard to be achieved for all peoples and all nations".

As we decided last year, this year's commemoration is dedicated to human rights education. We also decided to hold a plenary session to mark the end of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) and to discuss future initiatives to be taken in view of strengthening education.

Indeed, it is important to educate and sensitize people on issues relating to human rights, as well as to promote respect, equality, cooperation and understanding between individuals and among nations. This is a long process which, like all education, occurs all life long.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

56 years ago, when proclaiming the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the General Assembly highlighted in particular the fundamental role of education in the achievement of human rights: As stated in the preamble: "every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms". Consistently to this call, United Nations activities have been more and more devoted to promoting respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

On the one hand, by establishing legal instruments in relevant United Nations organs, we have committed to ensure in our respective countries not only education in general, but also education about and for human rights.

On the other hand, we have always highlighted the importance of human rights education in various United Nations fora, in the General Assembly and at the Commission on Human Rights, as well as during many international meetings.

The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna considered "human rights education, training and public information essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace" and further called "on states and institutions to include human rights, humanitarian law, democracy and rule of law as subjects in the curricula of all learning institutions in formal and non-formal settings".

Thirdly, we have adopted many international programmes of action, such as the World Public Information Campaign on Human Rights and the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), whose Plan of Action and related guidelines encourage the elaboration and implementation of global, effective and sustainable strategies for human rights education at the national level.

Today, we commemorate the conclusion of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. When the General Assembly launched this programme, ten years ago, it urged in Resolution 4/184 "governmental and non-governmental educational agencies to intensify their efforts to establish and implement programmes of human rights education, as recommended in the Plan of Action, in particular by preparing and implementing national plans for human rights education".

A mid-term evaluation of the Decade indicated that the Decade has been a catalyst in eliciting a response from governments, though much more needs to be done. But the evaluation also pointed out that improved collaboration between governmental and non governmental actors, working in a spirit of mutual respect, is needed.

2004 showed an increase of governmental activities in the area of human rights education. However, some governments mentioned that human rights education will still remain a priority in their countries, since specific issues have not been dealt with. But the Decade was considered as a positive mechanism which had "put human rights education on the agenda as a priority issue" and helped to increase public awareness of this matter and provided a framework for international cooperation in this area.

Excellencies,
Ladies, Gentleman,

Both the proposed World Programme for Human Rights Education and the draft Plan of Action for its first phase (2005-2007) are before us for consideration and adoption.

Their endorsement by our Assembly is important, for many reasons: it will reaffirm that human rights education remains a priority for the entire international community; it will provide a common framework for action to all relevant actors; it will allow to support existing programmes and provide an incentive for the development of new ones and will enhance cooperation at all levels.

Nevertheless it is still obvious that initiatives such as the closing Decade and the proposed World Programme can have an effective impact only if national and local actors use them as mobilization tools.

In opening this plenary session, I would like to appeal to all of us to join efforts to make human rights education a reality in our societies and a focus of our discussions in the future years. Effective human rights education -which enhances respect, equality, cooperation and understanding, therefore preventing human rights abuses and conflicts- remains one of the best prerequisites towards the achievement of a peaceful world.

Thank you.