

1 April 2008

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,
on “Recognising the Achievements, Addressing the Challenges and
Getting Back on Track to Achieve the MDGs by 2015”**

Your Excellency Prime Minister of Finland,
Your Excellency the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Mali,
Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I welcome you all to this important and timely thematic debate to help get us back on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

I would like to thank the generous sponsors of this event the United Nations Foundation, the Arabella Philanthropic Investment Advisors, and the Permanent Missions of Austria, Qatar and the United Kingdom.

I would also like to give a special welcome to the Prime Minister of Finland and the Foreign Minister of Mali, whose presence today along side the Secretary-General symbolizes the sense of urgency and resolve with which both developed and developing countries attach to achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Let me begin by sharing with you the words of George Bernhard Shaw;

“The greatest evils and the worst of crimes is poverty”,..... eliminating poverty is our first duty....., “a duty to which every other consideration should be sacrificed.”

What a profound call to action against poverty.

Achieving the MDGs is fundamentally a test of our global partnership on development. A partnership, that goes beyond cooperation among Member States to include the private sector, civil society and the global public.

At this halfway point, the question is not whether the glass is half full or half empty? The issue is, how quickly are we going to fill it up? This is exactly the purpose of this debate.

I agree with one of the founding fathers of the MDGs, former Namibian President Sam Nujoma. We will only emerge victorious and meet most, if not all, of the MDGs by 2015, with more commitment and dedication.

The stakes are high. If we achieve the MDGs on time 500 million people will be lifted out of poverty, 300 million more people will be adequately fed, and 30 million young children's lives will have been saved.

Yet at the mid-point between the adoption of the Goals and the 2015 deadline to achieve them, it is already clear that our pace is too slow.

On current trends none of the goals will be met in Sub-Saharan Africa. We are facing a crisis - a development emergency. As the Secretary-General has remarked, 'millions of lives quite literally hang in the balance'.

We must not be remembered as the generation that betrayed rather than honoured our commitments; irrevocably undermining trust in the multilateral system.

We all have a stake. This year, we have a critical window of opportunity to accelerate progress by translating our commitments into action.

Many leaders in government, business and civil society are rallying behind the Secretary-General's 'Call to Action' and the Special MDG event on the 25 September.

We should not wait. We can begin today, by building momentum and shaping the outcome.

The General Assembly has a strong message for the rest of the world: a message that will be carried to inspire forthcoming conferences and summits on development this year.

2008 is the year for action.

Commitments made must now urgently be translated into concrete deliverables on the ground.

As British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown said, "we cannot allow our promises to become wishful thinking, and then only words that symbolise broken promises".

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to set the scene for the debate today by taking stock of where we are on the specific cluster of MDG targets that are our focus - 'Poverty & Hunger', 'Education' and 'Health'.

Given the gravity of the situation we cannot simply act on the basis of impressions or assumptions. We must focus on facts.

But we must also bear in mind that these facts and numbers represent millions of frustrated people, with aspirations, goals and unfulfilled promises for a better life. They represent women, children and men who continue to suffer.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

There has been significant progress in reducing poverty and hunger.

The global proportion of people living in extreme poverty fell from about one-third to less than one-fifth between 1990 and 2004. And, the proportion of hungry people is expected to drop from 20 to 10 per cent between 1990 and 2015. So overall we are just on course to achieve our MDG 1 targets.

But there's a huge challenge in Africa, which saw absolute poverty rise over the last decade. In sub-Saharan Africa, a third of men, women and children are malnourished and on current trends 360 million people will still live in poverty by 2015.

At our current pace, one in six people globally will still live on less than US\$1 a day in 2015 – that's almost one billion. A staggering figure to imagine in the 21st century.

But their situation could yet deteriorate if energy and food prices continue to rise - increasing food insecurity and hunger for the most vulnerable.

On health, major progress has been made towards Millennium Development Goal 4 – to reduce infant mortality by two-thirds. At the halfway point 3 million more children now survive each year.

But 10 million children still die each year before reaching their fifth birthday, half of them in sub-Saharan Africa.

Every year more than half a million women die needlessly from complications in pregnancy or child birth. That's almost one woman every minute.

This means that the Millennium Development Goals to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters will not be met by 2015, unless we act decisively now.

Malaria kills one million people, tuberculosis two million people, AIDS three million people. Every human life lost is a tragedy.

However, because of the specific nature of HIV/AIDS the General Assembly will address it at a special High-level meeting on 10 and 11 June.

On education, we have made progress since 2000. There are now 41 more million children in school; net enrolment worldwide has risen to around 87 per cent; and, gender parity has already been achieved at primary level in 118 countries.

However, the quality of education and high student-to-teacher ratios remain significant challenges.

And, unless we act, the Millennium Development Goal to provide primary education for every child will not be met by 2050, at best by 2100.

Excellencies,

Despite these setbacks, success is not beyond our grasp. For all the measures of despair there can also be reason for hope and inspiration.

In the past 20 years, 400 million people lifted out of absolute poverty. Smallpox has been eradicated.

And, since the Millennium Declaration in 2000;

34 more countries are now on track to meet the infant mortality goal.

44 more countries are on track to meet the poverty goal.

47 more countries are on track to meet the education goal.

In Africa, up to one third of schooling is now provided by churches, and faith groups. Businesses and charities are also involved.

Goldman Sachs, working with CAMFED and Cambridge University, has just established a US\$100 million global initiative to provide business education to underserved women.

Their research indicates that closing the gender gap could raise per capita income by 10-14 per cent in developing countries – lifting millions out of poverty.

The tuberculosis epidemic is declining. Polio, leprosy and neonatal tetanus are on the verge of extinction. And, 2 million more lives are now saved every year by immunization.

The International Finance Facility for Immunisation - backed by the Gates Foundation, six European governments, Brazil and South Africa – is frontloading US\$4 billion to enable, by 2015, 500 million children to be vaccinated and at least 5 million more lives saved.

The debt of more than 20 countries has been fully cancelled - over \$81 billion - helping to provide free health care and to build new classrooms and hospitals.

However, the final official ODA figures for 2006 show a fall in real terms for the first time since 1997 to US\$104.4 billion, though aid to Africa rose to an all time high.

But, in addition to the quantity of aid, there also needs to be quality for it to have an impact on people's lives.

Each partner country needs to determine its own priorities, the pace and sequencing of reforms.

When strong government leadership and good domestic policies are combined with adequate financial and technical support from the international community, private sector and NGOs rapid progress is possible.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the long struggle to address the intractable problem of global poverty the MDGs represent the culmination of decades of incremental steps by the General Assembly to refine the United Nations development agenda.

This global consensus recognizes that economic growth, by itself, is not enough. Inclusive growth needs to be accompanied by good governance, care for the environment, social justice, human rights, gender equality and quality public services.

At the midway point to achieve the MDGs by 2015, all of our commitments must now be urgently translated into practical plans with systematic follow-through by all parties.

Donors need to issue country-by country timelines for how they are going to increase aid, so partner governments can plan for essential investments in services.

All of our attention must be focused on creating a more coherent development agenda, based on the nexus between Financing for Development, the Millennium Development Goals and the challenge of global warming.

This is the only strategy we can adopt to create a more sustainable, just and equitable future for all. But we face a race against time. We must now demonstrate the political will and turn our promises into action.

Thank you very much for your attention.