

2 April 2008

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,
on “Global Awareness of Autism: Challenges, Responsibilities and
Actions”**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I welcome you all to the first of many annual days to raise awareness about autism.

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of today’s panel discussion H.E. Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser the Permanent of Qatar, the World Health Organization and Autism Speaks.

Autism is a condition that has traditionally found little recognition in mainstream society. Though public awareness is growing, many around the world remain ignorant of it.

Recent studies suggest that in some areas of the world it can affect around 1 in every 150 people. There is no known cure. And, some claim that it is the fastest growing developmental disability, putting a huge strain on society.

I am very proud that during my tenure as President, the General Assembly agreed to establish World Autism Awareness Day. By adopting this resolution all Member States agreed to stand in solidarity with autistic persons and to support all actions affirming the fundamental freedoms and human rights of all, including persons with disabilities. I would like to acknowledge the role of the State of Qatar, in particular the leadership of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani.

By bringing autism awareness to a global level, the General Assembly has paved the way to give voice and recognition to millions of children and adults around the world who are misunderstood, misrepresented and misdiagnosed.

Many children with autism are sidelined. This is not just because autistic children’s ability to communicate and relate is different from the norm. It’s not just because they may act in ways that we don’t understand.

Beyond this, autistic children suffer discrimination and social stigmatization – mainstream society is sometimes too narrow minded to accept difference.

While many of us understand this condition from films and studies about autistics with savant-level capabilities in areas such as music, mathematics, and drawing, for the millions of people

with autism who aren't savants, the general view has been that their condition was tragic, their brainpower lacking. We need to break this stereotype forever.

By shining a light on this condition we can increase our awareness; improve early diagnosis and ensure that the scale of the problem is matched by adequate amounts of funding and research.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is another side. Around the world an increasingly visible and highly networked community of autistics is emerging – benefiting from the internet and innovations like type-to-speak software.

And, thanks to technology, many can communicate with the same speed and specificity as someone using spoken language. These advances are not available to all – but should be.

Some autistics are now leading a nascent civil rights movement calling for their uniqueness recognized - that autistic persons are not damaged. Not dysfunctional. Just different.

Today, on World Autism Awareness Day we need to make sure this message finds a place to grow in our hearts, minds and in society at large.

Thank you very much.