

22 February 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
"Towards a stronger UN" at New England Center for International
and Regional Studies Bridgeport University**

It is an honor to join you tonight and to continue the tradition established by the University of Bridgeport to invite the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations to address your academic community. I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my views on strengthening the United Nations. It is a timely and opportune topic, especially in the light of the ongoing work of the historic Millennium Assembly.

For me personally, tonight's address is of particular importance because I have underlined the need for the UN to open up to the civil society at large. This includes continued and enhanced dialogue with the academic community, with which the UN already has a history of partnership.

Last September's Millennium Summit gave Member States an opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations. The Summit reaffirmed that the Organization is not meant to serve only Member States, but also the peoples of the world, in particular the most vulnerable. The Summit stressed the inter-linkages between development, peace and security as well as the need to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for everyone. At the Summit Member States also pledged to strengthen the Organization, which is essential if we are to achieve the goals outlined in the Summit Declaration.

We all acknowledge that since the establishment of the United Nations, its achievements have been impressive in many areas of development, peace and security. The mandate given to us by the Summit reflects our global agenda for this coming century and as such is very ambitious. In my mind there is no doubt that the United Nations system needs to be strengthened and reformed in order to enable it to carry out the tasks entrusted to it.

One of the main challenges is to identify and develop the core strengths of the Organization. The UN needs to constantly adapt in order to respond to the new priorities established by its Membership. Furthermore, the UN needs to open up to the outside world. This requires political will and compromises by all parties at a very practical level. Unless Member States acknowledge and agree that to achieve the common good they need to let go some of their own individual priorities, nothing will move.

In my discussions with Member States and in listening to their statements, I sense that there is a renewed recognition and emerging consensus that we need to reinforce our efforts and equip the Organization with appropriate tools to achieve the goals we have set.

During the fall session of the Assembly I was very pleased to see how promptly Member States responded to the challenge. The implementation of the Summit Declaration was launched in December by consensus and with co-operation from all sides. Subsequently the Secretary General, for his part, responded by appointing a panel to advise on the world's development financing needs.

The Assembly rose to the challenge in other important ways to strengthen the UN. Firstly, it was able to agree on new scales of assessments both for the regular budget and for UN peacekeeping. This was an unusually complex and difficult issue that had generated a lot of heated discussion. Despite the complexities, the Assembly, just hours before the start of its holiday recess, reached consensus. In my view, this historic agreement has the potential of greatly improving the spirit of our work.

In addition, the agreement will soon lead to the payment of a substantial portion of the arrears owed to the UN by the United States. Ultimately, the goal must be a payment of all remaining arrears by the US. Putting the arrears question behind us will not only strengthen the relationship between the US and the UN but also help advance the American agenda in the UN.

Last fall, the Assembly also adopted a package of emergency measures to reinforce the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, a step towards strengthening one of the core functions of the Organization. This is necessary so as to close the gap between the tasks we ask the UN to carry out, and the resources we make available to it. Decisions were also taken to improve the security and safety of UN personnel, to move towards results-based budgeting and on other issues that will contribute to strengthening the UN.

Reform has been underway for the past couple of years under the able leadership of Secretary-General Kofi Annan. But it needs to continue throughout the Organization in order to make the UN stronger and more effective. In fact, strengthening the Organization is a prerequisite to achieve all the priorities agreed in the Summit Declaration.

For my part, I have tried to lead and keep this process moving forward. To have concrete results on the reform and revitalization of the UN, it is of utmost importance to have the whole Membership on board. I have urged Member States to engage in discussions, to implement decisions taken and make new initiatives to further the reform.

As President of the Assembly I have started with my own 'backyard', if I may put it that way, the Assembly. I have made an effort to guide its work in a more effective manner.

In this regard, it is striking how many decisions Member States have already taken over the years, to improve the work of the Assembly. But it is perhaps even more striking to find out how many of these decisions have not been implemented. So how to move forwards on this issue? My experience is that it is often the practical and small things that count and ultimately add up to change.

One of these issues might be reviewing the agenda of the Assembly. Despite some successes in the rationalization and streamlining of the agenda, the overall workload has not been reduced. The fact is that the total number of items on the agenda has been increasing over the years. The same goes for the number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly. I believe that we should now make a serious attempt to review the agenda of the General Assembly. This is essential if we are to focus our work more on current priorities and not on those of years gone by.

One possible way to do this might be greater use of clustering, biennializing or triennializing the consideration of agenda items. Agenda items of closely related substance could be merged within a single agenda title or could be incorporated as sub-items.

Moreover, the division of labor between the Plenary and the Main Committees has become blurred. To make the Assembly matter on issues of critical importance to Governments, we need to address this issue. Whilst the Plenary should be the place where issues of high importance are debated in the presence of all Member States, it is in fact, often discussing issues of a routine character and, I dare say, often with only a half full audience.

One concern that has been raised is the lack of continuity in the work of successive Assemblies. To provide some continuity, the model of a 'troika', used in other organizations, has been suggested. The 'GA troika' would include the present, previous and incoming Presidents of the General Assembly or representatives of these States, to be involved in major discussions of reform and of planning the work of the General Assembly. Another suggestion that has been made to the same effect is to make more effective use of the General Committee, the bureau of the General Assembly, which is comprised of the Vice-Presidents of the Assembly and the Chairpersons of its Main Committees.

I should also add that the experience of the round tables at the Summit has inspired some to suggest that maybe the Assembly's annual general debate could be made more interactive and focus on issues of particular importance each year rather than cover the whole of the global agenda.

In addition to enhancing the effectiveness of the General Assembly, work is under way - and has been for more than seven years - to reform the Security Council. The Millennium Summit Declaration called for a comprehensive reform of the Security Council in all its aspects. There were several calls - both in the Summit and during the last fall's debates - for the Council's composition to reflect the realities of today, in order to make it "more representative and more legitimate". I hope that the statements made indicate a willingness by the membership to move forward on this issue as we continue to consider it in the coming weeks and months.

Let me now turn briefly to the issue of opening the UN to the outside world, a key means to strengthen the Organization. Better governance requires better and wider participation. In the era of globalization, the UN and national governments cannot do their work alone. Therefore, one of

my priorities as President of the Assembly has been to reach out to civil society in order to fully benefit from its expertise and to ensure its involvement in our work.

In the resolution on the implementation of the Summit Declaration, a call was made for enhanced partnership and co-operation with civil society, including the private sector. To fulfill this commitment, we need to explore innovative ways to enable civil society to contribute to the work of the UN system. I will continue to keep this issue on my agenda and support all efforts to implement this commitment.

In addition to civil society, international and multilateral actors, such as the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Trade Organization and various regional organizations are becoming increasingly important in harnessing the positive powers of globalization. It is my intention to try and build bridges with the international financial institutions - IFI's - on such important issues as financing for development. This issue will be the topic of a high-level meeting next year and in my view, the best way for the event to be a success is through participation by the IFI's and also by the national finance ministries of the donor countries.

In concluding I would like to reiterate my firm belief: Reform and strengthening of the United Nations is not an option, but a necessity.