

21 March 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the entire week of Solidarity with the Peoples Struggling against Racism and Racial Discrimination, remind us of the need for communities and nations to work towards racial equality and tolerance.

Racial discrimination is not only based on race or ethnic group. It also finds its expression in a variety of acts of intolerance and discrimination because of people's culture, nationality, religion or language. Racism frequently hits hardest the most vulnerable people: those who have little means to protect themselves, such as refugees, internally displaced people, women and children. In its extreme form, discrimination can involve ethnic cleansing and the imposition of racial superiority. But it may also be expressed as exclusion from the every day activities and tasks of society, at schools, at work places, congregations, and kindergartens. Often it does not leave visible marks of physical violence, but the psychological marks may be life-long and painful.

Children and youth are our future. I am particularly happy to note that the United Nations is reaching out to young adults on this day, to encourage them to take a stand against discrimination of any kind in their communities, be it based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability.

We are currently observing the International Year of Mobilization against Racism and Racial Discrimination. What does it mean to mobilize against racism and racial discrimination? We have an ample supply of international agreements and conventions. They need to be implemented fully. But I also believe that getting to know the differences across boundaries of any kind is helpful - knowledge and information on the diversity of cultures, and diversity of human races, ethnicity and customs, contribute to overcoming racism. I strongly believe that knowledge is a conduit for a better understanding, tolerance and acceptance. I also believe that modern technologies of communication may serve this goal well - and that they should be protected against serving the spread of hate and racist ideologies.

In spite of all efforts to overcome racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance, we all know, that we are far from the goal of eradicating these evils. We need to multiply our efforts towards equality among people. The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, to be held later this year, will be another landmark in this struggle.