

3 May 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day**

Freedom of the press and the free flow of information and ideas are powerful ways to combat racism, discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance. Societies that inhibit freedom of expression also inhibit the full enjoyment of human rights and foster intolerance. Yet even when freedom of the press is guaranteed, it does not guarantee that incidents of racism, discrimination and xenophobic behaviour will not occur. Indeed, it is a sad commentary on our world today that not only are such incidents on the rise but they are manifesting in terrible outbreaks of ethnic cleansing, genocide and other crimes against humanity.

Today's observance of World Press Freedom Day and its focus on the relationship between racism and press freedom reminds us that with freedom comes responsibility. Freedom of expression should not be interpreted as the freedom to incite or promote racial hatred, discrimination or violence. On the other hand, our efforts to combat racism, xenophobia and related intolerance must strike a balance with the need to protect freedom of expression. Hate speech, like hate sites on the Internet, are best countered not by censorship but by fostering free access to information which exposes these ideas as being racist, or as inciting violence, hostility and discrimination.

In the fight against racism, our best weapon is education that fosters tolerance and an understanding of our differences. Here the media can have an enormous influence. In my view, the media has an obligation to make a positive contribution to the fight against racism. This can be as simple as ensuring that in the media racist terms or derogatory stereotypes are not used and that there are no unnecessary references to a person's race, religion or related attributes.

Combating racism is not only a matter of ending ignorance and fear of our differences. But education and understanding can go a long way towards fostering a more tolerant and discrimination-free society. In this the news media has an important role to play. We rely on it to bring acts of racism or discrimination to our attention and to report factually about them. We rely on it to give all groups and communities a chance to be heard. And I believe we rely on it to promote a culture of tolerance and a better understanding of the evil of racism.

Today's World Press Freedom Day commemorates the 10th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic Free Press. This Declaration was the outcome of a seminar organized jointly by the Department of Public Information and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Namibia in 1991. And as an outgrowth of that seminar, the General Assembly in 1993 established World Press Freedom

Day. So in a sense we will have come the full circle when later this year another important milestone will be laid in our fight against racism with the convening of the World Conference against Racism to be held in Durban, South Africa.

The Durban conference offers the international community an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the 21st century. I hope that at the conference governments will commit to an action-oriented and forward-looking plan to combat racism and related intolerance. And I hope that members of the global news media will come to Durban in droves to report on what happens there. The mere presence of the media raises the stakes and ensures that the very important issues to be discussed at the conference will be brought to the attention of the public world-wide.

The promotion of human rights, including combating racism and intolerance, are goals that the world's leaders recommitted themselves to at the Millennium Summit last year. But for us to achieve these goals, everyone - governments, civil society and members of the news media - will have to work together. We all have a role to play. World Press Freedom Day is good occasion to renew our commitment to this responsibility.