

5 June 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Symposium on Children in Armed Conflict: Everyone's
Responsibility**

At the Symposium on Children in Armed Conflict: Everyone's Responsibility 5 June 2001 It is a great pleasure for me, as President of the United Nations General Assembly, to welcome you to this seminar. I would like to especially welcome the children who have travelled from far to participate in this symposium. We are happy to have you here and are ready to listen to your experiences. I would like to express my thanks to the hosts for organizing this event as part of the preparations for upcoming high level meetings.

The General Assembly has been in the forefront of the UN's work to ensure the rights, protection and well-being of all children, including those affected by war. Last September, Heads of State and Government adopted the Millennium Declaration, which highlights the individual and collective responsibility of world leaders to ensure that children can live free from oppression and injustice, as well as free from the fear of violence. The Declaration calls for providing assistance and protection to children and all civilians who suffer from the consequences of armed conflicts.

There are signs of progress in meeting these goals concerning war-affected children. The General Assembly and the Security Council have successfully worked together to formulate guidelines and policies in this regard. The General Assembly has institutionalized the practice of an annual debate on the rights of the child, culminating in the adoption of a resolution on this. The issue of war-affected children features prominently in both this debate and the resolution. But more must be done. I would like to encourage all Governments to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in May last year, which forbids persons under 18 to participate in combat.

The problems facing us continue to be truly daunting. According to a recently released global report, hundreds of thousands of children are recruited into government and opposition armed forces, paramilitaries, civil militia and non-state armed groups in more than 85 countries. As the Secretary-General pointed out in his report last year to the Security Council on children and armed conflict, recruitment of child soldiers is only one aspect of a broader problem, which relates to poverty and political instability.

To achieve concrete results will require us to come together across all ideological and doctrinal boundaries. In order to create a worldwide movement to de-legitimize the abuse of children, we have to stand firm against those who carry out such abuse.

Once child soldiers have been rescued from armed groups, they should not be left alone to survive in circumstances socially and economically devastated by war. Their sustainable rehabilitation will require coordinated efforts and resources from the United Nations system and the international community. We have to make a better effort to assist all those children who have been orphaned, made homeless, handicapped, traumatized, deprived of education and abused in countless other ways by war.

I would like to emphasize the importance of families and communities in integrating former child soldiers back into society. There is great wisdom in strengthening those local norms and values that have traditionally protected children and that may facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation. The key players in this effort, in my view, are the growing numbers of local civil society actors. In the absence of larger economic and political structures in war-torn areas, civil society has often taken on the burden of bringing sustainable peace and recovery. I appreciate the constant and increasing efforts of international NGOs to support the work of local NGOs in this field. New partnerships need to be established within the United Nations, but also between governments and civil society.

In September, the plight of war-affected children will feature prominently on the agenda of the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children. This meeting will test the political will of world leaders to take concrete action on behalf of children. Equally important is that the United Nations system has a coherent policy and works as a team to promote the well-being and rights of the child.