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**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S
MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FAMILIES**

15 May 2002

The theme for this International Day of Families is 'Families and Ageing: Opportunities and Challenges'. As the Second World Assembly on Ageing recognized in April of this year, humankind is undergoing an unprecedented demographic transformation. Between now and 2050, the number of older persons will rise from about 600 million to almost two billion. Such a revolution will present enormous challenges in a world already being transformed by globalization, migration, and economic change. As more and more people move to cities, older persons are losing traditional family support and social networks, and are increasingly at risk of marginalization. The HIV/AIDS crisis is forcing many older people in developing countries to care for children orphaned by the disease -- of whom there are now more than 13 million worldwide. In many developed countries, the concept of cradle-to-grave security is fast disappearing. The shrinking size of the working population means older people are even more at risk of having to make do with inadequate pensions and medical attention.

Given these challenges, we must redouble our resolve to build a society for all ages -- and we must build on families as the basis for achieving it. Families are the key to socializing and educating younger generations, and to providing care and support for older generations. By helping families promote the active participation of their older members in society and development, we can ensure that older persons' invaluable gifts and experience are put to use, and give them the opportunity to continue learning throughout life. By helping families provide support networks and enabling environments, we can strengthen the bonds of solidarity between generations and combat abuse, violence, disrespect and discrimination against older people. By working for adequate and affordable health care -- including preventive health measures -- we can help older people maintain their independence for as long as possible.

Above all, we must build on the understanding that the wisdom and experience of older persons form a veritable lifeline in families and societies alike. Older people are intermediaries between the past, the present and the future. They enrich the lives of younger generations, and are crucial in binding the family structure together. On this International Day, let us resolve to help families make the best and most enduring use possible of that gift.

Kofi A. Annan