

5 September 2000

**Acceptance Speech of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President-elect of the 55th Session of the General Assembly**

Mr. Secretary-General, Permanent Representatives, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful for the trust and confidence in my country and myself that this election represents. I will do my best to live up to the honour of having been elected President of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly. Let me assure each and everyone of you that as of today, I am the President of the Membership as a whole.

The fact that this Session of the General Assembly has been designated as the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations makes this privilege of serving the Member States particularly momentous. This week's Millennium Summit will bring together a record number of Heads of State and Government. Co-chaired by Presidents Tarja Halonen of Finland and Sam Nujoma of Namibia, the Summit is a unique symbolic moment. The Summit Declaration will capture the common vision of the Member States at that moment. It will guide our work not only during the Millennium Assembly but for years to come.

I am profoundly grateful to my most esteemed predecessor, Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, President of the Fifty-fourth Session of the General Assembly, for his tireless work to pave the way for a successful Millennium Summit and Assembly. I wish him well in all his endeavours as he continues to serve his people as the Foreign Minister of Namibia.

I also wish to salute the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, for having once again shown leadership, courage and vision. His report - "We the peoples" - laid an indispensable foundation for the work of the Summit. It has also set for us new standards in clarity of purpose, relevance and readability.

As I thank all Member States for their confidence and trust, I am particularly thankful for the endorsement from the Western European and Other States' Group. For Finland, this Presidency comes after almost forty-five years of Membership in the United Nations. Over the past decades, Finland and Finns have been given the opportunity to serve the UN in a number of ways. Now it is my turn to serve the Organisation and its General Assembly, the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations.

The Organisation has been – and still is – one of the cornerstones of Finnish foreign policy. Finland is committed to multilateralism in the advancement of the purposes and principles of the United Nations, as enshrined in the Charter.

For my country, multilateralism is therefore a means to promote greater social equality, democracy and human rights, and in particular, rights of women and girls. It is these goals and the overall goals of sustainable human development, alleviation of poverty and combating global environmental threats that are also central to Finnish development co-operation.

In the spirit of multilateralism, Finland has also participated actively in UN peacekeeping from the Suez to South Lebanon to the Balkans. Since the 1950's, thousands of Finnish men and women have served with devotion to support the UN maintain peace and security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This week's Millennium Summit and its Declaration will provide an enormous momentum which will reinforce the implementation of the global agenda and its development targets, as defined in the global conferences of the 1990's. The Declaration will constitute an authoritative mandate for our work and for my Presidency. On the agenda before us, there is one issue which is close to my heart. It is primary and secondary education, particularly for girls. Education is a key element in the global economy and we should implement our commitments in this regard.

It will be the responsibility of this General Assembly to heed the moment and put into practice the political commitment of our Heads of State and Government. The General Assembly and its main Committees must show leadership to the rest of the UN system and reflect the results of the Summit in their work. We need to avoid a "business-as-usual" mentality.

It is also vital that we start without delay the consideration of the recommendations of the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations.

We must make every effort to make new technology available to all at a low cost. I believe that information and communication technology is a true opportunity for development, be it for reducing poverty, improving education or combating HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. It can help us better understand climate change and other environmental challenges, and even plan better neighbourhoods in place of slums. In other words, it facilitates reaching the concrete goals which are part of the upcoming Summit Declaration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For the General Assembly, all this is an immense task. Let me now dwell on how we can accomplish it. It involves reaching out to the wider world for co-operation, increasing the transparency of the General Assembly and improving its effectiveness.

As for the Organisation's outreach towards wider civil society, it is closely related to the overall relevance of the United Nations. This is a challenge the UN can either accept and grow with or shy away from and stop growing. The norm should be dialogue and inclusion. The emergence of a strong and viable global network of non-governmental organisations is a fact. We all know that their work is indispensable and complements the role of the United Nations in many fields. This

was evidenced most recently in the Millennium Forum and I hope that Governments take time to reflect on the outcome of the Forum.

The private sector is part of civil society. The UN is currently exploring new ways to co-operate with the private sector, so as to assure that it takes due note of our work and standards for mutual benefit. In this regard, I would like to express my support for the recent initiatives of the Secretary-General.

Furthermore, our goal must be to enhance understanding, collaboration and complementarity of activities between the UN and the international financial institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To be effective, and to get due credit, the General Assembly must work in a transparent and understandable manner. In order not to become a hermit kingdom, understood only by UN experts, the General Assembly must be able to explain why its work is relevant to the outside world. As President, my aim is to work in an open way. That will also be one of my requests to the Chairpersons of the Main Committees and to the Secretariat.

I strongly believe that in order to add value and make a difference, the General Assembly must address, in a focused, meaningful and timely manner, the challenges of rapid change and globalization. In doing so, it must respond to the current priorities of its Member States. This requires courage to look back at the original legislative intent of the General Assembly and how that can be best reflected in the practical work of the Organisation today.

Yet the General Assembly is not only about specific mandates and accomplishments. To engage in a dialogue on an equal basis, the global community needs the General Assembly. Between nations, even the most expensive dialogue is immeasurably cheaper than the cheapest armed conflict. The power of dialogue in the service of development is well demonstrated by the goals agreed upon by the global conferences of the 1990's.

As in any parliament, there is bound to be a certain degree of partisanship and political manoeuvring in the General Assembly. After all, there are genuine differences in Member States' interests and worldviews. However, the General Assembly can lose its effectiveness if this turns into a stifling block mentality and an "us-versus-them" mindset. During this Millennium Assembly, I plead to Member States to work in the spirit of partnership and solidarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I see the role of the President of the General Assembly, it is one of a facilitator, conciliator and consensus-builder. He must lead - and I will do so - but without the Membership on board, that leadership will ultimately fail. During this General Assembly, we will have to make hard and at times unpleasant decisions. These decisions require a spirit of dialogue and inclusion from all of us.

I will make every effort to guide the work of the Assembly in an effective manner. I harbour no illusions about quick solutions. I believe it is often the practical and small things which count and ultimately add up to a change. One such step will be to always start the plenary meetings of the Assembly on time. I trust that the Chairpersons of the Main Committees will commit themselves to the same practice at the committee level. This is not only about sensible use of our common resources; it is the least we can do to show respect and courtesy towards one another.

I will also seek close and regular dialogue with the Chairpersons and bureaux of the Main Committees, as well as with the Secretariat. The six Chairpersons that we are about to elect are very much the backbone of the daily work of the General Assembly. I also intend to maintain regular contacts with the Presidents of the Security Council and ECOSOC.

As for the Secretariat, it provides an indispensable partner without which our work would stall. I salute the staff members of the Organisation - at Headquarters as well as in the field - for their dedication, commitment and hard work. I would like to pay special tribute to those staff members who, even at this moment, put their lives in danger in the service of this Organisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe in people and I believe in the United Nations. I am convinced that we can live in peace and harmony, because the power of our common values and goals exceeds our differences. Our strength lies in the diversity of humankind, and in our different backgrounds, skills, and knowledge. As a father and grandfather, I dream of a better world for my children and theirs.

During my tenure, I will do my best to serve the UN and all its Member States. In this task, I need your support and assistance. I would like to invite everyone to work together during this Millennium Assembly. Let us not be afraid of the difficulties and uncertainties ahead. Instead, let us build on co-operation, mutual understanding, and trust.

I thank you for your attention.