

7 May 2002

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Multi-religious service**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to be here today among the representatives of so many of the world's religions. It is especially gratifying that you have gathered here in behalf of the children of the world, whose rights we seek to defend and advance at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children.

Amidst so many global problems and crises that cry out for attention, nothing is more important over the long-term than the fate of the world's children. Children are, after all, the only minority group of which every human being is at one time a member. The treatment accorded children profoundly affects their behaviour as adults. Many, perhaps most of the world's problems, can be traced to the ill-treatment that children receive at the hands of their elders.

Throughout history, religious bodies have been in the forefront of efforts to safeguard children and to protect their rights – often from the unjust demands of the state. They continue to fill this indispensable role today, sometimes at considerable risk to themselves and their members. Fortunately, in recent years, the conscience of the world has been aroused anew by the plight of children. This is owing, in large part, to the activities of religious groups and individuals, who have worked hard to place children's concerns at the top of the global agenda.

The UN Special Session on Children is a striking indication of the growing public awareness of the urgency of issues directly affecting children. It is rare indeed for so many world leaders to gather together to consider a single topic, especially one outside the normal bounds of diplomacy and world politics. But in recent decades, the dire situation of countless children, particularly with regard to armed conflict and the spread of HIV/AIDS, has captured the attention of global public opinion. The world's leaders have responded to this upsurge of concern in various ways, culminating in the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children.

This event is, of course, a secular occasion, but I believe that there lies behind it a profoundly spiritual inspiration. In the past two centuries or so, almost every major social and humanitarian advance has owed much to the spirit of religion and the active efforts of religiously-inspired men and women. The cause of children's rights and welfare in the 21st century is certainly no exception. The commitment of world leaders is vitally important. But it is the contributions of

religious bodies and communities that may ultimately count the most as we strive to reach our ambitious goals in behalf of the world's children.

This is a challenge worthy of your best efforts and one that, I am sure, you will not fail to meet.

Thank you very much.