

8 May 2002

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children**

Distinguished Heads of State and Government, Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies, Honorable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to welcome all of you to the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children. I would first like to thank Madam Lee Hee-ho, First Lady and Head of the Delegation of the Republic of Korea for presiding over the opening of this Special Session.

This is a crucial moment – the first time that the General Assembly has debated the issue of children in a Special Session. And it is one of the largest gatherings of world leaders ever to take place at the United Nations. The fact that more than 70 world leaders are here with us is a reflection of the gravity of the subject – the well-being of our children.

This Special Session on Children was one of the first major casualties of the tragic events of September 11th last year. These events compelled us to postpone the Session in September. Those very events make it all the more pertinent that the issues are at the core of this Special Session-to give children not just their right to survival, protection and development, but a stake in the future of the world. Taking this opportunity, I would like to express my appreciation to all the Member States for their spirit of flexibility and cooperation in rescheduling this Special Session.

This Special Session reviews progress made since the World Summit for Children in 1990. The Summit opened a decade of debate and action on children's issues, setting concrete goals to improve child well-being by the year 2000. More than 70 leaders gathered in 1990 and I am delighted that, once again, the leaders of the world have responded wholeheartedly in the name of children.

You have come to renew the commitments you have made to children. And this time you are doing so in the presence of more than one thousand non-governmental organizations and, very importantly, hundreds of children and young people. This is a sign of one of the most important lessons of the last decade: progress for children depends on partnership between many players and on the participation of children and young people themselves.

As we have read in the comprehensive report prepared by the Secretary-General, there has been real progress in many areas and there is much to celebrate. More than 60 countries have cut child mortality by at least one-third and there has been a 50 per cent reduction in death from diarrhoeal

diseases. Determined efforts have brought polio to the brink of extinction and great strides have been made against iodine deficiency.

These successes are owing to the work of numerous people and organizations. I would like to recognize, in particular, the great achievements of UNICEF under the able and inspired leadership of Executive Director, Ms. Carol Bellamy. I also wish to congratulate Ms. Bellamy and her staff, Ambassador Patricia Durrant of Jamaica, chairperson of the preparatory committee, and its bureau members on their excellent preparations for this Special Session.

Looking into the future, we still have a long journey ahead of us. We must be serious and open about the challenges that remain – about the unfinished business of the last decade. And we must ask some searching questions. Why are so many children still out of school? Why have we made so little progress on maternal mortality? In a world of unprecedented wealth, why are so many children still born into abject poverty and deprivation? And why are children still exposed to the horrors of conflict?

Unless we understand and acknowledge our failures, we are in danger of repeating them. Unless we recognize and address the barriers to progress for children, we cannot overcome them. Unless we are inventive, creative and adaptable, we will be unable to respond to the issues that have emerged since 1990 or to the challenges and opportunities that may face us in the future. Globalisation, for example, presents us with both profound challenges and great potential. The revolution in information and communication technologies holds out an enormous potential for accelerating the pace of economic and social progress.

Yet, at the same time, it has also engendered the digital divide, which threatens to widen the already huge disparities of income and opportunity both within and among countries.

May I suggest that, for the next three days, we set aside any adult prejudices, and listen to, and learn from, the children and young people that are with us. Let us take on their excitement, dynamism, optimism and energy. Let us be as open as they are to new ideas, differing opinions and alternative viewpoints.

We are immensely privileged to be part of this historic event. At the same time we have immense responsibility to meet the children's high expectations. The children of the world are watching us. They expect us to deliver on the promises we make here in New York. Let's not fail them. Let us therefore work together during these three days to build a world fit for children.

Thank you.