

29 May 2002

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,  
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the United Nations University: "The Role of the United Nations in a  
Globalizing World"**

Rector Van Ginkel, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to meet with you in this unique academic institution at the center of the dynamic and cosmopolitan city of Tokyo. In the almost 30 years since its establishment in 1973, the United Nations University has been in the forefront of scholarship and research in key areas of concern to the United Nations and the global community.

Having taught economics at Seoul National University for almost 20 years quarter century and also spent a semester at Komaba campus of Tokyo University as Visiting Professor just before I entered politics in 1986, and now standing before you, I feel I am at home at long last.

The UNU with the focus on two thematic areas, i.e. environmental and sustainable development and peace and governance, has made especially valuable contributions in advancing our knowledge of conflict resolution, development issues, and the use of science and technology to promote human welfare. As this institution prepares to celebrate its 30th anniversary next year, I would like to congratulate all those associated with it - past and present - on a job well done.

Today, I would like to share with you some of my experiences as President of the General Assembly as well as my thoughts on the role of the United Nations in a world that is rapidly being globalized. The term globalization has been used so often as to become a commonplace, both in and outside the United Nations. And we have realized that globalization is a double-edged sword, presenting mankind with a host of global problems as well as benefits. Yet again, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent international events, as much as they appalled us, came as a reminder of how small a world we live in where problems of a global scale can only be dealt with through global responses.

September 11, 2001 was the day on which the 56th session of the UN General Assembly was scheduled to open, and I was to be elected as its President. On that morning, I was attending a breakfast prayer meeting to celebrate the start of the new session, held in the Delegates' Dining Room. President Harri Holkeri, my predecessor, and many UN ambassadors were also present in the room on that fateful morning. At that moment, just 4 miles south of where we were, the World Trade Center towers were collapsing after being struck by two airplanes hijacked by terrorists. We left the breakfast in utter shock and outrage.

The United Nations headquarters was immediately evacuated at the risk of becoming a target of another terrorist attack. I had urgent consultations with Secretary-General Kofi Annan and other UN officials. We decided to open the General Assembly the next day, September 12. Directly

after the opening of the meeting and my assumption of the Presidency, the General Assembly adopted its first resolution (56/1) of the session strongly condemning those heinous acts of terrorism.

The three months since that day were marked by the most extraordinary and busiest session in the history of the General Assembly. During this period, the Assembly had to reorganize virtually all of its work program. Still, we managed to hold 93 plenary meetings and adopted 384 resolutions or decisions. The General Assembly devoted one whole week of its debate to the measures to eliminate terrorism, during which the Mayor of New York City was invited to speak for the first time at the UN. Unprecedented numbers of Member States participated in these meetings as well as in the General Debate held two months later than normal.

This extraordinary session culminated in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the United Nations and its Secretary-General on December 10. I had the honor to receive the Prize in Oslo on behalf of the world body, along with Secretary-General Annan, who accepted the award in his own right. I am sure this historic event was celebrated here in the UN University, as all of you also share in the Prize as part of the UN family.

In 2002, the 56th session of the General Assembly is continuing its work with several important special conferences. The most notable one was the Special Session on Children held from 8 to 10 May, where more than 70 Heads of State and Government participated and adopted a Plan of Action and a Declaration to create "a world fit for children." This was one of the largest gatherings of world leaders ever held under UN auspices, specifically that of the General Assembly. That so many world leaders chose to attend this event attests, I think, both to the priority they accord the subject and to their belief in the capacity of the UN to take effective action.

Distinguished Guests,

Having briefly summarized my experiences so far as President of the General Assembly, I would like to share my observations on the role and function of the United Nations, particularly those of the General Assembly, which are evolving to meet the needs of this rapidly globalizing world.

In fact, globalization, in one form or another, has been a defining feature of international relations since the latter part of the last century. Interdependence among nations, especially in the economic field, has been growing at an unprecedented rate along with the freer flow of products, capital and labor. The revolutionary progress in transportation and communications has greatly accelerated this process by rendering the national boundaries almost irrelevant.

By now, the benefits of globalization are fairly well understood. We know that an open and outward-looking economy offers the best prospects for achieving economic growth. Countries that have gone down that path have dramatically raised their living standards, while drastically reducing or even eliminating poverty. Scholarship produced by the UNU and elsewhere clearly

demonstrates that, at least in economic terms, globalization benefits the vast majority, though by no means all, of society's members.

On the other hand, globalization also poses a number of global challenges to the world community. Financial instability, environmental degradation, the spread of diseases and drugs, illicit trafficking of weapons, and illegal migration are just a few of them. The most recent and most alarming negative consequence of globalization is international terrorism - "terrorism with global reach" to paraphrase President Bush.

The rise of global issues has heightened the importance of international response on the global level. As the only existing international organization with a universal membership and a comprehensive agenda, the United Nations has naturally become the focus of international efforts to work out such common responses.

The representative and universal character of the United Nations can be seen not only in terms of its membership, but also in terms of its purposes and principles as embodied in the Charter. The founding fathers of the UN and their successors designed and developed a panoply of international institutions under the umbrella of the United Nation, which in total constitute the UN system today. The agenda of the United Nations system has come to cover every area of international life, ranging from peace and security to cultural heritage, from disarmament to drug trafficking, and from HIV/AIDS to environmental protection.

As such, the United Nations has been playing a pivotal and increasing role in addressing global questions that have been mounting with the accelerating trend of globalization. The international process following the events of September 11 served to reinforce this growing role, profoundly influencing the efforts of the world community in the framework of the UN. I would like to consider these changes in two vital aspects.

First, the United Nations has confirmed and strengthened its unique capacity for consensus building and collective action among nations. Multilateral cooperation by means of the world body has gained renewed importance in the international community's coping with and managing the crisis of terrorism.

In the wake of September 11, the UN was able to take a series of actions to deal with the situation based on the collective will of the Member States: we condemned the terrorist attacks in a speedy and firm manner, took action aimed at suppressing the financing of terrorist acts, endorsed the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, increased humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people, and set up the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to facilitate recovery there. At the same time, the efforts of the world community to fight terrorism at a more fundamental level have been greatly enhanced, as seen in the UN negotiation on a comprehensive convention against terrorism.

Second, the concept of security has been broadened to more properly address the realities of international relations in recent years. Concepts such as "new security" and "human security" have been developed and widely discussed to deal with issues of peace and security in a comprehensive manner. The events of September 11 have lent a strong impetus to this new

emphasis on holistic approaches to security issues. The proposition has been vindicated that security cannot be maintained by military defense only. It has become clear that many different aspects of international and domestic affairs are closely linked to peace and security in any part of the world. In the UN system, in addition to the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and many other institutions are now working together to accommodate security concerns from their own perspectives as well as playing their part in promotion of international peace and security.

This new trend has been contributing to the strengthening of the General Assembly within the framework of the United Nations. Despite the provision of the UN Charter that designed the General Assembly as a forum to discuss any matters within the world body, there have been concerns expressed in the past over the insufficient activity of the Assembly. The Millennium Declaration, adopted at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000, addressed these concerns and reaffirmed I quote "the central position of the General Assembly as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations." Unquote.

Being the highest UN body where all Member States are represented, the General Assembly is the right place to deal with mounting issues of the global scale that affect each and every one of the membership. In accordance with this growing importance of the General Assembly, the Presidency of the Assembly is also strengthening its role, by inter alia, involving itself more and more in mediation and informal consultations on substantive issues. This is a remarkable departure from the past role of the President, which was more often than not symbolic and honorary.

Distinguished Guests,

I want to emphasize that the UN is an evolving institution and thus has an immense potential for meeting new challenges in the future. The United Nations may not have fulfilled all of its mandates as envisioned by its founding fathers fifty years ago. But the world body has been continually adapting itself to enable it to tackle new tasks. For instance, to fulfill the task of maintaining international peace and security, the UN invented the concept of peacekeeping operations (PKO), which have evolved over the decades into a highly effective means of furthering the UN's peace efforts. Currently, efforts are underway to better adapt the UN to changing world conditions through reform of the Security Council and revitalization of the General Assembly.

I recently had an opportunity to see for myself the largest and perhaps most successful UN peacekeeping operation, namely UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone. UNAMSIL's success is owing in large part to its effectiveness in integrating former combatants into civil society. The elections held in Sierra Leone earlier this month, widely seen as free and fair, show what can be accomplished through close cooperation between UN peacekeepers and the local population.

During my trip to Africa, I also attended the summit in Dakar, Senegal, held to discuss the New Partnership for Africa's Development, or NEPAD. Thirty African Heads of State and Government were present along with a delegation of the some of the world's foremost business

leaders. NEPAD has inspired much optimism in Africa and elsewhere because it is essentially an initiative by the Africans themselves. But Africa's leaders also recognize that self-support efforts need to draw upon international support, specifically the United Nations and the world business community.

A little over a week ago, I also had occasion to observe another UN "success story" in East Timor, where I welcomed that country to the family of independent nations on behalf of the General Assembly. After the enormous devastation wrought three years ago, the UN moved quickly to assist the East Timorese in rebuilding their physical and social infrastructure and to help lay the foundation for a democratic independent state.

The UN's actions in Sierra Leone and East Timor are excellent examples of how the world body is responding to the needs and demands of a rapidly changing global environment. The UN has often been subject to criticism, both fair and unfair. But in recent years, I think that the contribution of the UN to global well-being is being recognized more properly. I am sure this was a factor that encouraged Switzerland, which for decades stayed outside the UN, to decide in a national plebiscite to join the world body.

As we stand at the start of the new millennium, it is an appropriate time to contemplate how we want to see the world's only universal organization develop in the coming years. How efficiently the world body can adapt itself to a new environment very much depends on the degree of commitment and support the Member States provide. Today, in the face of new and serious threats to the security and well-being of humanity, we are again turning to our collective wisdom to safeguard ourselves and our posterity. Hence the United Nations looms large in the world's future.

I would like to conclude by quoting the Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee on awarding last year's Nobel Peace Prize to the UN and its Secretary-General: I quote "The only negotiable route to global peace and cooperation goes by way of the United Nations."

Thank you.