

24 June 2002

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
on “The United Nations: Agenda for the New Era” at the UN Office in Vienna
(UNOV)**

Director General Costa, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to be here with you this afternoon at the meeting organized by the UN Office in Vienna (UNOV), a focal point for the worldwide activities of the United Nations. With my term as the President of the General Assembly nearing its end, I feel I am fulfilling a long held wish by paying a visit to Vienna and sharing with you my views on issues of common concern facing our world body. I am particularly heartened to see for myself the excellent work being carried out by such important institutions in the UN system as UNIDO, IAEA, UNODCCP, and many others. And of course, I am also delighted to have this opportunity to visit one of the world's centers of art and culture.

Today, I would like to discuss the new challenges the United Nations is facing in this rapidly changing world and how the world body is redefining and reforming itself to meet these challenges. On my flight from New York to Europe, I was reviewing my work in the UN during the past ten days of my stay in New York. During those ten days, I was mostly occupied with three issues: first, reform of the Security Council for which we concluded the 2002 session of the Working Group; second, revitalization of the General Assembly for which we are working on a new resolution to enable early elections of the President and the bureau of the General Assembly; and third, the holding of a meeting devoted to information and communications technologies for development.

As I was going over these items, it occurred to me that the agenda I have been dealing with as President of the General Assembly during the last 10 months was very much representative of the challenges and tasks posed to the United Nations today. Those reform issues and the ICT meeting are just a few examples.

My term as President was scheduled to start on September 11, 2001, a date now remembered by everyone all over the world for a very different event. On that morning, I was attending a breakfast prayer meeting to celebrate the start of the new session along with President Harri Holkeri, my predecessor, and many UN ambassadors. At that moment, just four miles south of where we were gathered, 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. I had urgent consultations with Secretary-General Kofi Annan and 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 measures to combat terrorism, during which the Mayor of New York City was invited to speak for the first time at the UN. The fight against terrorism also topped the agenda of the General Debate held in November, two months later than normal.

Other issues that have dominated the work of the General Assembly during my term include Afghanistan, the Middle East, dialogue among civilizations, development of Africa, financing for development, ageing, children, ICT, the environment, and reform issues in the UN system. Many of these represent new or growing challenges the United Nations is facing in an era characterized by the post-Cold War international relations and the accelerating process of globalization.

Since the end of the Cold War more than a decade ago, the world has seen fewer and fewer international conflicts stemming from ideological differences or bloc-to-bloc confrontation, and thus the specter of global nuclear war has largely been banished. At the same time, however, conflicts of an ethnic or religious nature have proliferated and intensified. The Middle East and Afghanistan are two of the most serious ones that came to the urgent attention of the UN recently, though they had been on the agenda of the world body for a long time.

In the absence of the old Cold-War mechanisms for settlement of disputes, the United Nations is playing an increasing role in maintaining and restoring peace. The institution of UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), once introduced to bridge the gap between the ideas of collective security and the reality, has evolved into a highly effective means of furthering the UN's peace efforts. The world body's peacekeeping capability has been increasing in recent years with the overhaul and strengthening of its operations as a whole.

Globalization has become a defining feature of international relations today and affects the agenda of the UN in a comprehensive way. Interdependence among nations, especially in the economic sphere, has been growing at an unprecedented rate along with the freer flow of commodities, capital and labor. The revolutionary progress in transportation and communications has greatly accelerated this process by rendering national boundaries increasingly permeable.

Globalization has proved to be a double-edged sword. While globalization is enhancing the well-being of mankind in general especially in economic terms, it also poses serious challenges to the world community. Many of the issues we have been discussing in the UN General Assembly reflect such challenges. The digital divide and other development issues relate directly to the problem of a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the shrinking global village. Minority groups such as the aged and children are the most seriously affected by this negative by-product of globalization. The problem of environmental degradation has long been on the agenda

of the UN but will receive renewed attention at the World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in South Africa this coming September.

But looking at the issues from this perspective, the most recent and most alarming negative consequence of globalization is international terrorism - "terrorism with global reach" to paraphrase President Bush.

As I noted earlier, 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 efforts to cope with and manage 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.

The world body may not have fulfilled all of its mandates as envisioned by its founding fathers fifty years ago. But the UN has proved to be an evolving institution and thus has been continually adapting itself to enable it to undertake new tasks. I have already given you the example of how the UN invented the concept of peacekeeping operations (PKO) to carry out its mandate in the lack of proper implementation of Charter provisions.

The most recent and important efforts to better adapt the UN to new international conditions are underway in the ongoing deliberations on reform of the Security Council and revitalization of the General Assembly. How to upgrade and strengthen these two vital organs of the United Nations are critical tasks bearing far-reaching implications for the future of the Organization.

Last April, I 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 in May, widely seen as free and fair, show what can be accomplished through close cooperation between UN peacekeepers and the local population.

Also in May, I 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. In recent years, I think that the contribution of the UN to global well-being is being more widely and more properly recognized. I have no doubt 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.

We must take care not to be complacent either about the UN's achievements in the past or its role in the future. To be sure, the Organization has its shortcomings. UN initiatives have not always been successful, nor have its successes always been permanent. Criticism of the United Nations, both fair and unfair, has been a staple of political debate since 1945. Some of the more practical criticisms are quite legitimate, providing useful guidance in improving the work of the Organization, while others question the very basis of the UN by bringing up difficult, fundamental issues such as democracy, transparency, efficiency, representativeness, and national sovereignty. At its highest level, I think this has been a very constructive debate, influencing not just the evolution of the United Nations, but the whole climate of post-World War II international relations.

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, I believe it was by no means a coincidence that in 2001, the year marked by the worst act of terrorism in modern times, the United Nations and its Secretary-General were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Thank you.