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**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the National Press Club of Australia “The Future of the
United Nations: Where do we go from here?”**

Mr. Randall, Ladies Gentlemen;

I am pleased and honored to meet with you this afternoon at the National Press Club of Australia. I have just co-chaired the 4th Korea-Australia Forum meeting in Hobart last week, where I met with foreign Minister Downer and Trade Minister Vaile and other state officials in Tasmania. We had a very fruitful meeting on bilateral issues.

But today I am here to talk with you in my capacity as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, the post I have been holding for the last 10 months. I would like to share with you, in particular, my views on the new challenges posed to the UN today, how the world body is redefining and reforming itself to meet these challenges, and what future role the UN is likely to play in this changing world. In trying to do so, I will, of course, draw on my own experience as President of the General Assembly, which was by no means usual or mundane as it began with the events of September 11, last year.

As we all know, the United Nations came into being in 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War. The founding fathers of the UN learned from the lessons of the League of Nations and designed the new world organization with a view to making it more viable and enduring by introducing more realistic features to the Charter such as in the composition and decision-making mechanism of the Security Council. As to how successful the UN has been since then, opinion may be divided. But few would challenge the achievements of the world body in areas such as decolonization, peace-keeping, economic development in developing countries, human rights, environmental protection, and international law.

Today, 57 years after its birth, the United Nations finds itself in a totally different world. During that half century, many changes have taken place in the international environment. I would like to look at three of them and consider how these changes have affected the work of the UN.

First, actors in international relations have dramatically increased in number and diversified in nature. With the process of decolonization that culminated in the 1960s, the number of UN member states has soared from 51 in 1945 to 189 today. Even this year, we will welcome two new members in September, Switzerland and East Timor. Compared with the 51 original members, the new member states comprise a much wider spectrum in political, economic and cultural aspects, and this has fundamentally changed the dynamics of the world body.

The emergence of non-state actors has also been a notable phenomenon. Without going into the realm of international law, these include collective actors such as the EU, the African Union, the G-77, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), all with varying degrees of integration. Some of these organizations and also independence movements such as the PLO and SWAPO were accorded observer status in the UN. Furthermore, a host of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly recognized by the UN as participants in international life.

The second important change is the rise and fall of the Cold War. The Cold War, which set in immediately after the creation of the UN, developed into a dominant feature of international relations, undergoing many shifts and transformations until it came to an end with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. 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 possibility of global nuclear war has largely been diminished. 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.

With the end of the Cold War, the United Nations has come to play an increasing role in maintaining and restoring peace. The institution of UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), once introduced to bridge the gap between the idea 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.

The third and perhaps the most influential change for the purpose of our discussion is globalization. Globalization is a process that has been going on for quite a while but became a defining feature of international relations toward the end of the last century. Revolutionary progress in transportation and communications technology has rendered national boundaries increasingly irrelevant for most economic, commercial, and cultural purposes.

At the end of the 20th century, compared to 50 years ago, global trade volume had grown 50-fold, and the cost of a phone call from New York to London was reduced to one two-hundredth of what it had been in 1950. Thus, interdependence among nations, especially in the economic sphere, has been growing at an unprecedented rate.

The process of globalization, as it is substantially changing the interactions among nations today, is affecting the agenda of the UN in a comprehensive way. This is all the more so because globalization has proved to be a double-edged sword. While enhancing the well-being of mankind in general, a globalized world also poses serious challenges to nations. Many of the issues being discussed in the UN reflect such challenges. The digital divide and other development issues represent 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 by-product of globalization. The issue of environmental protection 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.

Having talked about the changes and new challenges to the United Nations, I would like to draw your attention back to the events of September 11, 2001. In my opinion, these terrorist attacks and the ensuing events in the international community are very representative of the three challenges I mentioned. The chilling fact that a terrorist group, instead of a state, can pose such a serious threat to international security is a reflection of the diversity of international actors, a new characteristic of post-Cold War conflicts, and an undesirable effect of globalization.

September 11, 2001, a date now remembered by everyone for a very different event, was also the scheduled day of my inauguration as President of the General Assembly. On that morning, I was attending a breakfast prayer meeting to celebrate the start of the new session along with President Harri Holkeri of Finland, 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. Under serious security threat to the UN headquarters building itself, I had urgent consultations with Secretary-General Kofi Annan and decided to open the General Assembly the next day, September 12. Directly after my assumption of the Presidency, the General Assembly adopted its first resolution (56/1) of the session strongly condemning the 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. 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.

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.

One of the questions I am asked often is whether the events of September 11 has had the effect of weakening the role of the UN in fighting terrorism by diverting the international community's attention to the creation of the multinational forces outside the UN. I think this is a rather superficial conclusion reached through focusing on military activities in Afghanistan. Certainly the military campaign was an important part of the fight against international terrorism. But measures of a more fundamental and long-term nature have been considered and taken in and around the United Nations.

Based on the collective will of the Member States, the UN took a series of actions: we condemned the terrorist attacks in a speedy and firm manner, took measures to suppress 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, progress has been made in the UN negotiation on a comprehensive convention against terrorism. Thus, multilateral cooperation by means of the United Nations has gained renewed importance in the international community's coping with and managing the crisis of terrorism.

Another effect of the events of September 11 on the work of the UN has been in its dealing with issues of international security. 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 in this context. The September 11 terrorist acts have lent a strong emphasis 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 the promotion of international peace and security.

In its efforts to meet the challenges of the new era, the United Nations needs to make itself equal to this formidable task. The world body may not have fulfilled all of its mandates as envisioned by its founding fathers fifty-seven years ago. But the UN has proved to be an evolving institution and thus has been continually adapting itself to enable it to meet new challenges.

I have already given you an example of how the UN invented the concept of peacekeeping operations (PKO) to carry out its mandate given the lack of proper implementation of Charter provisions.

Last April, I had an opportunity to see for myself the largest and perhaps most successful UN peacekeeping operation, namely UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone. The next month, 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. 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.

Also underway are the efforts to better adapt the UN to new international conditions through 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 is a key issue bearing far-reaching implications for the future of the Organization.

Particularly in the area of revitalization of the General Assembly, an important step was taken on the 8th of July. For the first time in the history of the UN, the General Assembly amended the Rules of Procedure so that from now on the President, Vice-Presidents, and the Chairpersons of the Main Committees will be elected at least three months before, instead of at the beginning of, the next session. Under this new formula, Deputy Prime Minister Jan Kavan of the Czech Republic was elected as my successor on the same day. Six Main Committee chairpersons and twenty-one Vice Presidents of the General Assembly were also elected last week. The transition between my Presidency and Mr. Kavan's will set a precedent for future sessions of the General Assembly as well as for other institutions in the UN system.

But these are only small examples of how the UN is adapting and reforming itself to stand equal to the new challenges. As we move forward into the new millennium, we need to contemplate how we want to see the world's only universal organization develop in the coming years. As the Member States are the masters of the United Nations, the future of the world body is also in their hands. Do we ultimately want to have a kind of world government? Or do we expect the UN to confine itself more or less to the basic function of a forum for nations? Answers to such questions cannot be easily given and should necessarily be related to more fundamental and philosophical questions about the nature and development of international and human society.

In my opinion, at the risk of sounding too idealistic, we need to place more, rather than less, hope in the future of the UN. For the sake of greater safety and well-being of mankind in general, we need to strengthen predictability and rule of law in international life. A world that is rapidly globalizing with more numerous and diverse actors requires all nations to constantly interact with one another. To make these interactions more peaceful rather than violent, more cooperative rather than confrontational, more productive rather than wasteful, we need a universal institution such as the United Nations. Today, in the face of new and mounting threats to the security and well-being of humanity, we should resort to our collective wisdom to safeguard ourselves and our posterity and place the UN at the center of world affairs so that all nations can unite around it. In other words, we should reunite the United Nations.

Thank you.