

30 August 2002

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the meeting of the UN Association "The United Nations:
What does the world body hold for our future?"**

President Tham, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased and honored to address the distinguished members and guests of the UN Association of Singapore. This visit to Singapore is one of my last duties as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. And I must say that it is much more a pleasure than a duty to come to Singapore and meet with the leaders and intellectuals of this vibrant, beautiful city.

As President the General Assembly during the past year, I have given much thought to the past, present and future of the United Nations, made many speeches on the topic, and received valuable feedback from a variety of audiences around the world. And my thoughts have evolved accordingly. It is very gratifying that I should have the chance to discuss the subject with all of you today thanks to the UN Association of Singapore, for I have always found the leaders of this country to be of the highest intellectual and moral caliber.

Indeed, in New York, some of the most articulate and engaging diplomats I have met around the UN have been from Singapore. You can rest assured that you are very well represented at the global body. Meanwhile, here, as I offer you my views on the challenges facing the UN today, and how the world body is trying to meet these challenges and chart its future in these changing times, I expect the ensuing exchange of views with you to be a mutually enriching and thought-inspiring experience.

The world today is certainly a very different place from the world that gave birth to the UN fifty-seven years ago in the aftermath of the Second World War. In designing the new global organization, the founding fathers drew lessons from the unfulfilled idealism of the League of Nations. To make the United Nations viable and enduring, they incorporated many elements of realism into the Charter, especially concerning the composition and decision-making mechanism of the Security Council. Hence, the basic structure of the United Nations was a product of the global political dynamics of that era.

Since then, the world body has evolved with the changing times, with an ever-expanding mandate. Now, hardly anything escapes the attention of the United Nations. If there is an issue, there is bound to be a UN body laboring over the details. How successful has it been? The answer varies. Certainly, few would dispute its accomplishments in areas such as decolonization, peace-keeping, promotion of human rights and democracy, humanitarian assistance, environmental

protection, and codification of international law. But still there are those who question the effectiveness of the global organization and even try to discount it as a talking shop, probably out of frustration over seemingly much more discussion than action.

Having presided over the UN meetings for the past year, and being a three-term parliamentarian back home, I, for one, am a staunch advocate of discussion, as well as for the efforts to make it more democratic and result-oriented. Indeed, the United Nations has been engaged in an on-going effort to reform itself toward greater effectiveness and relevance in a world where constant change seems to pervade all aspects of global life. But underneath the fluidity, there are a number of general trends that constitute the dictate of our times and thus the context in which the United Nations is trying to chart its present and future.

First, the field of international relations is becoming increasingly crowded with more and more actors. The expansion of state actors, which has gone from fifty-one in 1945 to 189 today in terms of UN membership, can be traced back to the decolonization process that culminated in the 1960s. But the increase continues even to this day. Indeed, this year, we will shortly welcome two new members into the fold, Switzerland and East Timor. Furthermore, compared with the initial lot of fifty-one members, the current membership of the UN comprises a much wider spectrum in political, economic, and cultural background. The dynamics of the world body has dramatically changed accordingly.

Non-state actors have become important players as well. They include collective actors of varying degrees of integration, such as the EU, the African Union, the G-77, the Non-Aligned Movement, etc. Some of these organizations enjoy observer status in the UN, as do some other political entities such as Palestine or the SWAPO in the past. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly recognized by the UN as participants in international life, as sources of input into its deliberations and partners in the implementation of action. It seems evident by now that if the UN aspires toward effective global governance, it must do so with all of these actors fully on board.

Second, the world is no longer ideologically divided by a Cold War, which had been the dominant feature of international relations during the second half of the 20th century. The Cold War set in immediately after the creation of the UN, and held the global organization under its grip until it came to an end with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, the world has seen fewer and fewer conflicts stemming from ideological rivalry or bloc-to-bloc confrontation, and thus the possibility of global nuclear war has been largely diminished. At the same time, however, conflicts of ethnic or religious origin have proliferated and intensified, drawing the urgent attention of the United Nations. Some, like the Middle East, continue to simmer and remain on the agenda of the world body.

In the post-Cold War era, the United Nations has come to play an expanding role in restoring and maintaining peace. Once introduced to fill in the gap between the idea of collective security and the reality of a lack in Charter provisions for its implementation, the institution of UN peacekeeping operations has evolved into a highly effective means of furthering peace around the

world. The world body's peacekeeping capability has been strengthened in recent years with an overhaul of its operations as a whole.

No longer tied down by the ideological rivalry of superpowers, the United Nations is also recharged in its work of bringing the community of nations together in the pursuit of universal values and shared standards, brought under the broad rubric of democracy and market economy. The work is greatly facilitated but also made much more complicated by the third and perhaps the most defining trend of our times, i.e. globalization, which is transforming the world into a virtually single global village.

Globalization has been under way on for decades, long before the word became fashionable in public discourse. But the wide use of the term in the final decade of the last century and henceforth is a reflection of its predominance over all aspects of life in the present era.

The recent surge in globalization has been made possible by the revolutionary advances in communication and transportation technology, which have rendered national boundaries increasingly irrelevant for economic, financial, cultural, and even criminal purposes. The interdependence that globalization generates has been most visible in the economic sphere, where the global trade volume has grown fifty-fold during the past fifty years, and the cost of a phone call from New York to London reduced to half of one percent of what it used to be in 1950.

Globalization has had far-reaching implications for the work of the United Nations. As states become more interdependent, as problems become more trans-border and global, the issues brought to the UN have continued to expand and diversify. Environmental protection has been such an issue, long on the UN's agenda. It is receiving renewed attention as the World Summit on Sustainable Development has just opened in Johannesburg, South Africa this week.

Furthermore, globalization itself is an issue that the world body must come to terms with. Globalization is proving to be a double-edged sword. While enhancing the well-being of humankind in general, it is also widening the gap between the haves and have-nots within and between countries in the shrinking, global village. The problem is aggravated by the digital divide and other development issues of the information age. In the process, the already vulnerable sectors of society, such as children, the aged and the disabled are likely to fall further behind. Bridging the gap, making globalization work to the benefit of all is one important challenge that the United Nations called upon to rise up to.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing events in the international community are illustrative of the three trends and the challenges they pose for the world body. The attacks represent a new type of conflict of the post Cold-War era. They were committed by a transnational terrorist organization, which was able to exploit the cross-border flow of money and information. They have alerted the world to the fact that a terrorist organization, a non-state entity, can pose such a serious threat to international security.

Everyone must remember what happened on September 11, 2001. For me, it was the day of my scheduled inauguration as the President of the General Assembly, which had to be postponed to the next day. The three months since then were marked by the most extraordinary and busiest session in the annals of the General Assembly. During this period, the Assembly had to reorganize virtually all of its work program. One whole week of the Plenary was promptly set aside to debate 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, rescheduled to November.

A question I am often asked is whether September 11 had the effect of weakening the role of the UN, by diverting attention away to processes taking place elsewhere, more specifically whether the UN's role in the fight against terrorism has been overshadowed by the multinational forces created outside the UN. If one were to focus just on the military campaign in Afghanistan, it might look that way. Certainly, the military campaign was important, but in and around the UN, measures of more fundamental and long-term nature have been considered and taken so as to root out terrorism and to assist the Afghan people in rebuilding their country.

Against terrorism, the UN took a series of actions. In a united voice, the Member States condemned the terrorist attacks in a speedy and firm manner both in the General Assembly and the Security Council. We agreed to measures to suppress the financing of terrorist organizations, and endorsed the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. We also 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 negotiations to draft a comprehensive convention against terrorism. In sum, multilateral cooperation centering around the UN has gained renewed importance in the global community's efforts to cope with the crisis and to establish measures to stem the growth of terrorism.

Furthermore, September 11 and the ensuing developments in Afghanistan have given added impetus to the deliberations taking place at the UN to redefine the concept of security. During the recent years, concepts such as "new security" and "human security" have come into wide circulation, broadening the debate on security beyond the traditional military and political concerns. The new approach to security issues has been vindicated in the aftermath of September 11. It has become clear that security cannot be maintained by military means alone. Security, and peace, in this inter-connected world of instantaneous communication and blurred boundaries, must be seen as a holistic concept. At the UN, this has meant that security concerns have come to penetrate into all the deliberations. Now, in addition to the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and many other bodies are incorporating security concerns into their own work.

For reasons just discussed, these are challenging times for the UN. The world body may not have fulfilled all of the mandates envisioned by its founding fathers fifty-seven years ago. But it has proven to be resilient and evolving, continually adapting itself to meet new challenges. The UN peace-keeping operations have been a good example.

In April this year, I had an opportunity to see for myself the largest and perhaps most successful UN peacekeeping operation, namely UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone. The following month, I had the chance to see another UN "success story" in East Timor, where I welcome that country to the family of independent nations on behalf of the General Assembly. Sierra Leone and East Timor are excellent examples of how the UN is responding to the needs and demands of the rapidly changing world.

Also underway at the UN are efforts to better adapt itself to the new international conditions. Deliberations are under way on the reform of the Security Council as well as on the revitalization of the General Assembly. The outcome of these deliberations concerning the two vital organs of the United Nations will have far-reaching implications for the future of the organization.

As a means to revitalize the General Assembly, a small but important change has been made. The rules of procedure of the General Assembly have been amended to elect the President and other officials at least three months in advance, so as to give them time to prepare and provide continuity to the work of the GA President. Thus, on July 8th, Deputy Prime Minister Jan Kavan of the Czech Republic was elected as my successor, as were the twenty-one GA vice presidents and the chairpersons of the six Main Committees of the 57th session of Assembly. The transition from my presidency to Mr. Kavan's will set a precedent for future sessions of the General Assembly as well as for other bodies in the UN system.

Finally, a few words on relation between the United Nations and regional cooperation. We all know that Singapore is a leading force in regional cooperation in this part of the world, as has been the case with APEC or ASEM. Regional cooperation of varying degrees of integration has been on the rise, particularly during the last decade. At the current stage, most of these bodies of regional cooperation, with a few exceptions including the European Union, are concentrating on economic issues with a much lower degree of institutionalization compared to those in the UN system. Thus, the linkage between the UN and regional cooperation is not very strong for now. However, like we have witnessed in the EU, regional cooperation is an evolving process. And as regional cooperation in East Asia develops into a deeper and more comprehensive stage, I believe there will be wider and closer cooperation with the UN and other international organizations. After all, many of their goals are shared and approaches are complementary. This is certainly an important area to be explored for the future of the UN and states of every region in the world.

I have tried to look at how the UN is adapting and reforming itself to meet new challenges at this changing, critical time. For the longer term, we must ask ourselves how we see the world's only global organization developing in the coming decades. Would it develop into a kind of world government, or would it remain a forum for nation-states? The answers do not come easy, and would depend on fundamental, philosophical questions about the nature of history, human societies, and nation-states.

In any case, being the optimist that I am, I believe that we must begin to explore those questions by placing greater hope in the UN. We seek greater safety and well-being for humanity in

general, and for this we need greater predictability and rule of law in international life. We should make the interaction among the ever-growing number of actors in the globalized world more peaceful than violent, more cooperative than confrontational, more productive than wasteful. And at the center of all of these efforts, we need the United Nations, the only universal body, doing more than less in its endeavor to fulfill its mission of strengthening peace and human well-being around the world. Thank you.