Opening Remarks by Dr. Han Seung-soo
at the Forum of Small States
10 September 2001

Ambassador Mahbubani, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very honored to address the Forum of Small States on the eve of my assumption of the Presidency of the General Assembly as this group includes nearly half the total UN membership. In fact, this is my first speech in New York before a UN audience. And I can think of no more appropriate "rite of initiation" to begin the coming year. Let me thank all of you, and especially Ambassador Mahbubani, for your kind invitation.

Of course, the Republic of Korea is not a member of your group as our population is too large. Nevertheless, Koreans traditionally think of their country as a small state because, I suppose, its immediate neighbors are far more populous nations. This feeling of being "a dolphin amongst whales" gives us a natural rapport with the smaller countries of the world.

As you know, tomorrow I begin my duties as President of the 56th session of the General Assembly. My awareness of the great honor thus accorded myself and my country goes hand-in-hand with a recognition of the heavy responsibility I will bear. Since, as I understand it, the purpose of our meeting is to share our views on matters of common interest that will come before the General Assembly, let me first briefly explain how I would like to approach those issues.

If I were to choose a theme for my Presidency, it might well be "reform within continuity." What this phrase may lack in originality, I think it makes up for in accuracy. Both the United Nations system and the General Assembly, in particular, have acquired and nurtured their own unique traditions over the course of more than five and a half decades. This is a precious asset that each and every UN delegate and official has a solemn obligation to pass on undiminished to his or her successors.

But "undiminished" does not necessarily mean "unchanged." Indeed, the value of any living tradition such as ours is enhanced as a result of timely adaptations to changing circumstances. Particularly in the last decade, the pace of global change has accelerated, and the United Nations has had to move quickly to adapt to those changes. It was therefore highly significant that last year, at the Millennium Summit, the world's leaders pledged to "spare no effort to make the United Nations a more effective instrument" for pursuing the priorities set forth in their Declaration. They also reaffirmed the central position of the General Assembly as the "chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations."

The 56th session will be the first following the Millennium Summit and will, accordingly, give priority to implementing the Millennium Declaration. We will certainly seek guidance from the example of the 55th session, under President Holken's able leadership, and also from the Secretary-General's forthcoming "Road Map Report." But however good the road map, we will need to rely heavily on our own driving and navigational abilities, particularly if and when we enter uncharted territory. By according the Declaration high priority, the General Assembly can generate a powerful momentum for implementation throughout the United Nations system. In addition, given its central position within that system, the Assembly can play an invaluable coordinating role in the overall implementation scheme.

One of our most urgent tasks in this regard is to continue efforts to put our own house in better order. We have long recognized the need to improve the working methods of the General Assembly, and I wish to commend President
Holkeri on his initiatives to this end during the 55th session. Building on what has been achieved in previous sessions, I will do my best to sustain the momentum for reform and revitalization. I think it is especially important for the General Assembly President to be open to new thinking and proposals on this issue.

Peacekeeping operations is another key area within the UN system. Over the past decade, we have seen an enormous expansion of the UN's role in maintaining peace and security as regional conflicts and sectarian strife have escalated in the aftermath of the Cold War. On the whole, the UN's record in dealing with this unprecedented challenge has been commendable – particularly considering its limited mandate and resources. But at the same time we should candidly evaluate the cases of failed peacekeeping operations and learn the appropriate lessons from them. In order to prepare the UN for even greater and more diverse challenges in the future, we need to strengthen its capability to conduct peacekeeping operations in line with the recommendations contained in the Brahimi report, among others.

I hope that the 56th session will also be remembered for progress in the area of human rights. As the Millennium Declaration recognizes, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms are all closely interlinked. Taken together, they constitute the essential parameters of a society within which men, women, and children can lead peaceful, secure, fulfilling, and prosperous lives. I believe that human rights are at the very center of this nexus of values, giving practical substance and ultimate meaning to the whole. Accordingly, no task will be more important to me in the coming year than working with the Member States to advance the cause of human rights throughout the world.

In its discussion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, the Millennium Declaration also includes the concept of "the right to development," reflecting one of humanity's deepest aspirations. During the 56th session, the General Assembly will be focusing on a number of development priorities. In my view, bridging the digital divide and African development issues demand our serious attention and action.

With the rapid growth of information and communication technologies – or ICT, the "digital divide" has moved to the top of the development agenda. ICT has the potential to become a powerful new engine of social and economic development, lifting hundreds of millions of human beings out of poverty and into the mainstream of the world economy. These technologies constitute a major force driving the whole phenomenon of globalization. By utilizing and mastering them, mankind can transform that phenomenon from a double-edged sword into a multi-purpose tool of human development.

However, insufficient resources, inadequate knowledge, and lack of infrastructure, prevent the vast majority of human beings on the wrong side of the digital divide from bridging the gap. The UN has responded to the scale and urgency of this problem by, inter alia, establishing the ICT Task Force under the Economic and Social Council, which will be officially launched later this week.

I believe the General Assembly can significantly contribute to narrowing the digital divide by mobilizing the political will of the international community. Timely action during the 56th session can do much to ensure the success of the World Summits on Information Society in 2003 and 2005 being organized by the International Telecommunication Union. Working with the Member States, I will do my best to ensure that this happens.

The subject of African development is doubtless of special concern to the Forum of Small States. I understand that many African states are members of this Forum and that Africa has the largest representation of any region within the Forum of Small States. But, as the Millennium Declaration makes clear, African development should also be of great concern to all Member States. The future of African development will have important ramifications for development in other parts of the world and even, to a certain extent, for the well-being of people in the developed countries. If Africa can become a full participant in the global economy of the 21st century, the benefits to mankind – economic, but also cultural and political – will be enormous.

We know that Africa has a great potential for economic and social development. What we need to do is to find more effective ways and means of removing the impediments that prevent this potential from being realized – above all, civil and inter-state conflict and the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

As for the latter, the UN has been in the forefront of efforts to combat the spread of this dread disease, to assist those already afflicted, and to find a cure. In this regard, a major milestone was passed when the UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS was successfully held in June this year.