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PRESS RELEASE

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STATEMENT

by Mr. Nexhat KALAJ  
Chairman of the Commission on Health  
in the Albanian Parliament

At the Twenty-First Special Session  
of the United Nations General Assembly  
on Implementation of the Program of Action of the International  
Conference on Population and Development

New York, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999

Mr. President  
Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1994, Albania was one of the countries that endorsed the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo. Through this process, the Albanian Government committed itself to adopting a new population policy.

Since ICPD and ICPD + 5 some important legislative and policy progress has been made in Albania including a "Pregnancy Interruption" law approved on December 1995, an Environmental Protection law, a law on migration, and a national strategy on women, recently approved by the Albanian Government. This process continues by finding means of finalizing new laws such as laws relating to NGOs and Family Code that can affect and influence the reproductive health and whole population situation in Albania.

Albania has already achieved ICPD goals in the area of infant and maternal mortality and is looking for further reductions and to improve reproductive health and population situation as a whole. The Government is currently working in health and welfare reform and there is political commitment in developing multi-comprehensive approaches and strategies in population issues, including reproductive health, which has been difficult to realize because of whole situation.

In 1998 the Ministry of Health with UNFPA support started a national program in reproductive health. This program will develop a national strategy in this field as well as at coordinating the development of an IEC strategy.

Albanian Government is also engaged in achieving gender balance . A National Committee on Women, was established last year and a National Strategy for Women was developed and approved by the Government. Special attention is being given to women's empowerment.

The changes between 1991 - 1998 have been reflected in every aspect of Albanian population. Migration, both emigration and very rapid urbanization has a negative effect on the reproductive health and choices of the

population Emigrants out of the country make up 15 % of the country population. These people have very low status in the countries to which they have emigrated and experience many economic, cultural, and linguistic difficulties. They have little access to information and services. Cases of HIV/AIDS and other STD are growing rapidly, thus creating health risks for Albania and host countries as well. The need to develop special programs for these individuals is much needed. At the same time, urbanization has been accompanied by very serious problems in education sanitation, water supplies, health and social services for the population. Thus the living standard and health situation of this group is getting worst.

Reproductive health needs and violence of women in emergency situation as well as other population problems has been evident in Albania as a result of the Kosovar refugees. We are giving greater attention to ensuring that Kosovar refugees, in particular women and youth, receive appropriate health care , including sexual and reproductive health care and emergency contraception and appropriate and timely information.

The Population age structure of Albania clearly reflects the young age of the population. In 1997, 41.7 percent of the population was under the age of 17. This reflects the high demand for reproductive health services.

Although there are no legal barriers for adolescents to receive reproductive health services and information, economic and social-cultural barriers still limit such services.

However, success has been achieved in the last five years. This includes the fact that there is now a much more opened and approving attitude towards issues related to sexual and reproductive health including family planning, in a country like Albania where the family planning used to be a taboo before 1992 due to the very strict pronatalistic approach of the previous regime. After the Cairo Conference, Albania took very good steps by introducing sexual education in schools. However, implementation is mainly left to the discretion of individual schools.

The NGOs and private sector is very new in Albania. Civil society is still building up slowly. The Government now has a more open attitude to civil society groups, and in particular, non-governmental organizations.

Although there have been many positive changes concerning the role and responsibilities of civil society and partnerships with governments there is

still much to be done, and NGOs must to be given greater space and opportunities to represent individual needs at the local and national levels. Frequent changes of government mean that NGOs provide stability and continuity, which play a vital role in moving forward the ICPD Program of Action. And after the assessment of what has been done in ICPD+5, we think that taking real actions requires more in terms of development of civil society. Different approaches could be used for creating appropriate environment for broaden partnerships and building trust, building coalitions, increasing the capacity of NGOs and being creative in promoting full access to reproductive **health** services.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The transition period has created difficult situation for the country's economy. The consequences were reflected in drastic increases of unemployment, inflation and also the budget deficit. The biggest barrier to equal and universal access to reproductive health services in Albania is resource allocation. We recognize that lack of domestic and international funds for reproductive health programs remains a huge problem and one that makes a sustainable program often a wish rather than reality.

Albanian Government wish to express its commitment for fulfilling the obligations and make Cairo Program of Action a reality in all aspects.

Thank you