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STATEMENT BY SECRETARY-GENERAL AT PRESENTATION OF POLISH SCULPTURE

Following is the text of a statement by the Secretary-General, U Thant, to be made this afternoon in connexion with the presentation to the United Nations of a granite bust of Nikolaus Copernicus, Polish astronomer, philosopher and physician:

On behalf of the United Nations, I accept with pleasure this granite bust of the great astronomer, Nikolaus Copernicus, generously donated to the world Organization by the Polish People's Republic.

This striking portrait of an extraordinary genius, who revolutionized man's concept of the universe 500 years ago, deserves a place of honour in this building. For so many of the developments in science and technology which characterize contemporary civilization hark back to the concepts of Nikolaus Copernicus.

Like many great men of the European Renaissance, Copernicus received, what we now call, an inter-disciplinary education. He was a mathematician, a doctor of medicine, a theologian, as well as an astronomer. In the context of his era, he was also international. He studied, worked and taught in the centres of learning in Italy as well as in his native Poland.

Above all, Copernicus was an original thinker. He questioned the accepted concept of astronomy in which the earth was the centre of the universe. On the basis of his observations of the heavens, he concluded that the earth and other planets moved in orbit around the sun. This view, expressed by some ancient Greek thinkers, with whose works Copernicus was familiar, had been totally disregarded for over a thousand years in favour of the geocentric concept of the famous Greek astronomer, Ptolemy.

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Copernicus was one of those rare brilliant individuals who extend the frontiers of knowledge for mankind. All of us at the United Nations will draw inspiration from the universal message which he brings to us. Having laid the foundations of modern planetary astronomy, Copernicus can take credit for having launched our twentieth century astronauts and cosmonauts on their adventurous journeys into the universe.

Your Excellency, I would ask you to convey to your Government and to the people of Poland, my deep appreciation for the gift of this sculpture which tells us so eloquently that man is indeed capable of the most splendid achievements.

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