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TITLE: REVIEW: The 2002 World Telecommunication Development Conference Major Offensive On War Footing Called For By ITU Secretary-General To Connect Every Village Before 2005

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The 2002 World Telecommunication Development Conference Major Offensive On War Footing Called For By ITU Secretary-General To Connect Every Village Before 2005

International Telecommunication Union

Istanbul, 18 March 2002 - The 2002 World Telecommunication Development Conference opened today with over 1000 delegates from around the world including 30 Ministers and 50 representatives of regulatory agencies converging on the Istanbul Conference and Exhibition Centre.

The Conference was opened by ITU Secretary-General, Yoshio Utsumi, in the presence of the President of the Republic of Turkey, the Minister of Transport and Communications of Turkey and several other dignitaries including the Governor of Istanbul, Mr Erol Cakir, the President of the Telecommunication Authority of Turkey, Mr Fatih Mehmet Yurdal and Mr Selcuk Coskun, Deputy Under Secretary of Transport and Communications.

"My message is that the telecommunications sector must take urgent steps to bring basic telecommunications to all the world's inhabitants" Mr Utsumi told participants. "We must take a fresh look at our policies, and modify them to fast-track our objectives" he said. "As we review our programmes and their implementation, we should do some honest introspection and ask ourselves whether the telecoms fraternity has been working to bridge the digital divide, or is it unwittingly and systematically contributing to widening the divide", he added.

Mr Utsumi recalled that many initiatives had been taken to bridge the digital divide: from the Maitland Commission more than 15 years ago to the G8 DotForce and the UN ICT Task Force. "There is no time to discuss again, in yet another committee, the reasons mired in a deep bureaucratic maze which prevents us from providing basic telecoms to the inhabitants of the world," he said, adding, "the need of the hour is to launch an offensive, on a war footing, to make sure that every village in the World is connected before the World Summit on the Information Society". He called on the public and private sectors to be driven by their common objectives rather than divided by their different views on how to achieve these goals and urged both sectors to harness their respective strengths to reap the benefits for the populace.

Also speaking at the Opening Ceremony, Doctor Oktay Vural, Minister of Transport and Communications of Turkey said that the widening inequities in access to information and technology between industrialized and developing nations could be a source of tension. "To reap both the economic and social benefits of technological progress and to improve people's quality of life, the Information Society must be based on the principles of equal opportunities, participation and integration of all, Dr. Vural said. "This can only happen if everybody has access to at least a basic set of the new services and applications offered by the Information Society", he said.

He urged the United Nations, the ITU and the wealthy nations, in particular the G-8 countries, to be more sensitive over these issues and to allocate more funds to narrow the digital divide, expressing the hope that the World Telecommunication Development Conference would be a significant milestone in the process of bridging the digital divide for a better and peaceful world.

The President of Turkey, His Excellency Mr Ahmet Necdet Sezer, delivered the keynote. "One of the main challenges the new telecommunication technologies create" he told delegates,

"is that only certain countries and circles possess these technologies while the other countries are not benefiting from the information society and the opportunities it brings. To mitigate the negative impacts of these differences" he said, "developing countries should pursue policies enhancing access to telecommunication services and policies at affordable price.

He also stressed the importance of initiatives aimed at bridging the digital divide and the role of this conference in doing so. "My country sees this conference as an opportunity to be used in order to start cooperation towards the solving of problems between the governments, non-governmental organizations and the other actors of the economy," he said.

The Conference also held its first Plenary session at which it elected Mr Fatih Yurdal, Chairman of the Turkish Telecommunication Authority as Chairman of the Conference. Mr Yurdal will be assisted by six vice-chairmen (United Kingdom, United States, Russia, Tunisia, Burkina Faso and India). Chairmen and Vice-chairmen of the various committees were also elected (see itu.int/newsroom/wtdc2002/Structure.html for details).

At the plenary, Mr Hamadoun Touré, Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau - ITU's development arm - reviewed the major components of the Valetta Action Plan adopted four years ago at Valetta (Malta) and detailed achievements in its implementation. He also identified the challenges to be addressed by this Conference, charting the way for the discussions.

World Telecommunication Development Conferences are held every four years to map out ways to bolster telecommunication development worldwide. They establish ICT development priorities, strategies and Action Plans for the future with special emphasis on the expansion and modernization of networks, the mobilization of resources and regulatory reform needed to boost telecommunication penetration and access in the world's poorer countries.

SPECIAL SESSION ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Special Session on Bridging the Digital Divide showed that there was a common understanding on the definition of the digital divide.

Opening the Special Session on Bridging the Digital Divide, Oktay Vural, Minister of Transport and Communications of Turkey, noted that public policy has begun to pay attention to providing Internet access and the corresponding skills on a broad base worldwide.

In the context of bridging the digital divide, he felt the telecommunications community should address the issues of the financial divide, the knowledge divide as well as the confidence divide. At international level, four elements in the digital divide should be taken into account: education, electricity, governance and culture.

In remarks that followed, ITU was recognized as the leader in various activities, such as raising efficiency of limited resources like the radio spectrum, and was also seen as keeping in step with the huge transformation in technologies. While it has done much to bridge the digital divide, ITU could become more involved and become a focal point for information about digital divide initiatives.

The digital divide should not be accepted as an irreversible marginalization of the knowledge "have nots". The digital divide could be seen as a cloud with a silver lining. Bridging it could be the means to, for example, create new jobs and improve transparency of government services. The digital divide must be dealt with from the perspective of globalization with a view to promoting the concerted development of the world telecom industry. With will, more importantly, political will, intractable obstacles could be overcome.

Multilateral institutions have a role to play in creating a balance in access to Internet at a

reasonable price. There were calls for a concerted information strategy, based on applications like tele-health and tele-education.

Rural areas suffered from lack of reliable, modern equipment and the problem of isolation. ITU was asked to continue its work in technical assistance to ensure sustainable development, while also adapting solutions to the living conditions and fostering the conditions for connectivity to be made more widespread.

ITU should help to strengthen national regulatory bodies, but at the same time, remove the regulatory underbrush that hampers investment inflows.

Many speakers also raised concerns and hopes about the development of Internet content. Multiple cultures and languages require that every country take effective measures to gradually redress the imbalance in the Internet content and making the Internet a more accommodating space culturally.

International organizations also had a role to play in bringing about "digital justice" or "digital equity" through strengthening regional initiatives, enhancing cooperation between developing countries and through "government push". International cooperation also needs to be strengthened to combat cybercrime in all forms, in a bid to protect and preserve the security of the network and information.

Among the various concrete proposals to combat the digital divide were proposals to include digital broadcasting in the agenda of the Istanbul Action Plan, deploy digital radios with computers and printers in projects intended to bridge the digital divide; and promote the creation of local content to drive development agendas. On a national level, community awareness, educational empowerment, development of professional skills were other means to transform the 2Ds (digital divide) into 3As (awareness, access and affordability). Provision of Public Infocentres at schools, libraries and other locations were a favoured solution. It was also suggested that industry contribute a common corpus similar to a National Universal Service Fund.

Russia's Minister for Communications and Informatization, Leonid Reiman, Cameroon's Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Maximin Paul Nkoue Nkongo, FCC Commissioner, Kevin Martin, Syria's Minister Basheer Mohammed al-Munajed, Minister of Tunisia, Ahmed Friaa, Vice-Minister of China, Jiang Chun Zhang, France's Minister Christian Pierret and a spokesperson for Egypt's Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology, Ahmed Nazif, led the roster of ministerial-level speakers at the special session. France's Regulator Jean-Michel Hubert, Shyamal Ghosh from the Indian Department of Communications, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority's Shehzada Alam Malik and Malaysia's Suriah Abd Rahman also added remarks.

Jan Mutai, Secretary-General of African Telecommunication Union; José Pileggi-Veliz, chairman of Com-Citel; Maya Shankar Verma, chairman of the Telecommunication Regulatory Authority of India, Noah Samara, CEO of WorldSpace and Arthur Reilly, senior director of Cisco made presentations.

The strategic approaches recommended by both ITU Member States and Sector members at the Special Session on Bridging the Digital Divide will be submitted to a plenary session of the Conference, which in turn would reflect the outcome in the final report of the WTDC, including the Action Plan, the Strategic Plan and the Istanbul Declaration.

The full text of the statements made at the Opening ceremony as well a number of statements made at the special session on the Digital Divide can be found at itu.int/newsroom/wtdc2002/PolicyStatements.html

ABOUT ITU

ITU is a world-wide organization which brings governments and industry together to coordinate the establishment and operation of global telecommunication networks and services; it is responsible for standardization, coordination and development of international telecommunications including radio communications, as well as the harmonization of national policies.

To fulfill its mission, ITU adopts international regulations and treaties governing all terrestrial and space uses of the frequency spectrum as well as the use of all satellite orbits which serve as a framework for national legislations; it develops standards to foster the interconnection of telecommunication systems on a worldwide scale regardless of the type of technology used; it also fosters the development of telecommunications in developing countries.

ITU also organizes worldwide and regional exhibitions and forums bringing together the most influential representatives of government and the telecommunications industry to exchange ideas, knowledge and technology for the benefit of the global community, and in particular the developing world.

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