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ADDRESS BY UN SECRETARY-GENERAL TO

THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Geneva, 10 December 2003

We are going through a historic transformation in the way we live, learn, work, communicate and do business. We must do so not passively, but as makers of our own destiny. Technology has produced the information age. Now it is up to all of us to build an information society.

This Summit is unique. Where most global conferences focus on global threats, this one will consider how best to use a new global asset.

We are all familiar with the extraordinary power of information and communications technologies.

From trade to telemedicine, from education to environmental protection, we have in our hands, on our desktops and in the skies above, the ability to improve standards of living for millions upon millions of people.

We have tools that can propel us toward the Millennium Development Goals; instruments with which to advance the cause of freedom and democracy; vehicles with which to propagate knowledge and mutual understanding.

We have all of this potential. The challenge before this Summit is what to do with it.

The so-called digital divide is actually several gaps in one.

There is a technological divide – great gaps in infrastructure.

There is a content divide. A lot of web-based information is simply not relevant to the real needs of people. And nearly 70 percent of the world's web sites are in English, at times crowding out local voices and views.

There is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys. This can be true of rich and poor countries alike: some developing countries are among those offering the most digital opportunities for women, while some developed countries have done considerably less well.

There is a commercial divide. E-commerce is linking some countries and companies ever more closely together. But others run the risk of further marginalization. Some experts describe the digital divide as one of the biggest non-tariff barriers to world trade.

And there are obvious social, economic and other disparities and obstacles that affect a country's ability to take advantage of digital opportunities.

We cannot assume that such gaps will disappear on their own, over time, as the diffusion of technology naturally spreads its wealth. An open, inclusive information society that benefits all people will not emerge without sustained commitment and investment. We look to you, the leaders assembled here, to produce those acts of political will.

We also look to the business community, which I am glad to say is represented here in impressive numbers. The future of the IT industry lies not so much in the developed world, where markets are saturated, as in reaching the billions of people in the developing world who remain

untouched by the information revolution. E-health, e-school and other applications can offer the new dynamic of growth for which the industry has been looking.

We look to civil society groups, in particular for their rich knowledge of hopes and concerns at the local level, among communities that are eager to join in the global exchange of ideas and information, but may also feel their identities are threatened by a pre-packaged global culture.

And we look to media organizations, which are both creators of content and essential watchdogs. At yesterday's World Electronic Media Forum, broadcasting leaders from all the world's regions adopted a declaration in which they pledged to do their part for development and social cohesion. It is vital that they retain their freedom to do so, as spelt out in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, the right to freedom of opinion and expression is fundamental to development, democracy and peace, and must remain a touchstone for our work ahead.

Information and communication technologies are not a panacea or magic formula. But they can improve the lives of everyone on this planet.

Yet even as we talk about the power of technology, let us remember who is in charge. While technology shapes the future, it is people who shape technology, and decide what it can and should be used for.

So let us embrace these new technologies. But let us recognize that we are embarked on an endeavour that transcends technology. Building an open, empowering information society is a social, economic and ultimately political challenge.

There is no comparison between the technologies of the atomic age and those of the information age. Nonetheless, something written half a century ago by the American nuclear scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer seems strangely prescient and applicable today. And I quote:

> "The open society, the unrestricted access to knowledge, the unplanned and uninhibited association of men for its furtherance – these are what may make a vast, complex, ever growing, ever changing, ever more specialized and expert technological world, nevertheless a world of human community."