20 November 2001

Statement of H.E. Dr. Han Seung-soo,
President of the 56th Session of the General Assembly,
at the ICT Task Force launching ceremony

Secretary-General, Distinguished Members of the ICT Task Force, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am pleased and honored to be present here today at the inauguration of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force.

As I already noted in my acceptance speech of 12 September before the General Assembly, the ICT revolution is rapidly expanding the horizons of economic and social development. It contains within itself an enormous, yet largely untapped, potential to promote sustainable development, build capacities, and – above all – reduce poverty. ICT can contribute to the empowerment of women, reduce gender inequalities, and facilitate the full participation of disabled and elderly persons in socio-economic life and development.

It can bridge the distance between rural and urban populations, and significantly strengthen the global fight against diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria.

Most importantly, ICT enables developing countries to leapfrog stages of development and rapidly integrate into the global economy.

However, it would indeed be a cruel irony if the world's newest technological revolution were to widen, rather than narrow, the existing gap between developed and developing countries. The vast majority of human beings remain untouched by advances in ICT. The enormous regional disparities in the capacity to utilize these new technologies – the so-called "digital divide" - continue to grow. Africa's share of Internet hosts relative to the world total is steadily declining. While claiming 12% of the world's population, Africa accounts for only three tenths of one percent (0.3%) of total global Internet content.

It is my belief that the international community should coordinate its overall efforts in order to narrow the ever-widening digital divide. We need to arrest and then reverse the current trend before it may be too late.

 In this regard, a number of important initiatives have been recently undertaken by both public and private bodies, including the World Bank, the G8, the South Summit, and the World Economic Forum, among others.

I believe the United Nations is in a unique position to provide a truly global dimension to such activities. Given the scale and seriousness of the problem, our goal should be nothing less than to place ICT in the service of development for all human beings on an equal footing.

Thus, we bring to today's inauguration ceremony high hopes and expectations for the success of the ICT Task Force. I would like to commend those responsible for this initiative, especially Secretary-General Kofi Annan who, acting on a resolution of the Economic and Social Council, has done so much to bring the Task Force into being. As befits its ambitious goals, the Task Force has been given a wide mandate covering all the major areas in which ICT can make a real difference to the people of developing countries: from providing basic digital education to improving network access and assisting aspiring entrepreneurs to combating HIV/AIDS.

In addition to its substantive importance, the Task Force also bears a symbolic significance as an innovative public-private partnership. It provides an institutional framework wherein Member States, the private sector, and other stakeholders can come together as partners in implementing the goals of the Millennium Declaration. I sincerely invite all Member States and the various components of civil society to offer their full support and enthusiastic encouragement to the ICT Task Force.

Of course, as a new body with limited resources, it cannot tackle every job at once. But the ICT Task Force can mobilize the support of and inspire action by the international community to accelerate development through the application of ICT so as to make a real difference in the lives of people everywhere. I firmly believe that what we are witnessing today is the commencement of a process in which the UN, the private sector, and civil society can work hand-in-hand to help make the term "digital divide" an anachronism within our lifetimes.

As president of the General Assembly, I pledge to give the ICT Task Force my wholehearted support and to do my utmost to facilitate its work.

Thank you.