

17 May 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on World Telecommunication Day**

On 17 May 1865, representatives of 20 European countries met in Paris and signed the first International Telegraph Convention to manage the first international telegraph network. As a consequence, the oldest inter-governmental organization - the International Telegraph Union - was established. Since 1969, World Telecommunication Day has been celebrated annually on 17 May to commemorate this important historic event.

From its humble birth nearly 11 years before the invention of the telephone, the International Telegraph Union gradually developed into the current International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a UN specialized agency with a membership which includes almost all the countries of the world and over 500 private members from the telecommunication, broadcasting and information technology sectors. Its tireless work and achievements today positively affect the life of everyone who makes telephone calls, listens to the radio, watches television, surfs the Web or otherwise exploits the fruits of the recent telecommunication's revolution. It is hard to imagine how today's telecommunication world would look without the efforts of the ITU to globally harmonize national policies, bridge technological differences and foster interconnectivity and interoperability of systems. World Telecommunication Day might thus be rightly considered as a celebration of the accomplishments of the ITU.

However, World Telecommunications Day is also a day to reflect on the growing chasm between those who have the technology and its fruits and those in the world who have not even been remotely touched by this revolution. Despite fast technological development, which in every moment allows unimaginably huge movements of information from one side of the globe to the other, more than 70 % of people in this world have never heard a dial tone, let alone surfed the Web. This digital divide can be illustrated - for instance, by the fact that there are more telephone lines in Manhattan, only one part of the city of New York, or in Tokyo than in the whole of Africa. And even if telecommunication systems and computers were available in every place, most of the world's poor would still be excluded from the information revolution because of illiteracy and a lack of basic computer skills. Moreover, four-fifths of websites are in English, a language understood by only one in 10 persons on the planet. The digital divide separates both internationally and nationally, rich and poor but also men and women, young and old. Clearly, the challenge ahead to help all of the world's people to communicate is enormous.

Already in 1989, the Plenipotentiary Conference of ITU held in Nice, recognized the importance of placing technical assistance to developing countries on the same footing as its traditional activities of standardization and spectrum management which was later reflected in its new structure. In the developing world, ITU has since established a number of programs to facilitate

world connectivity and access, foster policy, regulatory and network readiness, expand human capacity through training programs and others.

To bridge the digital divide, nevertheless, is a task so enormous that it cannot be achieved by the ITU alone. Though providing of food, safe drinking water, shelter and education for all might seem to be more urgent and burning challenges for the world development community, being cut off from telecommunication services is a hardship almost as acute as those other deprivations, and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them. That was why world leaders in the Millennium Declaration "have resolved to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, ... are available to all."

The World Summit on the Information Society, which ITU is organizing with the support of the United Nations system, is one important step on the way towards facilitating a real information society for all. It will take place in two parts: in Geneva in December 2003 and in Tunis in November 2005. Based on the general goals incorporated in the Millennium Declaration, this summit should serve as a strategic opportunity to reach international agreement, at the highest possible level, on some clear and quantifiable goals and targets relating to achieving the information society, with benchmarks and timeframes for measuring progress towards them, and help build and launch multi-stakeholder alliances for action, with concrete commitments to achieve them.

I would like to use this occasion to strongly encourage Heads of all States and Governments, as well as leaders in the private sector, civil society and relevant international organizations to actively participate at the World Summit on Information Society and to use every available resource for its best preparation and successful outcome. This unique chance to bring the benefits of information and communications technologies to all of the world's inhabitants must be utilized to its maximum.