

***Hon. Kaliopate Tavola***  
Minister for Foreign Affairs & External Trade

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***Address at the World Summit on the  
Information Society***

10 - 12 December 2003 Geneva, Switzerland

On behalf of the Government and people of the Republic of the Fiji Islands, I wish to extend our deepest gratitude to the Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) for graciously hosting this first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva.

I believe the organisation of this Summit is timely as there continues to be widening gaps in digital and knowledge divides between the technology empowered and technology excluded communities. Ignoring the realities of this process would render most of our communities to ever increasing irrelevance.

The Millennium Declaration and its goals were unanimously agreed to by the full 189 UN member states. In recognition of "*the urgent need to harness the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration*", this Summit was agreed to. It is my Government's wish that the level of ambition in this regard has not waned.

I am pleased to note the wide participation of governments, non-governmental organisations, civil societies and the media. Increasingly, this integrated approach to establishing multilaterally agreed principles is being adopted to ensure that a multiplicity of views is addressed. Understandably, the outcome would contain a lot of compromises, but ultimately, in the end, I am hopeful that the spirit with which the WSIS was mooted has been firmly entrenched in these final documents.

The prolonged and arduous preparatory process is testimony to this fact and I pay tribute to the hardworking committees. I am hopeful that the Declaration of Principles for the Information Society and the corresponding plan of action that Fiji is endorsing today will ensure that we reap the benefits of information and communications technologies for social and economic development.

Fiji is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group, which consists largely of least developed countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). We are pleased to have signed an Agreement jointly with the European Union on Wednesday 10 December on Information Society for Development. As a group, we recognise that the rapid advent and development of information and communication technologies could have a two-pronged effect: firstly, a threat of widening even further the technical divide and secondly, an opportunity that could catapult our vulnerable economies into the heart of the information age. It is our aim to avoid the first and ride the second!

Our countries have inherent and persistent problems including low human capital qualification level, lack of telecommunication infrastructure, an inadequate national and regional regulatory and judicial framework, institutional weakness, lack of investment, to name a few. We are therefore pleased that the ACP and EU will endeavour to call on relevant organisations like the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Centre for the Development of Enterprise (CDE) and the relevant organisations in the region to promote sustainable Public-Private Partnerships and innovative financial mechanisms with a view to developing state of the art ICT infrastructure. It is our hope that these good intentions come to fruition.

As I alluded to earlier the mandate is extremely wide. While we support all the principles in the Declaration, I wish to highlight issues critical, not only to Fiji but also to the Pacific region as a whole. As mentioned earlier, we belong to the category of countries referred to as *small island developing states (SIDS)*. Our vulnerability stems from geographical isolation from markets, lack of economies of scale, exposure to natural disasters and dependence on one or two commodities. The advent of and rapid progress in technological advancement globally offers rare opportunities to our people that were non-existent just a few short years ago.

Moreover, the opportunities and advantages emanating from more liberal global information could extend to other sectors such as education, health care, business, food security, women and youth in development, culture and development of government services. As our various island nations are widely dispersed, separated by thousands of miles of ocean, this medium has allowed an increasing number of students to enrol in university programmes.

By the same token, telemedicine has also been widely used to share medical knowledge and know how in the region. The action plan that we endorse at this Summit is therefore an integral component of launching us firmly into the information age and the accompanying benefits.

I look forward to the successful implementation of this action plan and a positive report at the next phase in Tunis.

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No. of words – 787

Time – 6.3 minutes

I guess I need to cut another 163 words!