

Speech by the Head of the Sri Lankan Delegation,
Mr. Tilak Ranaviraja, Secretary
of the Ministry of Mass Communication

Mr. Chairman,
Heads of State,
Secretary General of ITU,

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Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Permit me to wish you a very good day. We from Sri Lanka are pleased by the salubrious climes of the country of Alpine mountains. Words of thanks are therefore due to the International Telecommunications Union for making arrangements to commence the first phase of this summit here in Geneva. On behalf of the President, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Government and the people of Sri Lanka, our expressions of greetings and warmth are extended to the host country Switzerland and all the distinguished delegates present here.

I believe that we all share the common belief that the information society should encompass the vast majority, if not all the people. The literacy rate of Sri Lanka is 92%. Therefore, its people are fully aware that Information and Communication Technology could profoundly improve their lot and for that reason no special effort need be taken to popularise the concept of the need of ICT.

Sri Lanka ranks 89 out of 173 in UNDP's Human Development Index. This different kind of third world country came into being because of the consistent policy made by successive Sri Lankan governments, lasting well over half a century, deciding that its entire population should have equal access to education and health services. During the last lap of the colonial administration

of our country we decided that education provided by the state should be free to all the citizens up to the first-degree level of the University. Irrespective of the cost to the Government or the taxpayer, irrespective of the criticisms of quality, the education services were not left in the lurch of the market forces and competition. However, it is important to note that the standard of English education in Sri Lanka is in need of critical improvement, and thus an initial push of technology will require native languages as the mode of user interface, as well as technology training.

Though we come here to declare the universality of the information society we cannot deny the creeping in of the digital divide that is taking place all over the globe. The extent of division varies with locality due to a variety of factors. The mere recognition of the same does not do justice to the population we represent here. Clearly bridging the divide requires the spread of infrastructure, access to the service and the literacy of usage. This requires a lot of ingenuity.

Within a few years of the invention of the telephone, Sri Lanka inaugurated its telephone network. However its spread was limited to Government Offices, Plantations and the rich for a long time. Both the costs and the inadequate development infrastructure hampered its growth. However the rate of spread grew only within the

last few years. Under the leadership of Her Excellency Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumarantunga, the President, the bold step was taken to privatise the state monopoly and secure the strategic investment of a Telecommunication system. Licenses were issued to operate fixed services in competition to the monopoly. The regulatory functions were vested in a Commission with its own funds of which I am the Chairman by virtue of the office I hold. An improved growth rate of the telephone network has taken place since then. Further improvements are much desired.

Unlike a plain old telephone, an external power supply is essential for the use of a computer. Availability of commercial power greatly facilitates this use. However conservative estimates provide us a figure of about only 60%

of Sri Lankan households have Electricity. In terms of present realities, which require reception of quality graphics the use of a 2 Megabits per second (Mbps) connection is desirable. The cost of such a connection in the developed world could be priced at about 30 US Dollars per month whereas the cost of such a connection in Sri Lanka is about 6,000 US Dollars a month. Incidentally the cost of a very basic living unit in Sri Lanka is about 600 US Dollars. Division in wealth, therefore, acutely contributes to the digital divide in Sri Lanka.

While globalisation and foreign investments have been critical in propelling the Sri Lankan economy towards the 21st century, the trickle-down effect has not been as great as anticipated. Thus, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. In sum, given the current

context of Sri Lanka, in addition to the prohibitive cost of computer equipment and services, I believe that the current level of power supply and communication infrastructure such as the current capacity and number of telephone lines combined with the low level of literacy in terms of computer literacy and English literacy, are the greatest barriers to entry that we need to address, especially when it comes to the rural sector, as we embrace ICT in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, the right to freedom of information is being increasingly accepted as a necessary adjunct to participatory democracy the world over. Given that ICT can be used to increase access to information, thus improving transparency and accountability, it can play a significant role in enhancing good governance and democracy in Sri Lanka. Regrettably, it is

possible, that the lack of communication and access to information may have contributed in some measure to the prevailing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. It is my fervent hope that we will be successful in creating equal access to ICT for all segments of society in our country, including at the grass-roots levels.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Permit me to say this. Let us not confine the vision of an information society merely to a declaration or to an action plan on paper. The penalty for that would be further frustration setting in society by creating another set of haves and have-nots in a different dimension. Our aim is to create a society that can take informed decisions.

Our thanks are extended to the Chair for giving us an opportunity to express our views.

Thank you,