

SPEECH
BY
HIS EXCELLENCY PRESIDENT
ROBERT GABRIEL MUGABE
OF
ZIMBABWE ON THE OCCASION OF
THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION
SOCIETY, GENEVA, SWITZERLAND,
10TH DECEMBER, 2003

Mr. President of the Summit,
Your Excellency Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Excellencies Heads of State and Government,
Distinguished Delegates,
Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I wish, on behalf of the people and Government of Zimbabwe, to thank and pay tribute to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the people and Government of Switzerland for organising and hosting this landmark Summit on the hope for and challenges of a global information society. I remain cognisant of the fact that this Summit is a culmination of a series of efforts that seek to bring into sharp focus an integral dynamic in human development, namely information, as well as the infrastructural means of its delivery, or what we have come to collectively term information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Mr. President, the new millennium boasts of dramatic technological improvements which have given rise to what is an information revolution. Time, space and distance have collapsed to create what for some is "a brave, new world", with instantaneous and simultaneous dimensions. It is a world of enormous technological leaps, a world where means have improved well beyond measure.

Yet in this new age, we continue to face basic paradoxes. The duality of development and under-development remain implacably in place as the basic and core dialectic to which there is no apparent synthesis. The rich, imperious and digital North remains on the one end of the development divide; the poor, dis-empowered, underdeveloped South remains on the other end of the divide.

Yes, for us post-colonials, we still have an aloof immigrant settler landed gentry – all-white, all-royal, all untouchable, all-western supported – pitted against a bitter, disinherited, landless, poverty-begrimed, right-less communal black majority we have vowed to empower, and in the cause of whom Zimbabwe continues to be vilified, in a country that is ours and very African and sovereign. Hence, in spite of the present global milieu of technological sophistication, we remain a modern world divided by old dichotomies and old asymmetries that make genuine calls for digital solidarity sound hollow. It is a sad, sad story of improved technological means for unimproved human ends.

Mr. President, long after we have talked about the need for information and communication technologies as tools with which to contrive the information society, we are soon to discover that receivers and computers are powered by electricity which is unavailable in a typical Third World village. Long after we have talked about connectivity, we are soon to discover that most platforms for electronic communication need basic telecommunication infrastructure which does not exist in a typical African village.

What is worse, we will discover, much to our dismay, that the poor villager we wish to turn into a fitting citizen for our information society, is in many instances unable to read and write. Where we are lucky to find the villager literate and numerate, we soon discover that he or she is not looking for a computer terminal but for a morsel of food; an antibiotic to save his dying child; a piece of land on which to eke out an existence, in short, looking for a humane society that guarantees him food, health, shelter and education.

For us, E-commerce implies growing economies trading fairly in barrier-free markets. E-education implies economies run for the people, not for the sake of enriching one or two multinational corporations. E-health implies affordable drugs for affordable health delivery systems that can only be guaranteed by policies that are genuinely national. Yes, E-government implies a sovereign national Government that manages "Top Level Domains" within its borders and whose preoccupation are its people first and foremost. Yes, for us E-Zimbabwe means a Zimbabwe with a sovereign people, Zimbabweans, and run by them and not by the British, Australians or Americans. This is a fundamental principle of our U.N. Charter enunciated as the right of self-determination.

Mr. President, the key to, and foundation of an information society lies in the resolution of the dilemma of development. The way to an information society is through even, fair and just development. There is no shortcut.

Today Mr. President, we seek an information society in a world shaped and divisively structured by global hierarchies of power – undiminished, hegemonic power made most arbitrary by the politics of uni-polarity that have led to circumstances of a dis-empowered U.N. system. We seek equal access to information, itself duplicitously presented as a basic human right when in fact it was commercialised and commoditised by a few rich countries a long time ago; and when it is daily managed and deployed in defence of the selfish interests of those countries.

Yes, we seek equal access to information and the control of communication technologies whose genesis in fact lies in the quest for global hegemony and dominance on the part of rich and powerful nations of the North. The ICTs that we seek to control and manage collectively are spin-offs from the same industries that gave us the awesome weapons that are now being used for the conquest, destruction and occupation of our nations. The ICTs by which we hope to build information societies are the same platforms for high-tech espionage, the same platforms and technologies through which virulent propaganda and misinformation are peddled to de-legitimise our just struggles against vestigial colonialism, indeed to weaken national cohesion and efforts at forging a broad Third World front against what patently is a dangerous imperial world order led by warrior states and kingdoms.

The deadly, televised spectacle of an unjust war of occupation in Iraq, based on blatant lies peddled shamelessly on monopolised media, was a dramatic example of a false and failed global information society founded on the twin aggressive impulses of shock and awe. These last two years have shown us how information and ICTs are often deployed as preludes and accompaniments to aggressing the sovereignties of poor and small nations. I say this because my country Zimbabwe continues to be a victim of such aggression, with both the United Kingdom and United States using their ICT superiority to challenge our sovereignty through hostile and malicious broadcasts calculated to foment instability and destroy the state through divisions.

Our voice has been strangled and our quest to redeem a just and natural right has, been criminalized. Today we are now very clear. Beneath the

rhetoric of free press and transparency is the iniquity of hegemony. The quest for an information society should not be at the expense of our efforts towards building sovereign national societies. Our national society does not exist to serve ICTs or information. Both must be instruments that serve our society as it seeks fullness through balanced development and self-determination. Both must express themselves within the parameters of our inviolate sovereignty represented by our democratic national will which expresses itself through our national laws, our national policies and our national institutions. On this we are firm and unbending.

Instead, we should seek to use ICTs as tools that can be adopted and adapted to the construction of sovereign national societies, with clear national identities, themselves real and only durable building blocs to vibrant, diverse, just and sustainable global information society.

I thank you.