

Statement by Mr. Zouhair Chelli, Honorary Representative of the
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Tunisia at the
World Summit on the Information Society, Tunis Phase
24 – 26 June 2004, Hammamet, Tunisia

His Excellency ~~Minister of Transport and Communications Technology~~
Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honor for me to address this forum which has brought together a large number of governmental, inter-governmental, and non-governmental organizations as well as the United Nations agencies, the media and representatives of the civil society. On behalf of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) I would like to express our gratitude to the organizers of the forum - ITU and the Government of Tunis-, in particular His Excellency the Minister of Foreign Affairs, for the opportunity provided to the members of the United Nations family to present the expectations of their respective agencies of the 2005 Summit.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rapid technological advancements in the last decade, in particular in the field of digital technology, have allowed for unprecedented possibilities for human creativity, global communication, and access to information. Like in any other field of science, the possibilities offered by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), could serve many different purposes and vested interests. It is the collective responsibility of the international community - the States, the United Nations and all humanitarian agencies - to ensure that ICT remains accessible to all nations and to all walks of society, including the marginalized and most vulnerable groups. It is also a universal responsibility to devise strategies and ways to ensure that ICT is always used for a good cause. Despite the many misuses, it is highly reassuring that innovative uses of information technology have helped dramatically expand access to information and communication and improve the livelihoods in many remote areas of the world.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My organization, UNHCR, is mandated to provide international protection and immediate assistance to refugees, and to seek durable solutions for them. There are only three types of durable solutions for a refugee:

- Local integration into the local community of host country;
- Repatriation or return to country of origin
- Resettlement to a third country

The speed of progress in Information and Communication Technology over the last 10 years has left many population groups in a time warp – especially refugees. Most countries today have already incorporated the ICT into their national programs and have developed strategies to educate their population on various aspects of this technology. However in most cases refugees are not included in any national program, social, educational or developmental. In short, they fall through the cracks

because host governments either do not have the resources, are not willing to include these people in the first instance, or believe that the refugee problem is short-lived.

The people of concern to UNHCR number around 18 million, consisting of refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, and the stateless. The majority of these are hosted in the low- and middle-income countries of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The development of telecommunications and the reduction of data tariffs have made the provision of information in electronic form commercially very attractive compared to the traditional print media. Many in developed countries depend on the Internet as their primary means of information and electronic mail is a well accepted means of communication. More advanced countries are able to 'tap' into the vast resources it presents. Sadly, however, many less developed countries are not able to do so. Alas, access to information, presented through this advancement in technology, has widened rather than narrowed the digital divide.

The durable solutions pursued by UNHCR can only be successful if refugees are able to find a safe, meaningful, and productive life wherever they eventually settle. In this time warp refugees find the world has passed them by. Access to information in all forms is necessary to bring them back in par with the general populace. The initiative of the WSIS is an opportunity to address this divide.

UNHCR is particularly keen on encouraging the following themes:

Government responsibilities

Ensure that Governments take into account refugees and other populations of concern to the organization (returnees and internally displaced and stateless persons) in national technological programs, especially in education.

Developing Infrastructure

Establish policies that encourage the equitable development of telecommunication infrastructure, thereby enabling affordable access to the Internet - an initial step towards being able to make use of such information.

UNHCR believes that a stable economy in addition to a stable government reduces the risk of armed conflicts which contribute to the refugee problem. Economies are now increasingly relying on electronic information. We need national policies that reflect this trend and encourage businesses to move with the information age.

Education

Promote education on the use of such tools and the benefits it can offer to businesses, the general population and the refugees, returnees, internally displaced and the stateless.

NGOs in education

For NGOs who are involved in refugee education, access to electronic information, the ability to use and contribute to this information base is as important as basic education.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now, allow me to say a few words about the importance that we attach to the application of ICT for promotion of education, particularly post-primary education, among refugee adolescents. Refugee children including adolescents constitute 39% of

refugee populations world-wide. They have specific needs, not only because they are children but because they have gone through a painful journey in their lives, caused by wars and ethnic conflicts. Education is a priority for children; it is hope for security and a better future. The international community has the moral obligation to fulfill children's right to education. It is in this context that part of UNHCR's policy commitments is to support specific education needs of children and adolescents. The challenge is to translate this policy into action in the face of a myriad of constraining factors that hinder access to post-primary education for refugees.

But how ICT can help refugees? I will just cite a few examples:

- Refugees who do not have the chance to pursue further studies after primary school can benefit from distance education programs that can be accessed through ICT.
- ICT is the refugees' window to the outside world. They can access a wealth of information and learn.
- ICT can help refugees with language training, which is an essential element for integration/reintegration processes.
- It is a means of communication and a source of comfort to their isolation. They can contact their families and friends like all of us.
- Refugees can be trained to have ICT skills which they can use to find gainful employment.

To this aim, UNHCR and the International software manufacturer Microsoft signed a partnership agreement last December, on the occasion of the WSIS Geneva Preparatory meeting, to create Community Technology Learning Centers (CTLC) in Kenya and Russia for the benefit of refugees. One such facility has been successfully established in St Petersburg for urban refugees (an estimated 6,000 Afghan and Iraqi refugees), and a second one in Dadaab refugee camp in eastern Kenya is about to be launched. More than 120,000 Somali refugees have been living in this camp for the last ten years, with little contact with their homeland or anywhere else. UNHCR is also assessing the feasibility of setting up such centres in Tanzania. This facility will serve as a place for refugees to learn and at the same time nurture their hopes.

The undertaking is indeed a challenging one not least because it is not considered a priority for the donor community. But UNHCR is determined to push this strategy forward through effective, operational partnerships with corporations, NGOs and host governments, hoping that humanitarian community will be convinced of its value, relevance and sustainability.

The adoption by 175 States of the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action of the Geneva Summit in December 2003 has raised much expectations. These documents for the first time have laid a foundation for the creation of an information society accessible to all, and have defined the fundamental universal values that underlie this objective. We hope that the Tunis Summit will further pave the way to move in that direction. I wish to conclude my statement by expressing hopes that UNHCR's concerns and expectations will be taken into account in the discussions and proceedings of the Summit.

Thank you.