

Speech
by President
Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
President of the Republic of Tunisia
at the opening session
of the First Phase of the World
Summit on the Information Society
(Geneva – December 10, 2003)

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,

Mr. Chairman,
Your Majesties, Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies,
Mr. Secretary-General of the United Nations Organization,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to participate today in the meeting of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society hosted by the friendly Swiss Confederation, here in Geneva, and to express to the Swiss President and people my sincere thanks for their warm welcome and generous hospitality. I also extend my thanks to the United Nations Secretary-General for the efforts he constantly exerts to ensure the success of this Summit in its two phases, the first in Geneva and the second in Tunis, and to stimulate international cooperation in this new vital sector for the human civilization.

My thanks are also due to the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, to the chairman of the Summit Preparatory Committee, and to the members of the Executive Secretariat, for the efforts they have all made to prepare for this important event which is marked by the remarkable contribution of the representatives of civil society and the private sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are certainly aware that the holding of this Summit and the international community's interest in its central theme confirm the fact that the establishment of the information society has become a strategic imperative for the promotion of humanity's conditions.

Tunisia's initiative made in 1998 in Minneapolis, USA, and calling for the organization of a world summit under the United Nations auspices, was premised upon its belief that this sector is vital for the achievement of a balanced and just human development, and for the materialization of humanity's aspirations for freedom, justice and dignity. For indeed, **before being just a technological divide, the digital divide is essentially a development disparity and a gap impeding the dialogue of civilizations.**

The preparatory meetings for the first phase of the Summit made it possible to bring to the fore the major concerns and poles of interest in this vital sector for the building of humanity's future. The United Nations' supervision of this sector has been effective, and the contributions of all parties, however different and diverse they are, have been quite important, for they reveal new challenges and stakes. They also demonstrate the growing awareness as to the fact that the information society, the society of the future, will radically change the face of the world, that disparity is taking new forms unprecedented in the history of humanity, and that the treatment of the current issues must be based on an appropriate approach and on eternal universal principles.

The newness of this theme, coupled with the rapid pace of technological changes and the continuous development of their applications in economic, social, cultural, educational,

environmental and other fields, render any consensus as to the principles and action methods difficult, but still possible by deepening our approaches and research in light of our common universal values enunciated in various international charters and agreements.

The holding of this Summit, the first of its kind, over two phases in Geneva then in Tunis, will offer all of us an opportunity to intensify consultations on the posed issues and to reach decisions that will certainly be historic, given the crucial importance of the question for humanity as a whole.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For Tunisia, the establishment of the society of information and communication constitutes a basic national choice which we have endeavored to consecrate as part of a comprehensive approach, through continuous structural reforms as well as through the consolidation of our country's communication and computer technologies infrastructure which constitutes a major foundation for the knowledge economy and an essential factor for the stimulation of the development pace.

We have been keen, essentially, on promoting human resources, by establishing a coherent strategy to generalize the teaching of computer science in the various levels of education, and by creating high institutes for technological studies. We have also intensified the training of communication and computer specialists in order to develop their capacity to assimilate new technologies and to make optimum use of them in the service of development. Besides, we have established technological poles as well as spaces for innovative projects in all the regions of the country.

We have also focused our efforts on disseminating the digital culture on the widest scale through regular media programs, establishing computer centers for children all over the country, connecting basic, secondary and higher education institutions to the Internet, generalizing computer and Internet clubs in cultural spaces, establishing a network of public Internet centers, and providing average-income families with facilities and incentives, on a large scale, for the purchase of "family computers".

Convinced as we are of the importance of competitiveness in stimulating the pace of development, we have relied, in addition to the state's efforts, on the effective contribution of the private sector in mastering information and communication technologies. For that purpose, we have established a policy to enhance internal and external private investment and to stimulate new economic sectors like e-commerce.

Tunisia, which has the great honor of hosting the second phase of the Summit in 2005, will work to ensure a successful preparatory process for it and to provide optimum conditions for its holding, so that this Summit can meet the aspirations of all countries, and open up prospects of effective and efficient participation for all the components of civil society, for intellectuals, and for the private sector.

The information society to which we aspire is one that offers all countries equal opportunities to benefit from the advantages of technologies, one that encompasses all countries and allows all persons and peoples, with no discrimination or exclusion, to have access to networks and to sources of knowledge and information.

Materializing this vision requires the consolidation of the bonds of solidarity and mutual assistance among all the world's peoples, so as to narrow the digital divide and curb its dangers.

We also hope that these technologies will help improve the conditions of less developed countries, as part of an effective solidary approach, so that these countries can meet their needs and realize their aspirations.

We believe that the developments generated by technological changes, at the level of thought and behavior of individuals and groups, and the new prospects they offer for contact and openness on the other, will foster the role of the information sector in developing the information society to advanced levels, so as to further anchor human rights in their comprehensive vision that

consecrates the freedom of expression and ensures the respect of state sovereignty and the right of peoples to self-determination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This first phase of our Summit will constitute an important starting point to closely look into the ways and means whereby to stimulate international and regional cooperation in order to reduce inequalities between countries and peoples in the acquisition of knowledge and in the mastery of modern digital technologies.

On our part, we believe that the various forms of triangular cooperation, which have proved their effectiveness in various development fields, could constitute an adequate framework for the achievement of complementarity between developed countries and the group of developing countries which have managed to build their own capacities in the field of information and communication technologies.

Since the start of preparations for the holding of the World Summit of the Information Society, we have been keen on establishing channels of communication and complementarity between all the concerned parties, in order to enlarge the circle of consultation and coordination.

I am convinced that the effective contribution of all these parties to the preparatory process for the second phase of the Summit in Tunis will allow to materialize our aspirations for the establishment of a balanced and solidary information society in our planet.

It is my pleasure to invite, from this rostrum, all parties, including governments, international and regional organizations, the components of civil society and the private sector, to participate in the Tunis Summit on November 16-18, 2005. We hope the Tunis Summit will constitute a historic landmark reinforcing this common edifice for the good of all humanity, and ensuring for all our countries the conditions of progress and development, particularly in the fields of information and communication technologies, within a context of peace, security and stability.

To conclude, I reiterate my thanks to the friendly Swiss Confederation and to the United Nations Organization which supervises this important international event, wishing all success to our proceedings.

Thank you for your attention.