

FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

Address by the President of the Confederation

Pascal Couchepin

**Opening of the
World Summit on the Information Society**

Geneva, 10 December 2003

Only the version actually delivered shall be deemed authentic

Mr Secretary-General,

Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,

Mr Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union,

Distinguished Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Swiss Government, it gives me great pleasure to greet you on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society.

Switzerland is proud to be hosting this Summit, which, for the first time at the international level, will be addressing the challenges posed by the information society.

Today we are celebrating both the inauguration of the Summit and also Human Rights Day, highlighting one of the United Nations' major concerns.

The right to freedom of opinion and expression, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is one of the main preconditions for the advent of the information society. Information technologies represent an opportunity for promoting human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The development of new technologies has revolutionized the way in which we access information. This revolution, a part of daily life in the western world, has to be extended to the rest of the planet.

Indeed, over half of the world's human beings are without access to the telephone, while Internet usage remains an even more restricted preserve.

The impact of technological progress is not homogeneous, with some participating in the movement and others choosing to remain on the sidelines, while another part of the population is simply without access.

One of the objectives of the Millennium Declaration is to reduce the digital divide. The objective of this Summit is to find concrete means of reducing this divide between those who are inside and those who are left out, between rich and poor.

Today, it is to governments and civil society that I am speaking. We must encourage, in a way that is both sustainable and equitable, the information revolution. We must shoulder our responsibilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must not miss the opportunity we now have in Geneva. The digital divide does not belong in the new millennium we are seeking to build.

The international community must join together to ensure that information is a public good. Free and unrestricted access to information lies at the very heart of development. I am convinced that information fuels both the market and, more broadly, democracy. Transparent information helps to build trust in the democratic institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

Switzerland is committed on various fronts to ensuring that the Summit gives rise to a shared vision of the information society. Our negotiators have worked hard to ensure that the Summit adopts a declaration and a plan of action that will serve to reduce the digital divide between rich and poor countries.

The results to date are encouraging. Of course, not all proposals have been adopted, compromises have to be made, and some questions will remain open at the end of the exercise. Geneva marks the beginning of a process. The discussions will continue until 2005 in Tunis.

For the first time within the framework of a summit, the United Nations has opened up the dialogue to non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

Just two months ago, in this same place, I inaugurated TELECOM 2003 in the company of professionals in the field. However, it is not just the economic and technical aspects of information that are important: it is also time to make a political commitment. That is what we are doing today.

We believe in this new political dialogue. In the Millennium Declaration, we expressed our desire "to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people". With this goal in mind, we have adopted a series of specific objectives with time-frames for their achievement.

However, it is not enough merely to state one's objectives: they must now be given tangible form. If the rich countries fail to keep their promises they will ultimately drive the poor countries to despair.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For Switzerland, the Geneva Summit is also an opportunity for encounter and exchange. Within this building you will discover projects, events and displays of many kinds. In concert with the United Nations, ITU, Tunisia and the civil society representatives, Switzerland has sought to broaden and deepen the discussion of ideas.

On Friday, we shall be adopting a policy declaration and plan of action. Together they will express our wish to realize an information society that is as open as possible.

Thank you for your attention.