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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON WORLD TELECOMMUNICATION & INFORMATION SOCIETY DAY

17 May 2008

Starting with the earliest drum beats, telegraphy – “writing in distance” – has been with us in dynamic, evolutionary motion. The ability to relay important information quickly across vast distances, closing the gaps of time and space, has expanded exponentially all manner of human activity, from sending out personal messages to completing complex financial transactions to engaging critical matters of war and peace. World Telecommunication and Information Society Day heralds the enabling and transformative role of communications and information in societies, and the universal need to communicate and cooperate across borders.

It is also the day in 1865 when the International Telecommunication Union was founded. At the time, the idea to transmit electronic signals across wires had already set forth a dramatic chain reaction of competing technologies. ITU was formed to address the growing need for international standards. From these early days, ITU has played a key role in connecting the world, a challenge which continues today with 3G mobile and broadband technologies.

Yet the reach of communications technology is not universal, its benefits have not been shared equally. The World Summit on the Information Society, held in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005, linked information and communication technology (ICT) with human development and called on Member States to build a global “inclusive, people-centred and development-oriented information society” through the sharing of information and knowledge.

The Summit also urged Member States to address the special requirements of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. The theme of this year’s observance, “connecting persons with disabilities”, highlights the importance of making ICT equipment and services accessible to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. There are an estimated 650 million persons living with disabilities worldwide. Including their families, there are nearly two billion persons who are directly affected by disability, almost a third of the world’s population. It is important to remember that anyone can become disabled at any moment.

It is vital that we change attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities, ensuring that all fundamental rights and freedoms are honoured, including the right to fully participate in the information society, and bring forth input, ideas and effort from the disability community.

This is a significant development challenge. But we must find creative solutions, including the development of new assistive technologies, and facilitate a broader access to ICT. I urge policy-makers and industry leaders to accelerate scientific and technical research aimed at developing technologies that will be inclusive and accessible to all.

On this day, let us pledge to adhere to the guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and work together to connect all humankind equally to the present opportunities and those yet possible in our ever-evolving world.