

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS
STATEMENT FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TUNISIA
ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Your Majesties,
Your Highnesses,
Your Excellencies,
Your Excellency, President of the Swiss Confederation,
Mr. Secretary General of the United Nations Organization,
Mr. Secretary General of the International Telecommunications Union,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

By the Grace of God, we open today the proceedings of the Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society. I would like, first of all, to extend to you a warm welcome to this Arab, African and Mediterranean land, the land of meetings and dialogue since the ancient era of Carthage, and to express to you my most sincere thanks for having accepted our invitation to attend this Summit. I also wish to express my deep consideration to all the parties concerned, including States, international and regional organizations, civil society components, and representatives of the private sector from all continents, for their massive participation in this major global event.

Through this large international presence, we feel, with great satisfaction and pride, the degree of prestige and credibility enjoyed by Tunisia and its people on the international scene, as well as the support with which its initiatives are met on the part of sisterly and friendly countries, and specialized international institutions and organizations. We are always keen on ensuring our country's active contribution to promoting cooperation and solidarity among countries and peoples, and to serving peace and security in the world.

I avail myself of this opportunity to express my most sincere thanks to the United Nations Organization, to the International Telecommunications Union, to the Preparatory Committee of the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, as well as to the organizations of the international civil society and the private sector, for the commendable efforts they have exerted all along the period of preparation.

I also wish to pay tribute to the friendly Swiss Confederation for the efforts it has exerted to ensure the success of the Geneva phase, and for its cooperation during the preparation of the Tunis phase, given the complementarity of both phases and the interdependence of their themes.

Our country, which in 1998 called for holding this Summit under the auspices of the United Nations, is indeed proud of playing host to its proceedings. For Tunisia has always been the land of dialogue, entente, tolerance and moderation, offering all cultures and civilizations opportunities for meeting, complementarity and communication.

Our meeting today represents a summit for the "global village" created by the new virtual realities, whose networks have been established, and whose components have been connected, through information and communication technologies.

It is of historical significance that this Summit is held in our country, whose eminent reformer Khereddine Ettounsi was the first who drew attention to this concept and used it, as early as 1867, in his book "Aqwam al-Massaleq" (The Most Sound Path), where he stated : "... If we take into consideration the new means created in this era of ours, which have brought bodies and minds closer to one another and facilitated their communication, we will not cease to perceive the world as a unified village, inhabited by various nations that imperatively need one another."

In saying so, he was pointing to the need of the inhabitants of this "global village", irrespective of their different races, civilizations and cultures, to solidarity not only as an ethical value, but also as a strong and efficient human tie, having its mechanisms, practical means and material foundations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are firmly convinced today as to the importance of building the knowledge and communication society in order to guarantee a better future for all humanity. We are also deeply aware of the need to strengthen the relations of cooperation and complementarity among the various components of the international community, as well as to reduce disparities among peoples, and achieve balanced and equitable development, in order to narrow the digital divide and remedy its negative effects as soon as possible, as this divide is ever-widening with the increasing disparity among countries in terms of growth rates and progress.

While reaffirming the fact that the digital divide is essentially a development disparity before being a technological gap, we call on the international community to join its efforts in order to allow all peoples, particularly the least developed ones, to gain access to technological progress and to benefit from the scientific and digital revolution witnessed in the world today.

We are convinced that achieving this objective depends on the adoption of an efficient solidarity approach, at the international level, for the eradication of poverty and the establishment of justice, mutual trust and constructive cooperation among all countries.

The need of the least developed countries for assistance is getting increasingly urgent, especially in view of the growing role of information and communication technologies in such vital sectors as education, higher education, scientific research, health, the environment, culture and other fields that have a great impact on building individual personality and society.

These technological developments have confronted humanity with a set of challenges and stakes that can be met only by thinking of establishing mechanisms ensuring universal access to their advantages. This requires us to endeavor for the establishment of a new approach to international cooperation, based on the principles of solidarity, partnership and complementarity. It is our hope that dialogue regarding this endeavor will be pursued after this Summit, in such a way as to win the approval of all parties concerned.

We also look forward to the adoption of practical decisions and programs that would help solve the issues posed by the information society, such as identity and diversity, and the question of the cultural specificities of peoples, in addition to certain phenomena brought about by the information society, which have become a source of growing concern, given the dangers they pose to societies. In fact, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of certain types of use

that shake confidence in the contents of networks and call into question the credibility of information, its sources, and its conformity with the agreed-upon ethical standards. Some of them arouse racism, discrimination and hatred, and advocate extremism and terrorism. Others incite to behavioral deviations and contribute to the propagation of organized crimes. Still others disseminate allegations and falsehoods, and transgress the individual right of access to information, through unsolicited messages, or through the illegal commercial use of databases.

Keen as we are on building an information society guaranteeing the individual right of access to information and ensuring the free flow of information and knowledge, without restrictions or constraints, we consider it necessary to set universal ethical standards that will stand as a rampart protecting our societies against negative uses of modern communication means. The United Nations texts, and the common universal principles and values, constitute, for us, references that may be adopted in this regard.

The information society offers individuals large freedom in the use of networks, and considerable means for self-assertion, for the expression of opinions, and for the attainment of an advanced level of independence in having access to information and in contributing to managing the affairs of the community. Still, this society requires individuals to be committed to the criteria of responsible use, and to abide by a set of standards and ethical values that preserve the other's rights and integrity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The effects of the digital divide go beyond the economic and social aspects, to extend to other dimensions more dangerous for the future of humanity, such as cultural diversity which constitutes the foundation of universal heritage and represents its true wealth, with all its fertility and durability.

Moreover, communication among languages and cultures now depends on their ability to be present in the virtual space which has become a vital means of communication and contact among individuals and peoples. Statistics show that the presence of the various languages and cultures on the Internet does not currently reflect the reality of human diversity, a fact that threatens universal heritage with disappearance, and vulnerable people with loss of identity, within a context marked by the predominance of certain languages and cultures over the content of the network.

It follows that preserving cultural specificities and guaranteeing their continuity amount today to a collective moral responsibility that the international community as a whole should assume in order to safeguard the cohesion of the universal culture, respect its various components, and guarantee the complementarity of its image, one generation and one century after the other.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have chosen for Tunisia a development approach based on the principle of complementarity and correlation between the political, economic and cultural dimensions, as part of a vision that takes into consideration the requirements of the current period and the deep changes it is witnessing. We have concentrated our efforts on building a modern and developed society, through a project of reform based on enlarging the scope of individual and public freedoms, promoting relevant legislation, reinforcing the democratic practice, protecting human rights, guaranteeing political pluralism, materializing the values of social solidarity, encouraging

private initiative, and consolidating the competitive capacity of our economy.

We will pursue accomplishing further gains and achievements, prompted, in this regard, by the positive results we have achieved in all fields, despite the difficult regional and international situation. Establishing the information and communication society constitutes an essential part of our comprehensive development approach, as we are keen on consolidating the foundations of the knowledge-based and intelligence-based economy, considering it a fundamental factor for the acceleration of the pace of growth.

Since the closing years of the past century, we have undertaken, through reforming education and promoting the cultural practice and other sectors, to establish a strategy for the dissemination of digital culture, so that it covers all segments of society. This strategy involves generalizing the teaching of computer science, establishing technological poles on a wide scale, and providing incentives and facilities for the administration, institutions and individuals, in order to promote access to the Internet. We have also established a special policy for the encouragement of investment in the ICT field.

These achievements are today in harmony with the fundamental objectives of the Summit on the Information Society which, from our position, we want to be open for all—Governments, components of civil society, international organizations, and the private sector from all parts of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society offered us the opportunity to examine relevant issues, and to look into the ways and means whereby to meet the challenges facing humanity in the ICT field. This phase was crowned by the international community's agreement to adopt a "Declaration of Principles" and a "Plan of Action".

These results laid the ground for the beginning of an agreement concerning the development of a new and unified concept of the information society. At the same time, intensive consultations and contacts have been held concerning pending issues. The process of preparing the Tunis Summit started with the holding of the first meeting of the preparatory committee in Hammamet in June 2004. This meeting constituted an important step in this process. In addition, the regional meetings and thematic symposiums held in parallel with the preparatory process, have enriched dialogue and deepened consultations concerning the main issues raised, related, in particular, to Internet governance and the consolidation of the efforts exerted to narrow the digital divide. This dialogue, and its method of organization and management, constitute a reference for future UN action.

Firmly convinced as we are of the importance of the issues included on our agenda, our country has endeavored, through its participation in all regional conferences related to the Summit and in the thematic symposiums organized as part of the preparatory process, to mobilize all available human competencies and material means to further enlarge the scope of the attention accorded by the international community to the Summit, and to prompt all components of this community to take part in it, including the representatives of civil society in the least developed countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We hope the Tunis Summit will constitute a propitious opportunity to find adequate solutions to the issues pertaining to information and communication, thanks to the cooperation of all participants and their determination to achieve results that are up to the current challenges and

stakes.

The Internet is one of the most important pending issues that need a consensus in order to serve the interests of all humanity, as part of the serious dialogue that, as we said earlier, we hope will be pursued after the Tunis Summit.

As regards the reduction of the ever-widening digital divide, with the ensuing effects and consequences, there is a need, today and more than ever before, for the establishment of a clear prospective approach outlining the contours of an equitable knowledge society, offering all peoples the opportunity to have access to communication technologies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We again extend to all our distinguished guests a warm welcome to Tunisia, wishing them a pleasant stay among us. We also reiterate our hope that the proceedings of our Summit will be crowned with constructive results meeting our peoples' aspirations, and constituting a real starting point toward the establishment of a new equitable, balanced and solidarity-based world communication and information order.

Thank you for your attention.