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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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AS DELIVERED

President Ben Ali,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I commend our hosts – President Ben Ali and the Government and people of Tunisia -- for all they have done to make this gathering possible. Let us remember that it was the Government of Tunisia, back in 1998, that first proposed the idea of a summit on the information society.

I also thank the International Telecommunication Union and other members of the UN family for their unremitting efforts to ensure that this process produces concrete results.

Two years ago in Geneva, the first phase of the World Summit articulated a vision of an open and inclusive information society. Our task here in Tunis is to move from diagnosis to deeds.

Last night you spelt out this task in the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society.

This Summit must be a summit of solutions. It must push forward the outcome of the World Summit held two months ago at the United Nations in New York. It must lead to information and communications technologies being used in new ways, which will bring new benefits to all social classes. Most of all, it must generate new momentum towards developing the economies and societies of poor countries, and transforming the lives of poor people.

What do we mean by an "information society"? We mean one in which human capacity is expanded, built up, nourished and liberated, by giving people access to the tools and technologies they need, with the education and training to use them effectively. The hurdle here is more political than financial. The costs of connectivity, computers and mobile telephones can be brought down. These assets -- these bridges to a better life -- can be made universally affordable and accessible. We must summon the will to do it.

The information society also depends on networks. The Internet is the result of, and indeed functions as, a unique and grand collaboration. If its benefits are to spread around the world, we must promote the same cooperative spirit among governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations.

And of course, the information society's very life blood is freedom. It is freedom that enables citizens everywhere to benefit from knowledge, journalists to do their essential work, and citizens to hold government accountable. Without openness, without the right to seek, receive and

impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers, the information revolution will stall, and the information society we hope to build will be stillborn.

The time has come to move beyond broad discussions of the digital divide. By now, we know what the problems are. We must now get down to the specifics of implementation, and set out ways to foster and expand digital opportunities.

Those opportunities are immense. Already, in Africa and other developing regions, the rapid spread of mobile telephones and wireless telecommunication has spurred entrepreneurship, and helped small businesses take root, particularly those run and owned by women. Doctors in remote areas have gained access to medical information on tropical diseases. Students have been able to tap into world-wide databases of books and research. Early warning of natural disasters has improved, and relief workers have been able to provide quicker, better coordinated relief. The same opportunities – and other, new ones – can be given to many more people in the developing world.

The UN system is ready to help member states and all stakeholders to implement whatever decisions are taken at this Summit, including on Internet governance. But let me be absolutely clear: The United Nations does not want to "take over", police or otherwise control the Internet. The United Nations consists of you, its Member States. It can want only what you agree on. And as I understand it, what we are all striving for is to protect and strengthen the Internet, and to ensure that its benefits are available to all.

The United States deserves our thanks for having developed the Internet and making it available to the world. It has exercised its oversight responsibilities fairly and honourably. I believe all of you agree that day-to-day management of the Internet must be left to technical institutions, not least to shield it from the heat of day-to-day politics. But I think you also all acknowledge the need for more international participation in discussions of Internet governance issues. The question is how to achieve this. So let those discussions continue.

This is envisaged in the agreements you reached last night and we in the United Nations will support this process in every way we can.

Mr. President,

The experiences of recent years – in this Summit process, the ICT Task Force, the Working Group on Internet Governance, the Digital Solidarity Fund, UNFIP -- the UN Office for International Partnerships, the Global Compact corporate citizenship initiative and other efforts -- have given us new insights into what it takes to build effective partnerships and platforms. UN agencies and departments continue to work hard to build capacity, and to use information technologies to boost our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

These efforts are bearing fruit. But for far too many people, the gains remain out of reach. There is a tremendous yearning, not for technology per se, but for what technology can make possible. I urge you to respond to that thirst, and to take the tangible steps that will enable this Summit to be remembered as an event which advanced the causes of development, of dignity and of peace.

Thank you very much.