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Remarks Made at the TELECOM 95 Conference, 3 October 1995

by President Nelson Mandela
of the Republic of South Africa

Dr. Pekka Tarjanne, Secretary-General of the ITU, Your Excellency, President Kaspar Villiger of the Swiss Federation, Honorable Ministers, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen: South Africa is deeply honoured by the invitation to take part in this opening ceremony of TELECOM 95, the 7th World Telecommunications Conference and Exhibition.

Your seventh forum is the very first in which South Africa is participating as a full member of the International Telecommunication Union. This is testament to the steadfast support which our struggle for freedom received from the ITU. On behalf of the people of South Africa, we thank you for your solidarity, and express our joy at being so warmly accepted as a full and equal partner in the all-important work of telecommunications.

We would also like to express our gratitude at being given this unique opportunity to present our views at TELECOM 95. The keen appreciation we feel is heightened by the fact this is a special moment in the world's potential for transition to a truly democratic information age.

The ITU is a body of crucial importance for South Africa and indeed the entire African continent. We need a vast expansion of our communication and information network. The ITU, as the principal driving force behind international policy, technological development, cooperation, and skills transfer is an indispensable agent in this regard.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to announce that, following discussions between officials of the ITU and the South African government, we have formally invited the Union to hold its next Africa region TELECOM Exhibition and Forum in 1998 in South Africa. We would be happy and proud to host this prestigious event, and look forward to further close cooperation with the Secretary-General and the TELECOM Secretariat to make it a memorable occasion for the benefit of the Union and its members.

Ladies and gentlemen, the value of information and communication is felt with particular force when, as happened in South Africa for so many years, their denial is made an instrument of repression. Such measures, however, ultimately evoke inventive and innovative ways of circumventing the restrictions. For example, as prisoners on Robben Island, when we were deprived of



newspapers we searched the refuse bins for the discarded sheets of newspapers which wardens had used to wrap their sandwiches. We communicated with prisoners in other sections by gathering matchboxes thrown away by wardens, concealing messages in false bottoms in the boxes and leaving them for other prisoners to find. We communicated with the outside world by smuggling messages in the clothing of released prisoners. Not even the most repressive regime can stop human beings from finding the ways of communicating and obtaining access to information.

This applies in equal measure to the information revolution sweeping the globe. No one can roll it back. It has the potential to open communications across all geographical and cultural divides. Nevertheless, one gulf will not be easily bridged—that is the division between the information rich and the information poor. Justice and equity demand that we find ways of overcoming it. If more than half the world is denied access to the means of communication, the people of developing countries will not be fully part of the modern world. For in the 21st century, the capacity to communicate will almost certainly be a key human right. Eliminating the distinction between information rich and information poor countries is also critical to eliminating economic and other inequalities between North and South, and to improving the quality of life of all humanity.

Converging developments in the fields of information and communications offer immense potential to make real progress in this direction. The pace at which the price of communications and information systems has fallen has also undermined the previously rigid link between a nation's wealth and its information richness. There is an unprecedented window of opportunity. But the present reality is that the technology gap between the developed and developing nations is actually widening. Most of the

world has no experience of what readily accessible communications can do for society and economy. Given the fundamental impact of telecommunications on society and the immense historical imbalances, telecommunications issues must become part of general public debate on development policies. Telecommunications cannot be simply treated as one commercial sector of the economy, to be left to the forces of the free market.

Ladies and gentlemen, in South Africa, with its own severe historical imbalances between developed and disadvantaged areas, we face many of these challenging issues within our own borders. For that reason we have much to learn from the rest of the developing world. But we do also believe that the lessons of our own experience may be of value to others, and in that spirit we would like to share some of them with you. First of all, we believe that the concept of universal service should be extended to the international plane. The obligation on governments to bring services to the rural and poorer areas of their countries should, with the globalisation of telecommunications, apply to the world at large. Developed nations should understand the necessity and the democratic right of the poorer countries to gain access to the information superhighway. And just as every nation needs cooperation between its various sectors to find the country's best way of accessing and utilizing the information highways, so too is increased international cooperation necessary. Amongst other things this should give high priority to overcoming the legacy of colonial development which left many countries linked to their neighbours via Europe rather than directly across their borders. A new programme of building high capacity links between neighbouring countries is urgently needed.

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At present only the best-resourced countries can keep up with new developments. A world-wide centre for monitoring change would allow all nations to do so. The scope of what is required is beyond that of existing organizations and this might well be a role for the ITU itself. If developing countries are to make effective use of the chance to join the superhighway, there is a need for a special effort to build the pool of human resources. A massive investment in education and skills transfer is essential if the South is to compete in the global communications marketplace. This too requires long term international cooperation. Many developing countries face difficulties in raising capital for their existing operators. There is consequently pressure on governments to throw open their doors to international competition. This calls for great care, to avoid jeopardizing local services unable to compete with powerful international operators. Perhaps the most creative solution is the establishment of

partnerships of operators in developing countries with international companies and consortia. Such mutually beneficial arrangements would bring profitable investment to the Northern partner and strategic skills transfers and expansion of networks to the Southern partners. They will help move us all away from dependency and one-way relationships.

Another major problem faced by governments is how to create incentives for telecommunications operators to supply unprofitable services which the state is committed to supporting—for example to rural areas of poor urban areas. Certain international developments are creating new difficulties for many developing countries. In particular, while moves towards liberalization are reducing the cost of international calls, they also force national operators to reduce tariffs in order to compete, thereby diverting funds from their less economic areas. The effects on national services of international accounting rates ought, therefore, to be taken into account in the negotiation of these rates and the way that revenues are shared. Traditionally, revenue from international services has been shared in a way that brought a substantial transfer of funds to developing countries. African countries in the ITU have urged that this transfer should be maintained or even increased, given their higher costs.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are some of the issues regarding the globalisation of telecommunications and the information revolution which are of concern to South Africa and many developing countries. If we cannot ensure that this global revolution creates a world-wide information society in which everyone has a stake and can play a part, then it will not have been a revolution at all. As we head towards the 21st century, the development of a global information society based on justice, freedom and democracy must be one of our highest priorities.

To this end I would like to formally table for discussion at TELECOM 95 a set of principles designed to enable the full participation of both the developed countries and the developing countries in building a global information society:

1. We should strive towards global universal service in telephony and global universal access to the information superhighway;
2. The expansion of the global information infrastructure should be based on partnership and rules of fair competition and regulation, at both national and international level;
3. The information revolution should be geared towards enhancing global citizenship and global economic prosperity;
4. A diversity of paths towards the achievements of national information societies should be respected;
5. The evolution of policy for the development of an equitable global information society should be co-ordinated internationally to ensure the sharing of information and resources;
6. The education of young people with regards to the skills needed for living in an information society should be prioritized.

In conclusion I would wish to emphasize the importance of young people to the information revolution. Many of us here today spent much of our lives without access to telecommunications or information services, and many of us will not live to see the flowering of the information age. But our children will. They are our greatest asset. And it is our responsibility to give them the

skills and insight to build the information societies of the future. The young people of the world must be empowered to participate in the building of the information age. They must become the citizens of global information society. And we must create the best conditions for their participation.

I thank you.