DEVELOPMENT:
Digital Divide Becoming a Vast Chasm
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UNITED NATIONS, Sep 14 (IPS) - While information and communications technologies (ICTs) have an important role in meeting internationally agreed development goals, one in every six people still does not even own a telephone, according to experts meeting here.

"The development promise of science and technology remains unfulfilled for the poor of this world," Pres. Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan told a gathering of political and business leaders on the sidelines of a key U.N. summit this week. "The rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer."

However, many of the some 400 people gathered to discuss the role of ICT in eradicating poverty may not have heard him. Ironically, the microphones were not working at the roundtable meeting, titled "Scaling Science and Technology to Meet the Millennium Development Goals".

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia noted that, "At present, one billion people in the world do not have access to a telephone... (and) around 800,000 villages, or 30 percent of all villages worldwide, are still without any type of connection.."

Since their adoption at the U.N. Millennium Summit in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have become the international standard for measuring and tracking improvements in the human condition.

The MDGs include a 50 percent reduction in poverty and hunger; universal primary education; reduction of child mortality by two-thirds; cutbacks in maternal mortality by three-quarters; the promotion of gender equality; and the reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

But progress towards reaching the MDGs has been mixed at best, according to the ICT Task Force. It cites various reasons, including slow growth in the world economy, slow progress in reform among developing countries, and inadequate support from developed countries.

"The millennium development agenda is still achievable globally and in most or even all countries, but only if we break with business as usual and dramatically accelerate and scale up action until 2015, beginning in 2005," said Jose Antonio Ocampo, chairman of the U.N. ICT Task Force.

"Science, technology, innovation and especially ICT can play a critical role in development and poverty eradication," said Ocampo, who is also U.N. under-secretary-general for Economic and Social Affairs.

"Networks of connectivity and infrastructure, both physical and electronic, are stabilising factors that lead to development, security and human rights," Ocampo continued. "From Africa to East Asia, the challenge of scaling up physical connectivity --telecommunications, ICT, media -- are more vital than ever."

The past decade has witnessed the most dramatic growth in the history of global computing and communications, with the potential for the near ubiquitous spread of the wired and wireless Internet.

However, the gap between those developing countries now empowered by the fundamental right of access to local and global networks of knowledge and information, and others still impoverished by the practical denial of that right, is widening and as stark as ever, according to the U.N. Millennium Project.

"We must not allow the progress in science and technology to widen disparities which already exist between the rich and the poor," stressed Badawi, to applause from those gathered.

Pres. Leonel Fernandez Reyna of the Doninican Republic said that his administration had noted a widening of disparities in his country. Rich children in private schools were learning about computers and ICT, while poorer children in public schools were not.

Reyna's government successfully instituted a plan to put computer labs, with 20 computers each, in every public high school in the country. Currently the plan is being expanded to middle schools and primary schools.

With the strategic and innovative use of science and technology and ICT in development policies and programmes, the ambitious agenda of the MDGs becomes possible, according to the ICT Task Force. Without this laser-like focus and vision from leaders of governments in developing and developed countries, donor agencies, the private sector and civil society, and international organisations, implementation of the MDGs in many instances will be impractical and in some cases impossible, it warns.

Many participants, including Musharraf, suggested creating "virtual universities", so that students would not have to travel to the United States or Europe, but could get the same degrees at home, said Pres. Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal.

Wade was forced to cut his remarks short. The U.N. had not provided translators so that he could speak in his native French.

In his report to member states for the three-day World Summit, which began Wednesday, Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that, "The unprecedented combination of resources and technology at our disposal today means that we are truly the first generation with the tools, the knowledge and the resources to meet the commitment, given by all states in the Millennium Declaration, to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want."

The immediate goal of Tuesday's event, organised by the U.N. ICT Task Force and the U.N. Millennium Project, in association with the U.N. Fund For International Partnerships, is to generate action and support around a number of quick-win, fast-tracked or even large-scale initiatives for ICT and the MDGs.

With the five-year review of progress toward the achievement of the MDGs taking place this week in New York, and the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society scheduled for November in Tunis, a unique opportunity exists both to identify bottlenecks and

gaps and to strengthen linkages between the MDGs and science and technology by galvanising political will and action in 2005, according to the ICT Task Force. (END/2005)