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On 24 September 1979, the World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC) opened in Geneva, a conference which in ten weeks is to revise, bring up to date and harmonize the Radio Regulations drawn up by a similar conference in 1959.

With its 1800 participants, its 14 000 proposals amounting to nearly 5000 pages and co-ordinated documentation in several volumes totalling nearly 3000 pages, no terms seem to be adequate to designate the largest conference ever organized under the auspices of the ITU.

It is no exaggeration to assert that this Conference will establish the framework that will regulate radiocommunications up to the year 2000. Moreover, since its task is to seek an equitable balance between everyone's most immediate needs and the long-term requirements of all services which will become operational during the next two decades, it will influence the planning and utilization of services well beyond the year 2000.

In our times, radio still seems, as it did in the beginning, to be one of the happiest and most productive discoveries of all ages. As we approach the year 2000 and an era when telecommunications, closely linked with computer science, will occupy a preponderant place in society, it is brought home to us that, from the dawn of the 20th century, radiocommunications have constituted a decisive factor in the prodigious development of the world. Have they not from the outset put an end to the isolation of seamen and of the most distant regions and, through broadcasting, have they not proved to be the most powerful of the mass communication media?

Unfortunately, we are all aware that the marvellous opportunities they offer us are dependent upon a frequency spectrum which is still limited, although its upper limit is constantly expanding as the result of technological advances.

It was very soon observed not only that radio waves knew no frontiers, but also that they were propagated over very long distances and could thus cause harmful interference. Radiocommunications therefore represent an area of activity in which the major problems could only be dealt with at the world level. There are, of course, specific requirements, regional and even national, and their disparity has led to the division of the world into three regions for the purposes of the Radio Regulations and particularly to a proliferation of "footnotes" in the Table of Frequency Allocations.

These footnotes result in a less satisfactory use of the spectrum and introduce additional complications for frequency planning and co-ordination and for the standardization of equipment. It is therefore to be hoped that WARC-79 will make every effort to get rid of as many of them as possible.

Thus the Radio Regulations have not been revised in their entirety for twenty years. The mere fact that the Table of Frequency Allocations to the various services has not been reviewed as a whole since 1959 emphasizes the importance attached to this Conference.

A great deal has happened in the past twenty years. First of all, technology has made giant strides: in 1959 there was hardly any mention of large-scale integrated circuits and satellites were mainly for research. Moreover, for lack of suitable equipment, frequencies above a few gigahertz were scarcely used, and optical waves even less.

During those twenty years some far-reaching political events have also occurred. In 1959, the Union had only 96 Members and 5 Associate Members, some of them not yet fully independent. Today the membership is 154, making an increase of over 60%. The Union is thus faced with new obligations, especially since telecommunications are increasingly becoming the cornerstone of a country's infrastructure and consequently determine the success of national development as a whole. In many countries, radiocommunications of all kinds can be brought into operation more rapidly than any other methods of transmission and can be maintained more easily.

Referring to the International Telecommunication Convention, which remains our guide, we find in Article 33 two basic provisions ** which have to be borne in mind.

It is also important to take longer-term interests into consideration, by ensuring the allocation of adequate frequency bands to the various services and by adopting provisions whereby countries which are not in a position to do so today may, in the more or less distant future and at a time they consider appropriate, introduce new services to meet their national or international requirements. In such cases, they should be able to do so without giving rise to congestion or causing interference for the users of other services.

The agenda of the Conference contains two innovations in items ten and eleven.

Item ten implies that the Conference will be in a position to draw up a calendar of conferences dealing with specific services and provide guide-lines for the technical preparations for such conferences.

Item eleven emphasizes the importance of technical studies in the preparations for administrative conferences. It is thanks to these studies that radiocommunications have been able to expand their potential in quality and quantity since the beginning of the century. This perpetual race between demands on the spectrum and its capacity calls for increasingly elaborate technical measures. For many years, progress was made only with regard to a few specific technical points, such as propagation and modulation, and to equipment, particularly antennae. But now all the characteristics have to be considered together with a view to reaching the optimal solution, that is to say, maximum utilization of every band in the spectrum.

M. MILI

* This editorial is based on extracts from Mr. M. Mili's address to the inaugural meeting of the World Administrative Radio Conference (Geneva, 1979).

** Article 33, numbers 130 and 131.