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The Plenipotentiary Conference

The Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)*, which opens in Nice on 23 May next, will be meeting in the midst of unprecedented change in the telecommunication environment. The issues it will have to deal with and the way in which it deals with them will have a profound influence on the future of our Union.

A fundamental question would be whether the ITU's structure, administration and working processes, some of which were established in the 1920s, are suited to the new telecommunication environment, even for the industrialized countries.

Plainly the development and application of digital devices and techniques on a grand scale are driving and revolutionizing the telecommunication industry today. Indeed, it is not only telecommunications that is involved, but the associated information systems and applications that are entwined with and support the entire global economy. In every country, basic telecommunication networks are prerequisites for industry and innovation, and for building the national economy.

In this context a Group of Experts established by the ITU's Administrative Council had studied the changing nature of technical co-operation. One of the proposals made by the Group was that the ITU should set up a long-term action plan for world-wide telecommunication development. The ITU's long-term technical cooperation programme would be defined within the framework of such an action plan. The Group also proposed that consideration should be given to strengthening the regional presence of the ITU in order to enhance the performance of the

network in developing countries through a better application of the Union's standards and regulations. It will be for the Plenipotentiary Conference to take the action it believes to be the most appropriate.

As the supreme policy and management body of the Union, the Plenipotentiary Conference, will be considering the contents of the International Telecommunication Convention and the structure and operation of the ITU. Five Resolutions and Recommendations adopted in December last year by the World Administrative Telegraph and Telephone Conference (WATTC-88) have been placed before the Plenipotentiary for review and appropriate action.

One such Resolution on "The changing telecommunications environment" invites the Plenipotentiary Conference "to consider the implications and opportunities which the integration of new technologies, the development of new types of services and the diversity of arrangements may entail for the harmonious and efficient development, operation and use of telecommunications world-wide; and to consider the impact that the various issues may have on the work of the Union and the cooperation between Members". Another Resolution on "CCITT and world-wide telecommunications standardization" endorses the IXth CCITT Plenary Assembly Resolution No. 17 which requests the Plenipotentiary Conference "to consider what changes may be needed to enable the CCITT to do what is necessary in a timely way to maintain its pre-eminent position...".

* See page 205 for the agenda.

The Union must respond to the need for a dynamic and effective global standardization process for the necessary interconnection and application of new technologies into the global network. The Plenipotentiary Conference should thus give consideration to modifying the International Telecommunication Convention to provide the Union with the necessary structure, processes and resources. This should include consideration of better use of the resources of countries and those of the ITU—an issue of major importance in the present period of great financial constraints. From a global interconnectivity perspective, then, it is crucial that the Conference takes those policy actions necessary to assure the primacy of the Union.

The telecommunication environment of the 90s and the role of the Union in preventing a breakdown of telecommunication equipment and services trade into regional enclaves requires no less. These are not changes that can wait for years for further consideration. Most of the needs are ones that long have been patently evident, and the time to act is in June at the Plenipotentiary Conference. Perhaps a more dynamic global standardization approach could have diverted the regional groupings already appearing.

In its long history, the Union has demonstrated its ability to adapt itself to change, both technological and political: from telegraphy to space communications and from a XIXth century eurocentric comity of 20 nations through a mid-XXth century world in which not only the centre had shifted but also the number of independent States had nearly quadrupled (at present, the ITU has a membership of 166 countries). More recently, we have witnessed unprecedented changes in the telecommunication environment including the convergence of classical telecommunications and information technology and services. Dramatic changes have occurred in the telecommunication infrastructure of some countries. They have been characterized by deregulation, privatization or generally liberalization, thereby creating new telecommunication service providers often accompanied by competition. The newcomers to the scene have demonstrated their ingenuity by introduc-

ing new applications and services profiting from digitalization. These applications have had strong impact in some sectors of the economy, such as office automation, design and manufacturing and the like. We are also witnessing the convergence of another branch of telecommunications—i.e. sound and television broadcasting—with informatics, thereby bringing the wide spectrum of the information technology to the doorstep of every citizen.

Thus the traditional approach of examining telecommunications from purely technological and operational standpoints is no longer adequate. Authorities are recognizing that telecommunication is now a critical component of many national sectors and the related policy issues must be considered at the highest governmental levels.

Hence, it is important that all Member countries of the Union respond effectively and quickly to the dramatic changes in the telecommunication environment and adapt the role, structure and processes of the Union as well as its legislative and related Secretariat activity to meet the needs of all parts of its constituency.

The Nice Plenipotentiary Conference will have to find appropriate solutions to facilitate international cooperation in the ITU in fields which call for the harmonization of actions of all Member countries as defined in the International Telecommunication Convention, for example the interconnection and routing of telecommunication traffic to achieve universal service and the use of technologies of all kinds. For the most part, these activity areas did not until now compel a broad role of national and international interconnection. Furthermore, the need is increasingly recognized for continued effective dialogue among users, service providers, manufacturers and regulatory authorities, and for efforts to assure that ITU instruments, organs, processes and available resources comport with the changing environment.

In keeping with the Union's past adaptability, I am confident that the Plenipotentiaries at Nice will make the necessary adjustments to better fit the Union to meet the challenges of the changing times.

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