ITU's supreme body to meet in Kyoto

As the telecommunications environment continues to be characterized by liberalization, restructuring and fierce competition among network operators, service providers and equipment suppliers, there is a case for greater cooperation and coordination. When the Plenipotentiary Conference meets in Kyoto from 19 September to 14 October 1994 one of its essential tasks will be to elect a new team of leaders and a new Council for the ITU. It will also define new strategies and policies for the future of the telecommunications sector world-wide.

Some milestones

There have been many challenges during the journey to Kyoto. The last few years have seen an unprecedented technological revolution that has had and, by all indications, will continue to have a profound impact on the telecommunications sector world-wide. Aware that the future international telecommunications environment would be influenced by this technological revolution and the world-wide trend to privatization, the Nice Plenipotentiary Conference in 1989 confirmed the need to adapt the Union's structure, management practices and working methods gradually to the rapid changes occurring in the telecommunications sector. Hence its decision by Resolution No. 55 to set up the High Level Committee (H.L.C.).

So in November 1989, the ITU Council at its extraordinary session selected 21 Member States to appoint representatives to serve on the Committee. Their task: to review the structure and functioning of the ITU and recommend measures to ensure greater cost-effectiveness throughout the Union's organs. After several months of hard work, the H.L.C. published its recommendations in a report entitled "Tomorrow's ITU: The challenges of change" (Geneva, April 1991).

Then came the Additional Plenipotentiary Conference (APP) that was held in Geneva in December 1992 to consider that report and set in motion the reforms recommended by the H.L.C.

The standards-setting activities of the former CCITT and CCIR were merged to form the Standardization Sector. The other activities of the CCIR, in particular, those concerning the management of the radio-frequency spectrum in terrestrial and space radiocommunications along with the activities of the former IFRB were reorganized to form the Radiocommunication Sector. It may be worth recalling that the Development Sector was set up in 1990 and was the result of a merger between the previous Technical Cooperation Department and the Centre for Telecommunications Development. The APP also revised substantially the Nice Constitution and Convention to reflect this new structure.

Meeting the challenges of change is a theme that continued to mark the work of the ITU trio during the period 1990–1994. In the Radiocommunication Sector, a voluntary group of experts worked towards simplifying the Radio Regulations. Again in this Sector and in the Standardization Sector, improved working methods and accelerated approval procedures were introduced to ensure timely development and production of Recommendations. In the Development Sector, four regional offices were established to strengthen ITU's regional presence. Similarly, a new management system, new financial regulations and a new financial management system where each sector controls its own budget have been developed and introduced by the General Secretariat for greater transparency and accountability.

Other events too have marked important stages in the restructuring phase of the Union:

- WARC-92 (Malaga-Torremolinos) that allocated the frequency spectrum for future generation mobile satellite telecommunication and broadcasting systems

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- The Radiocommunication Assembly and World Radiocommunication Conference (Geneva, November 1993)

- The World Telecommunication Standardization Conference (Helsinki, 1993) that planned the development of global standards for the telecommunication technologies needed for advanced personal communication systems and information superhighways

- Regional development conferences held in all the five regions of the ITU between 1990 and 1993

- The World Telecommunications Development Conference (Buenos Aires, March 1994) that developed and adopted a global telecommunications development strategy, better known as the Buenos Aires Action Plan.

That this Plan could attract some interesting debate among the Union's plenipotentiaries in Kyoto should not come as something of a surprise given the development priorities it discusses.

Are the changes in the telecommunication sector likely to alter the membership profile of the Union?

On the Conference agenda: new times, new challenges

As the role of ITU Member Administrations continues to shift from that of operators to regulators, and as other new players enter the scene creating, as it were, new needs and expectations, how will the ITU cope with the demands of this enlarged family? Are these changes likely to alter the membership profile of the Union? True, the Geneva Constitution and Convention (1992) provide for increased participation by non-Administration entities and organizations in the activities of ITU's Sectors. But are not these instruments rather silent on the criteria, procedures and rights and obligations that should govern such participation? These may be some of the fundamental questions that will dominate the policy debate in Kyoto. In setting priorities and defining a strategic plan for the next four years this Conference must take account of

the changed and changing nature of the entities the Union is now meant to serve. With improved structures well and truly in place, the ITU should now play a stronger and more catalytic role in stimulating cooperation between the increasing number of entities concerned with telecommunications.

Another issue of interest is the exchange of information with ITU Members and the wider telecommunication community. The ITU has made significant strides in increasing the exchange of technical information and regulatory experiences over the past four years, helping Members to make informed choices on equipment and services. However, with the ever-growing demand for telecommunication information, the Union could do more and even stands a good chance of playing a key role in the global information economy and society of the next century if it adopts the appropriate strategy. In the words of Don Maclean, Head of ITU's Strategic Planning Unit, "with the telecommunication information available through its three Sectors and its world-wide network of participants; the Union could be sitting on a gold mine, which, if explored and exploited to the full, might just give it that chance".

Playing a leading role in this domain would also make the Union a more credible partner in development to service providers and equipment manufacturers now at the forefront of telecommunications development world-wide, to private investors and public institutions with the financial resources needed by developing countries, and not least, to the other international organizations involved in economic, social and infrastructure development projects whose success largely depends on good quality and reliable telecommunications. The sooner the new strategy being developed to improve electronic access to ITU documents, publications and databases begins to bear some fruit the better.

Of globalization and global competition

What may one call this expanding web of satellite, submarine and terrestrial links and

the services they bring with them? Global-ization, perhaps? There is no doubt that in recent years, telecommunication products, services and technologies such as facsimile, mobile communications, global satellite services and fibre optics have changed the way telecommunication networks are developed, marketed and operated. And, increasingly, traditional boundaries between telecommunications, computers and broad-casting will continue to be redefined as these technologies continue to converge, raising new questions and great challenges not just for government policy-makers and regulators but also for the ITU.

Disturbing as these trends may seem, it is clearly better to be affected by them than to be left out. We have seen most developed and developing countries alike introduce major structural changes in their telecom-munication sectors in response to global-ization. In particular, the mature industrial economies of Europe and North America are now competing with newer industrial powers such as Japan and emerging ones in the newly industrializing economies of South East Asia. A recent example is the decision of the European Union calling for the liberalization of telephone services by 1998 amid fears that European companies may be falling behind United States and Japanese efforts to create the so-called information superhighways. There are also signs that the more "advanced" economies of Latin America are slowly entering the competition.

But where lies the place of the least developed countries of the world where the pre-conditions have not been established for them to compete? Firstly, they lack the infra-structure and trained personnel to attract their share of foreign investment. Secondly, they have no industrial base to even enter this fierce infrastructure competition. Much remains to be done to ensure that these countries whose economic survival is already threatened are not plunged into total isolation by the combined effects of global-ization and global infrastructure competition.

In this increasingly dynamic and competitive environment, analysing the impact of changes on ITU's role and capacity to keep pace with the major changes in the sector must now, more than ever, be part of an on-going process of strategic planning. The challenge facing the Strategic Policy and Planning Unit, in place since 1992, is to help the ITU stay forward-looking in planning its activities and in adapting its work programmes and policies to the fast growing and changing needs of its Members.

The question of how policies for global telecommunication systems should be devel-oped is likely to be a key issue in Kyoto and it is certainly going to be one of the most diffi-cult issues the Union will have to deal with over the next four years. Telecommunication indicators in a recent publication by the ITU called "World Telecommunication Develop-ment Report" (Geneva, March 1994) show that despite substantial growth in the inter-national network as a whole, much of the world still suffers from poor access to tele-communications.

The report goes on to indicate that 24 advanced industrial nations of the Organ-ization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) account for some 70% of the world's telephone main lines, 80% of telecommunication revenues and 90% of international traffic. Ironically, these countries are home to only 16% of the world's popu-lation. Clearly, the Conference ought to come up with some policy to ensure that this wide-spread restructuring in the telecommunication sector translates into a virtuous cycle of balanced development rather than into a vicious cycle of growing imbalance between rich and poor nations as is the case at present. Indeed, the greatest challenge to the ITU today is how to remain relevant and effec-tive in the field of development in the same way it has imprinted itself in the activities of the international community in the areas of standardization and radiocommunication.

In changing its structures the ITU has certainly reflected the general global mood of

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the telecommunications sector. On a larger scale, the new ITU that is slowly beginning to emerge may soon prove to be a model for management change within the entire United Nations family. If all these reforms are given time and a chance to work, the ITU can deliver more and indeed better services to the people who need them. What may be needed now for this Union to remain the pre-eminent organization in the coordination of international telecommunications are clear global policies, new strategies and clear priorities. The Union will also need a budget to cover its activities for the next four years. Such are the challenges that await the Plenipotentiary Conference in Kyoto.