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Press Release

**Arab Regional Preparatory Conference for the
Second Phase of WSIS Opens in Damascus**

Damascus-Beirut, 23 November 2004 (United Nations Information Service)--Syrian Minister of Communications and Technology Bachir Al-Mounajed said that one of the biggest strategic achievements of the Syrian government was drawing up an information and communication technology (ICT) strategy for the purpose of social and economic development, adding that prominent experts from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA) participated in this strategy alongside their Syrian and other counterparts. Minister Al-Mounajed was representing Syrian Prime Minister Najji Otari at the opening of the Arab Regional Preparatory Conference for the Second Phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at the Umayyad Palace on Monday 22 November 2004.

Minister Al-Mounajed thanked ESCWA for organizing this event and pointed out that experts from the UN regional commission also contributed to the examination and review of studies on the Syria's electronic readiness in 2002. He stressed that the Internet is a major contributor to the digital divide that exists with developing nations, including the Arab states. Al-Mounajed said this fact could not be ignored because it was not primarily a problem of a technological nature since "technology was and will remain a social product." He said, "The advent of ICT confirms this view even more." Al-Mounajed found it difficult to achieve any real progress towards an information society without tangible support and adoption by developed nations, who themselves generate ICT and have the biggest stake in technological development.

The plenary session included a speech by Ms. Mervat Tallawy, Executive Secretary of ESCWA, delivered on her behalf by Mr. Ahmed Farhat, Chief of the Information and Communication Technology Division and a second by Ms. Elizabeth Longworth, Director of the Information Society Division at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO). A PowerPoint presentation was also made by Mr. Pierre Gagné, Deputy Director of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

For more information: www.escwa.org.lb

Tallawy

In her speech, Ms. Mervat Tallawy presented the principal initiatives of ESCWA in building an information society in the region. She said, "There is the issue of Internet governance that was left unresolved by the Geneva conference, which prompted Secretary-General Kofi Annan to call for the establishment of a taskforce to study the many facets of this issue in an open, transparent manner. ESCWA participated effectively in the preparatory meeting that took place with the initiative of the UN ICT Taskforce and proposed a draft strategy to tackle the issues that were raised by way of encouraging the active, comprehensive participation by all the institutions of the international community in the mechanisms of the current system."

"ESCWA launched a regional initiative", said Tallawy, "to promote digital Arabic content on the Internet seeing as it was the only regional commission that is concerned with the Arabic language and its availability on the international network." Tallawy also said that ESCWA set out to activate and support Arab efforts to provide Arabic names for websites and domains by establishing an Arab Domain Names Task Force" (ADNTF) that produced a so-called Internet-Draft entitled "Trends of Arab Domain Names" to be adopted and disseminated by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) as a technical document for RFC, or Request for Comments.

Tallawy added that the regional plan proposed at the conference for discussion and adoption underlines three major points: (a) providing the right environment in terms of technological infrastructure, laws and executive measures to insure the widespread use of ICT; (b) building an ICT sector in the region: it is unimaginable for Arab countries to remain consumers of ICT and its applications for they must be able to generate and export it. They particularly need to build their programming applications themselves and tailor them to their actual needs for them to have the broadest dissemination; and (3) focus on the educational, research and creativity capacity-building that will nourish and support the sector with qualified human resources and make it sustainable.

Longworth

For her part, Ms. Elizabeth Longworth stressed the need to identify interaction between the initiatives and establishing follow-up formulae to promote dialogue and create solutions to benefit from the information capabilities in education and training; draft legislation to develop communication instruments; preserve lingual and cultural diversity and global access; and take into account the differences in societies.

Longworth also spoke of the comprehensive vision of UNESCO in keeping up with global changes by reviewing the Geneva Declaration of Principles and respect the Arab region's ethical, social and economic characteristics and focus on active partnerships.

After reviewing the activities of UNESCO and the obstacles facing their implementation especially in developing nations, Longworth hoped the decisions would contribute to alleviating the digital divide affecting Arab states. She concluded

by saying that “greater access for all to information, knowledge and the means of communication is a vital means for promoting social development, encouraging dialogue among cultures and civilizations, and building relations of peace and reciprocity between peoples.”

Gagné

In his presentation, Gagné pointed to the importance of the Damascus meeting in the context of preparing the second phase of WSIS to be held in Tunis in 2005. He stressed the activities of ITU in this regard and the necessity to take into consideration the characteristics of the societies represented by the organizers of such conferences, as well as the necessity to achieve the decisions taken by these conferences in order to reach their objectives and activate the relevant financial and human resources in the ICT field.

Following the plenary session, participants were divided into six workshops, among them: Civil Society – NGOs, National Perspectives, Knowledge Building, Women Issues, and ICT Strategies. It is worth noting that the workshop on civil society and NGOs was attended by Syrian First Lady Asma Al-Assad.

The Arab Regional Preparatory Conference for the second Phase of WSIS will follow up on the outcome of the first phase of the Summit, held in Geneva (December 2003), and will launch regional preparations for the second phase in Tunis (November 2005).

The Conference, which concludes today, has the following objectives:

- Reviewing actions taken by Arab countries to reduce the digital divide in light of the outcome of the Geneva phase of WSIS;
- Adoption of a Regional Plan of Action, based on the Arab Strategy for Communications and Information, adopted by the Arab Summit in Amman (March 2001) and the global Program of Action adopted in the Geneva Summit;
- Activate promotion of partnerships among the various stakeholders of the information society, including Government, private sector, non-governmental and international/regional organizations, in order to implement the Regional Plan of Action;
- Launching key regional projects that have the necessary funding and partnership to insure a high rate of success.

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