

SPEECH BY THE HON D JEEHA, MINISTER OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS ON THE OCCASION OF THE AFRICA ICT STAKEHOLDERS FORUM AT LE MERIDIEN HOTEL ON WEDNESDAY 7 JULY 2004.

Hon Jayen Cuttaree,

Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs,

International Trade & Regional Cooperation

Mr Hamadoun Toure,

Director International Telecommunications Union,

Dr Mohan Kaul,

Chief Executive Officer, Commonwealth Business Council

Dr Henry Chasia,

Executive Deputy Chairperson,

E-Africa Commission, NEPAD

Colleague Ministers from Africa

The Chairman and Executive Director of ICTA

Distinguished representatives of international organizations

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be here with you this morning on the occasion of the opening of the Africa ICT Stakeholders Forum organized jointly by the Commonwealth Business Council and the International

Telecommunications Union. I would like to thank these two organizations for having chosen Mauritius for the holding of this Forum and to welcome all the participants, particularly those of you who have come from abroad.

2. The initiative to organize this event is indeed laudable as the overall aim of the three-day Forum is to bring stakeholders together to examine concrete projects, proposals and models that will help to integrate the least developed countries into the global economy through the effective deployment of ICTs. I understand that the idea of holding this Forum in Mauritius is to utilize our experience and best practices for the benefit of the African Continent and the Forum is being organized to provide a platform for African countries to discuss the creation of a series of practical projects aimed at creating digital opportunities in the Commonwealth countries.

3. The digital divide between the developed and the developing countries is keeping on widening as the first world is taking full benefits of their advanced state of technological development and of the latest technologies to further develop their economies and raise the living standards of their population whereas the third world is still struggling to find the means to adopt the new technology. We had high expectations on the initiative of

the United Nations to hold the World Summit on Information Society but the first leg of the Summit held in Geneva last year has not adequately responded to our aspirations. We hope that the second leg to be held in Tunis next year will produce an effective Plan of Action that will really address the issues of digital divide in the poorer countries of the globe. We therefore welcome the initiative of the Commonwealth Business Council and the International Telecommunications Union to hold this Forum to help us find a way forward to face this difficult challenge of creating digital opportunities.

4. Most of the countries present at this Forum today are experiencing difficulties to embrace and adopt the new technologies because they do not have the required financial, technical and human resources. In fact, many of these countries have other priorities to address such as food, housing, health and unemployment problems and unless and until they obtain the assistance of the international community and donor agencies, it would be very difficult for them to invest in ICTs and the digital divide between the rich and the poor countries will continue to accentuate.

5. This is indeed a very sad state of affairs as ICTs really have the potential to promote economic growth and

improve living standards and to generate job and wealth creation. ICT can indeed raise the standards of living of population in developing countries by improving access to education, health, government and financial services. ICT can also help small farmers and entrepreneurs by connecting them to markets.

6. Small farmers and entrepreneurs living in rural areas typically lack access to information about prices, data on crops, weather conditions and market opportunities. ICT can remedy such information asymmetries and stimulate people's entrepreneurship by better connecting them to markets. ICT can also improve health care delivery. Telemedicine can diminish the cost and hardship of long distance travel for medical attention and diagnosis and medical list-serves can deliver at minimal cost recent medical findings to health workers lacking research and technological facilities. Furthermore, ICT can simplify medical data collection, record management and data filing.

7. ICT can be used by Government agencies to transform relations with citizens and businesses. It is not uncommon in developing countries for rural villagers to travel long distance to Government district headquarters in order to submit applications, meet officials, obtain

copies of public records or seek information regarding prevailing prices in commodity markets. This involves the loss of a day's income as well as the cost of transportation. Once at the Government Office, the relevant official, record, or information may not be available, thus forcing repeated visits and additional expenses. Villagers may also face discomfort and harassment and are often given incorrect information about Government programs and market prices. With ICT, it is possible to locate service centres that provide documents, land records and other public services, physically closer to citizens. Potential benefits include increased transparency, less corruption, better delivery of government services and greater government responsiveness.

8. Ladies and Gentlemen, one determining factor for the successful deployment of ICTs is the commitment at the highest authority in Government. Other factors would include a transparent and coherent policy, seriousness in the implementation of that policy and consistency in policy.

9. The Government in Mauritius has the vision to transform the country into a cyberisland and to make the ICT sector the fifth pillar of the economy after sugar,

textile, tourism and financial services sector. A high-powered Ministerial Committee has been set up under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister to spearhead the development of the ICT sector and to ensure that ICT related projects are implemented in a harmonious and timely manner. Three Task Forces have also been set up to address issues related to infrastructural framework, e-Government and ICT manpower requirements respectively and the Chairpersons of these Task Forces have to report progress to the High Powered Ministerial Committee on a regular basis.

10. The Cybertower at Ebene which delegates to this forum will have the opportunity to visit, offers state-of-the art facilities to investors to start their business in the ICT sector. Government is according high priority to the development of a strong ICT industry for job and wealth creation and we are concentrating, in the short and medium term on ITES and BPO activities. We are planning to construct additional facilities to meet increased demand for office space. The telecommunications sector has been liberalized and new operators have been licensed to offer a wider array of services at competitive prices. The mobile market is booming and we are considering the introduction of the Third Generation mobile from January next year.

11. An e-Government programme is being implemented to bring citizens closer to Government. In this context, a Government Online Centre is being set up and it will act as the Government portal via which the citizens and the businesses can communicate online with Government agencies on a round-the-clock basis. Community Access Points are being set up throughout the island to afford greater access to PCs and the Internet. A Public Key Infrastructure will be set up by the end of this year to promote and facilitate e-commerce.

12. Our education policy has been revamped to create the basis for a modern, flexible and highly skilled workforce. We are introducing IT as a subject in primary schools to familiarize our pupils with the new technology and to enable them to learn other subjects using IT as a tool. Two Universities as well as private training institutions are offering a wide range of ICT courses and this will help us to produce the pool of IT manpower required to support and sustain development in the ICT sector.

13. We have introduced a series of legislation in line with the EU guidelines to consolidate the legislative framework and to position Mauritius as a clean, responsible offshore

center and as an attractive location for setting up BPO services. We have ensured that there is minimum bureaucracy for the grant of work and residence permits to foreign investors and ICT professionals. We have even gone further by offering attractive incentives to IT professionals to consider relocating to Mauritius.

14. Ladies and Gentlemen, Mauritius, as you may have noted, is a very small country. We have no natural resources and we are also encountering a number of problems as other developing countries. We are currently facing threats for our sugar and textile industry and we have to struggle perpetually to survive in this highly competitive world. We have identified ICT as a potential engine of growth which can generate jobs for our young unemployed and additional wealth for the nation. We consider that ICT is not only a sector of growth by itself but may also be successfully harnessed to improve efficiency and productivity in the other sectors of the economy. In fact, our objective is to make Mauritius an information society where the citizens, the Government, the business community and the ICT industry can work together to fully reap the benefits of ICTs. It is my fervent wish that the countries represented here today can also avail of the new technologies to make greater strides in

their economic development and for the general welfare of their citizens.

15. I would now like to conclude by wishing all the participants fruitful deliberations during this Forum and I hope that they would indeed come out of this Forum with plenty of concrete projects for the successful deployment of ICTs in their respective country.

Thank you for your kind attention.