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NAVAJO NATION PRESIDENT JOE SHIRLEY, JR., SPEAKS FOR WORLD'S 370 MILLION INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AT UN WORLD SUMMIT

Navajo Nation takes international role at WSIS conference in Tunisia, Africa

TUNIS, Tunisia – In an historic address before the 191 member countries of the United Nations, Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., spoke on behalf of the 370 million indigenous people of the world to announce the creation of a native peoples' internet portal and to re-affirm indigenous sovereignty.

"Knowledge, combined with the wisdom of our peoples, is what creates true opportunity," President Shirley said here Friday before thousands of UN representatives and a world-wide television and internet audience. "This is why our people call for universal indigenous connectivity and the development of indigenous-specific ICTs (information, communications and technology)."

Beginning his address in the Navajo language and addressing the audience as relatives, President Shirley spoke at the plenary session of the final day of the weeklong 2005 World Summit on the Information Society – WSIS – an international ICT conference with the goal of finding solutions to end poverty around the world. Three years in the planning, WSIS was sponsored by the United Nations and the International Telecommunications Union.

The United Nations Millennium Project identified three things it believes can bring the world's poor out of extreme poverty – information, communications and technology – known as ICT. The goal of the Tunisia meeting was to complete a blueprint to implement a UN-sponsored plan to use ICTs to end extreme poverty by the year 2025.

To arrive on the international stage, the Navajo Nation was asked to join the International Indigenous Steering Committee last March in Ottawa, Canada, and President Shirley was asked to be its spokesman.

President Shirley said the indigenous internet portal will allow native people to share their own unique qualities with the world.

"Universal connectivity will help us to address other pressing economic and social development issues, including education, health, poverty alleviation and capacity- building," he said. "Indigenous peoples are a valuable part of the information society, and universal connectivity will help us to maintain our values, languages, traditions and sovereignty."

On Thursday at a press conference, President Shirley signed a memorandum of understanding for the Navajo Nation to become a voting member of the 127-year- old International Telecommunications Union and to create the indigenous portal.

The ITU has recognized the work done by the Navajo Nation to bring information, communications and technology to its citizens as one of the most advanced systems among emerging nations and one that can be reproduced by other indigenous nations.

On Wednesday, the President signed an MOU with the Observatory for Cultural and Audiovisual Communication to open an OCCAM office in the Navajo Nation capital of Window Rock. OCCAM, based in Milan, Italy, is the French acronym for the non- governmental UNESCO organization.

Attending the summit with President Shirley was Navajo Nation Council delegates Ervin Keeswood, the Government Services Committee chairman, George Arthur, the Natural Resources Committee chairman, Miss Navajo Nation Rachel James, Ernest Franklin, director of the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, and the staff of OnSat Native American Services, which videoed and webcast numerous interviews and proceedings for the BBC.

The WSIS summit was presided over by Tunisia President Ben Ali and Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of ITU and Secretary-General of WSIS.

Some 19,401 participants from around the world registered. These included:

- ? 46 heads of state and government, crown princes and vice-presidents and 197 ministers/vice ministers and deputy ministers.
- ? 5,857 participants representing 174 States and the European Community.
- ? 1,508 participants representing 92 international organizations.
- ? 6,241 participants representing 606 NGOs and civil society entities.
- ? 4,816 participants representing 226 business sector entities.
- ? 1,222 accredited journalists from 642 media organizations of which 979 onsite from TV, radio, print and online media worldwide.

The Indigenous Peoples and the Information Society parallel event at which President Shirley participated was organized under the auspices of the WSIS International Indigenous Steering Committee, formed at the closing plenary session of the Indigenous Thematic Planning Conference for Tunisia last March.

Other event sponsors were the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the Canadian International Development Agency, OCCAM, the Global Knowledge Partnership, UNESCO, and the Cisneros Foundation.

“The Navajo Nation has received a great honor,” President Shirley said following his address. “I think it’s awesome that the Navajo Nation is finding itself speaking out for the 370 million indigenous people of the world. At this juncture, we’re a player sitting at the table of the United Nations. It doesn’t matter that we’re only voting members of the ITU. The ITU is tied to the whole of the United Nations so that the Navajo Nation is helping to mind the affairs of the UN.”

“To be a spokesnation for the indigenous peoples of the world is very significant and a tremendous accomplishment on the part of the Navajo Nation because for too long the indigenous people of the world have been left out, left behind,” he said.

The President said indigenous people, especially Navajos, have an opportunity to say yea or nay regarding much of what happens in the world. He noted that he was not alone to make this occur. He credited Mr. Keeswood, Mr. Arthur and David Stephens, CEO of OnSat, for their consistent and persistent work over several years.

Mr. Keeswood, who has attended the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for the past 11 years, said the largest challenge now is educating the Navajo public about the importance and significance of the Navajo Nation speaking before the entire UN world body and creating an indigenous portal.

“People have to appreciate our President for taking this marvelous opportunity world-wide,” Mr. Keeswood said. “The Navajo people have to understand that all over the world, indigenous communities are underfunded. This not only creates opportunity for the Navajo Nation but for individual Navajos.”

Mr. Arthur described the event as the dawn of a new worldwide level of opportunity for Navajo people, whether they are artists, weavers, business people or students seeking education.

“Now we have the ability to take it home and make it work,” he said. “That’s what it’s all about. It’s got to grow at home. We’re here representing our future. I think we’re on the right track.”

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HI-RES PHOTOS AVAILABLE

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