

FOCUS

The Revolutionary Promise of Digital IT

TWO major regions of the world — one consisting of some of the richest countries and the other with some of the poorest — pin their hope for economic recovery and progress on the digital information technology.

Leaders of the European Union, according to a communiqué issued on 24 March at the end of a Summit of the European Union leaders in Lisbon, vowed to turn Europe into a "strong and dynamic knowledge-based economy" in a bid to surpass the United States in the Internet age. Dubbed as the "dot-com" summit because of its focus on the "new economy" based on information technology, the meeting was chaired by Prime Minister Antonio Guterres of Portugal, whose country currently holds the rotating Presidency of the European Union.

The Lisbon communiqué underscored the need for "social systems able to provide beyond their intrinsic value, the stable framework required for managing the structural changes involved in moving toward a knowledge-based society." Specific targets adopted by the heads of government of Europe included, among others, connecting every school to the Internet, cutting the cost of Internet access, speeding up legislation for e-commerce, and drawing up plans for reforming and adding appropriate regulations for the "new economy."

Prime Minister Guterres was of the view that, "This Lisbon Strategy is going to bring about a revolution in the way we work... This is a turning point." Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany was equally enthusiastic. "It shows we are prepared to move away from the old industrial society toward a new, high technology and communication-based one," he said. British Prime Minister Tony Blair saw the summit meeting as having "developed a different set of directions for EU economic policy."

During the same week as European leaders were charting the information age future, delegates from 46 countries of Latin America at the annual meetings of the Inter-America Development Bank were treated to a vision of the Internet-based future for their region. Several Projects were presented to demonstrate how the Internet can make a difference in the lives of peasant farmers. One project showed how Guatemalan peasant women marketed their hand-woven

For Bangladesh, a country dependent essentially on its human resources for improving its lot and offering its people life with basic human dignity, the confluence of the digital technology revolution and economic globalization opens up unprecedented opportunities... Is Bangladesh doing all it can to seize the opportunities?

by Manzoor Ahmed

cloth through e-commerce. In another, people in small towns were shown to gain access to the Internet through computer cabins set up around Peru.

President Miguel Angel Rodriguez of Costa Rica, speaking to the meeting by video-conference aimed toward a society that is based on technology and a government that is based on technology.

The message of Enrique Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank, a sister institution of the World Bank, to the conference was that the Internet can make a difference and help create new growth in Latin America. To pull one-third of the people in Latin America out of abject poverty, a much higher and sustained level of economic growth will be needed than the three to four per cent rate expected in 2000 and an even lower rate in the past. Effective use of the new technology could be the answer, according to Mr. Iglesias.

It has not escaped the participants at the Latin American meeting that Europe and Latin America do not start from the same base-line of economic, technological and institutional development. Electronic commerce may spark off a faster economic growth in Europe just as information technology in general has created an unprecedented decade-long economic boom in the United States and has produced huge national budget surplus, with no end in sight of the expansionary phase of the business cycle. Some experts believe that a sustained economic productivity growth that has been achieved through the application of the digital technology implies the end of this business cycle as we know it, characterized by periods of expansion and recession.

Latin America has to overcome several challenges before it can benefit fully from the new economy of the Internet. Most critical of these challenges are convincing and changing the mind-set of political leaders and policy makers regarding the potential of the digital technology, improving the

telecommunication infrastructure — the backbone of the new information technology and developing ways of applying the new technology in aiding growth and wealth creation that is shared widely by the people.

The globalized market has opened the possibilities for investment and technology sharing that will be required for introduction and use of digital technology in the developing countries. However, as Mr. Iglesias noted, private sector investors are interested mainly in big markets like Mexico and Brazil. "So the role of the [Inter-American Development] bank will be to help finance telecommunications and New Economy infrastructures for the smaller nations," Mr. Iglesias asserted.

Equally important will be the role of the government of the smaller nations in preparing the ground, taking necessary policy and regulatory decisions, giving priority to the necessary infrastructure, building and facilitating private investment, and promoting public-private partnership.

Also a critical responsibility of the government is to develop, present and share with the public the vision of the future that can be created for the benefit of all. The Government has to win the support or at least prevent active resistance of those who are against change. The President of Costa Rica, as he spoke about the promise of the new technology, remained confined in a building, besieged by government workers demonstrating against legislation that would end the government monopoly in telecommunication and the power sectors. This is symbolic of the obstacles developing countries face — and not an unfamiliar scene in Bangladesh.

For Bangladesh, a country dependent essentially on its human resources for improving its lot and offering its people life with basic human dignity, the confluence of the digital technology revolution and economic globalization opens up unprecedented opportunities.

Some of the possibilities of creating employment and income and boosting foreign exchange earnings are well-known from the experience of other developing countries including neighbouring India: contracts for data processing and data management for multi-national mammoths such as insurance companies, health systems, and airlines with huge on-going data processing needs; export of tailor-made software and application development, the demand for which is sky-rocketing and export of skilled personnel with IT competencies for whom a massive shortage is projected. India's earnings from IT-related export was \$4 billion in 1998 and is projected by the government to rise to \$85 billion by 2008.

New possibilities that will arise if the right steps are taken now include:

a) Staking a claim in the burgeoning global e-commerce — on-line world-wide commercial transaction between consumer and business and between business — the fastest growing sector in the world economy;

b) Prospect of dramatic improvement in the quality of education by expanding the availability of learning materials for students and teachers through web-based learning resource centres. Michael Saylor, owner of the Microstrategy Corporation, has pledged 100 million dollars to create a virtual campus in order to offer a "ivy league college education" free to anyone ready to take advantage of it. There is no reason why Bangladesh universities cannot make use of this gift to complement their lectures and course materials;

c) Most importantly, the new technologies offer a fighting chance for Bangladesh to be in the arena of the global market, to make a credible effort to halt and reverse the widening gap in income and quality of life with developed countries and to make a place for itself on the right side of the looming digital divide.

Is Bangladesh doing all it can to seize the opportunities? Some important steps have been taken including duty-free import of computer hardware and software, permitting competitive entry of the private sector into cellular phone service, and contract (although much delayed) for links to under-sea global fibre-optic-trunk lines. The private sector, especially the NGOs have made an exemplary contribution as internet service providers and by initiating IT training opportunities.

Other important policy measures that need attention include:

• Rapid improvement of telecommunication infrastructure, opening it to private sector competition; ensuring that telephones are efficient, reliable, and available on demand at a reasonable cost; and eliminating the interface problem between wireless and wired networks.

• Expanding broadband access for fast and large-scale data, audio and video transmission.

• Encouraging IT training and skill development with measures for self-regulation and self-accreditation by providers to safeguard consumer interest.

• Making internet service cheap and widely available as a public good for education and public information; university students and teachers at all levels should have internet access on a priority basis.

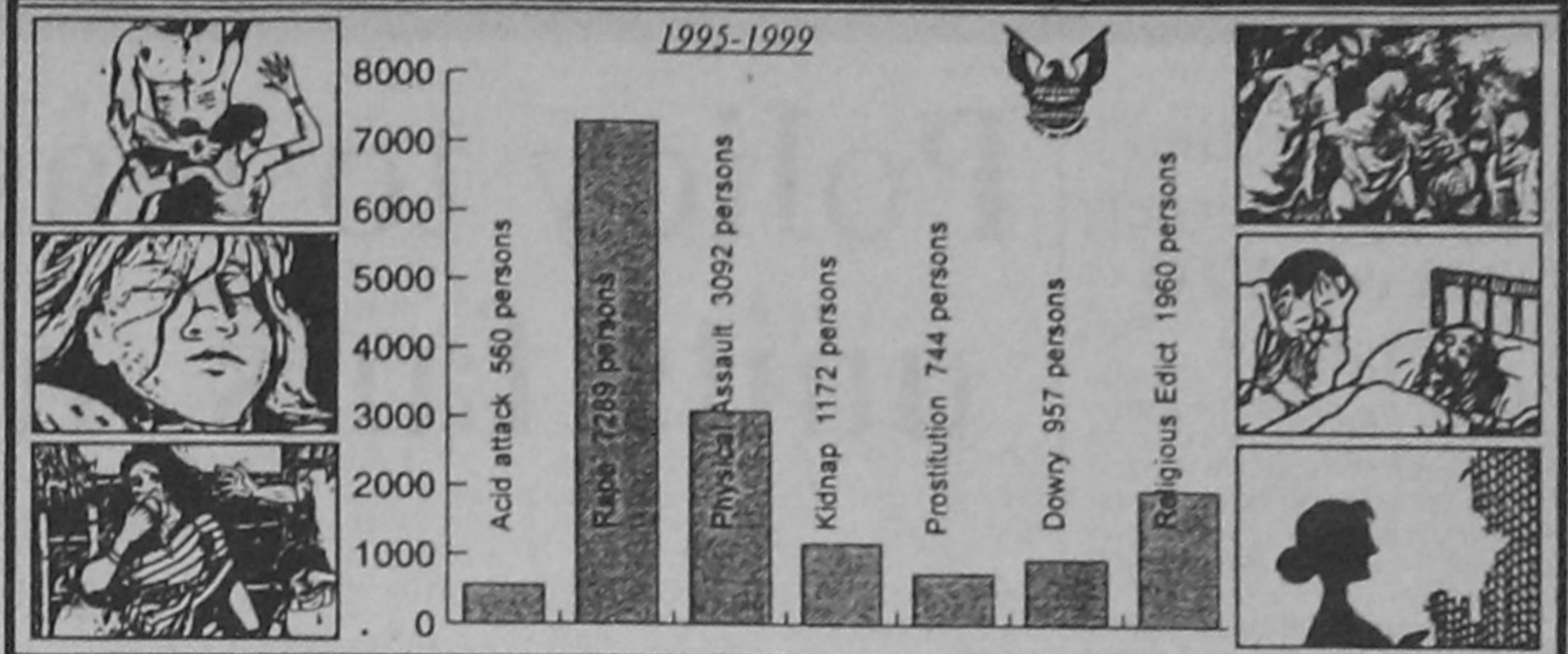
• Promoting public-private partnership for developing Bangla language internet capabilities and Bangla education and information content. A systematic effort is needed to develop a network of educational content providers for Bangla language internet service.

• Developing a legislative and regulatory framework for within country and international e-commerce for quality control, consumer protection and dispute settlement — if Bangladesh expects to take part in the global e-commerce race.

Digital technology is not the God-sent solution to all of the ills of Bangladesh. But it is a new and promising tool for tackling some of the major intractable problems.

The above are personal comments by the writer, who is Director of the UNICEF Office for Japan.

Women in Bangladesh usually fall victim to acid attack, trafficking, rape, unauthorised lashing, dowry, sexual assaults and kidnapping. According to figures released by police, Institute of Democratic Rights (IDR) and Bangladesh Mohila Ainjibi Samity repression on women and children rose four times between 1995 and August 1999.



Statistics revealed that 560 women fell prey to acid attacks between 1995 and 1999, while 7289 to rape, 3092 to physical assault, 1172 to kidnapping, 744 to prostitution, 957 to dowry related repression and 1960 to religious edict. In 1999, some 95 women were disfigured in attacks, while 461 raped, 20 lashed, 217 assaulted, 65 tortured for dowry and 261 abducted. Advocate Elena Khan of Bangladesh Manobadhiker Bastabayan Sangstha said in such cases the victims and even their guardians don't like to file cases for shame, hazards of dealing with the cases and trial costs. "And lack of witnesses is the other reason for which victims prefer to avoid going to courts," she said.

The Bangladesh Parliament on January 30 amended the 1995 Woman and Child Repression Prevention Act to make it more stringent on stopping violence against women and children. The main features of the law are: Capital punishment, speedy investigation and trial of cases will be held in tribunal and all crimes under the ambit of the law are non-bailable, the tribunal will complete the trial within 180 days, the government can form more than one tribunal and rapists will pay for the upkeep of a child born as a consequence of rape.

Pressing Challenges and Priorities to Consider

Key Proposals of the Millennium Report of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

In his Millennium Report, the Secretary-General identifies pressing challenges faced by the world's peoples and proposes a number of priorities for Member States to consider at the Millennium Summit. He also recommends several immediate steps that can be taken at the Summit itself. Outlined below are the new initiatives he is proposing, followed by targets and recommendations he has outlined for consideration by Heads of State.

Building Digital Bridges: To review their policies in order to remove regulatory and pricing impediments to internet access, to make sure people are not denied the opportunities offered by the digital revolution.

Private Sector: To develop strong partnerships with the private sector, at both national and international levels, to combat poverty in all its aspects.

Trade Access: To grant free access to their markets for goods produced in poor countries — and, as a first step, to be prepared to adopt a policy of duty-free and quota-free access for essentially all exports from the least-developed countries at the UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries in March 2001.

Debt Relief: To implement the expansion of the debt relief programme for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries agreed last year without further delay, and to be prepared to cancel all official debts of the heavily indebted poor countries, in return for those countries making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction.

ODA: To grant more generous development assistance, particularly to those countries that are genuinely applying their resources to poverty reduction.

HIV/AIDS: To work with the pharmaceutical industry and other partners to develop an effective and affordable vaccine against HIV; and to make HIV-related drugs more widely accessible in developing countries.

Africa: to make special provision for the needs of Africa, and to fully support Africans in their struggle to overcome the continent's problems. Specifically, experts and foundations are urged to tackle the problem of low agricultural productivity in Africa.

Water: To have, by 2015, the proportion of people who do not have access to safe drinking water (currently 20 per cent).

Education: To narrow the gender gap in primary and secondary education by 2005; and to ensure that, by 2015, all children complete a full course of primary education.

HIV/AIDS: To halt, and begin to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015 by: adopting as an explicit goal the reduction of HIV infection rates in persons 15 to 24 years of age — by 25 per cent within the most affected countries before the year 2005, and by 25 per cent globally before 2010.

Setting explicit prevention targets: by 2005 at least 90 per cent, and by 2010 at least 95 per cent, of young men and women must have access to the HIV-preventive information and services.

Clearing the Slums: to endorse and act upon the "Cities Without Slums" plan launched by the World Bank and United Nations to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

Youth Employment: to develop strategies to reduce job-

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Safe and Smart: Research and Guidelines for Children's Use of the Internet

THE Internet poses a singular challenge for public school leaders and parents. Many public opinion surveys confirm that Americans expect school leaders to focus on two top priorities: keeping children safe and increasing student achievement. At a time when Internet usage among children and adults is rising dramatically, however, these priorities sometimes may seem contradictory. Is it possible for schools to protect students from inappropriate content without denying them access to engaging and valuable educational content? Can adults craft approaches that strike a balance between safe and smart Internet usage by children? These questions are at the crux of the dilemma we face with increasing frequency and urgency.

Until now, this dilemma has been complicated by dearth of credible information. There was a lack of good data about where children access the Internet, what they do once they're connected, what kinds of sites they visit, and how much adult supervision and guidance they receive, among many other basic issues. Nor did we know much about parents' perceptions of and expectations for their children's Internet usage. Without sound research, there is a tendency to react to the headlines and hype of the moment — and that tack may not result in wise school policymaking and parental oversight.

Against this backdrop, the National School Boards Foundation worked with Grunwald Associates, a leading market research and consulting firm

A national survey of more than 1700 American households reveals that both children and parents view Internet use as a "positive new force in children's lives." The study results were released March 28 in a Washington news conference by the co-sponsors, the National School Boards Foundation, the Children's Television Workshop and the Microsoft Corporation.

The National School Boards Foundation says this study is the first to provide credible information about family Internet use, habits and views. Following is the text of the study's executive summary:

specializing in technology, to develop an unprecedented national survey of parents and children. The Dieringer Research Group conducted the survey and tabulated the data. With generous support from the Children's Television Workshop and Microsoft Corporation, we surveyed a significantly large random sample of 1,735 households nationwide to learn about children's Internet usage. In telephone interviews, we asked parents of children aged two to 17 a number of questions about the role the Internet plays in their children's lives. We also asked children themselves, aged nine to 17, from the same households, for a reality check on the role of the Internet their own lives.

Key Findings: The Benefits of the Internet
The bottom line: Most parents and children alike see to view the Internet as a positive new force in children's lives. Despite recent negative headlines about isolation, violence, pornography, predators and commercialism, parents and

children generally are upbeat and favorable about their own Internet experiences. Parents, in fact, are more positive on this issue than children. They believe the Internet is a powerful tool for learning and communicating within families. And, as parents' answers suggest, the Internet can be an equally powerful tool for schools that want to increase public engagement and family involvement — and to help bridge the digital divide between students who have computers and Internet access at home and those who do not.

In almost half (49 per cent) of households surveyed, at least one child uses the Internet. By the time they are teenagers, nearly three out of four children are online. Teenagers who use the Internet are more likely to log on at school. Younger children who are online are more likely to log on at home than at school.

Parents and children told us: 1. The main reason families buy computers and connect their children to the Internet at home is for education. The most

common reason parents cite for buying home computers is children's education. Education is also the single-most common motivation parents cite for their children to use the Internet form home. Moreover, education-related use of the Internet goes beyond learning activities for required schoolwork. Children also go online for learning activities that are not connected directly with school. Many parents whose young children use the Internet at school believe the Internet has improved their child's attitude toward school.

2. The Internet does not disrupt children's everyday habits and typical, healthy activities. In fact, once they start using the Internet, many children spend less time watching television; increased time reading newspapers, magazines and books; increased time playing outdoors; and increased time doing arts and crafts. The findings present a picture of American children whose involvement in a variety of activities continues and even increases — even as their Internet usage is rising.

By Hanna-Barbera