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NAVAJO NATION PRESIDENT JOE SHIRLEY, JR., TO ADDRESS WORLD SUMMIT ON INFORMATION SOCIETY IN TUNISIA, AFRICA

Navajo Nation to sign historic MOU to open international Internet office in Window Rock

TUNIS, Tunisia, Africa – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., has arrived here to address the weeklong 2005 World Summit on the Information Society, an international information, communications and technology conference sponsored by the United Nations.

Some 275 world leaders, including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and 11,000 participants from 175 countries are expected to attend.

President Shirley left Window Rock at 8 a.m. Sunday morning and arrived at his hotel in Tunisia at 11:30 p.m. Monday night.

Also attending the conference are Navajo Nation Council Delegates Ervin Keeswood, chairman of the Government Services Committee, and George Arthur, chairman of the Resources Committee. Both traveled here on Friday.

“Indigenous people of the world are really looking up to the Navajo Nation,” President Shirley said. “Our presence confirms the willingness of the Navajo people to join the efforts of the United Nations in organizing this world summit.”

All of the events of the summit, including press conferences, will be webcast in six languages – Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Russian and Chinese.

The United Nations Millennium Project has identified three things that can bring the world’s poor out of extreme poverty – information, communications and technology – known as ICT.

“Information and communication technologies are not a panacea or magic formula,” UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who is expected to attend, has said.

“But they can improve the lives of everyone on this planet. We have all this potential. The challenge before this summit is what to do with it.”

The Navajo Nation is now using ICT of its own to deliver distance learning, economic opportunity, telemedicine, e-government and public safety to remote communities throughout its 27,000-square-mile land base.

For the past five years, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a specialized agency of the UN based in Geneva, Switzerland, has worked to find ways to use ICT to end poverty. The goal

of the Tunisia meeting is to complete a blueprint to implement a UN-sponsored plan to use ICT to end extreme poverty by the year 2025.

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 in the emerging nations and one that can be reproduced by other indigenous nations. Because of this, the Navajo Nation is expected to take a leadership role to represent indigenous issues to the world beginning with this summit.

On Thursday, President Shirley is expected to sign a memorandum of understanding with the ITU and the Observatory for Cultural and Audiovisual Communication, a non-governmental organization of UNESCO based in Milan, Italy. The MOU is to establish an OCCAM office in Window Rock. The office would support the creation of a global indigenous people's portal to the Internet from the Navajo Nation.

On Friday, the President will speak before a plenary session called the "Indigenous People and the Information Society" to explain how the Navajo Nation created one of the world's largest wireless Internet networks.

Today, all 110 Navajo chapters now have free wireless Internet connections and computers where any Navajo can have an e-mail address and get online for free. In addition, every chapter and most Navajo Nation divisions, departments and programs have their own websites.

"The most important thing is that our people are communicating with their government, and their government is communicating with them," President Shirley said. "As President, I need to hear from my people, whether they are in a community center or living far away from Navajoland, whether working, in school, or serving in the armed forces in a foreign country."

OCCAM, which is paying for the President's trip, was created in 1997 by UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Since then, OCCAM has promoted UN values of peace, tolerance and human rights in the fields of all audiovisual means of communication.

Earlier this year, OCCAM was granted Special Consultative Status by the Economic and Social Council of the UN and is currently active in more than 15 countries, with an antenna in Window Rock and one in Antalya, Turkey.

The road to Tunis has taken nearly two years and began in 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland. There, nearly 50 heads of state and dozens of government officials from 175 countries adopted the WSIS Declaration of Principles and plan of action.

Last March, President Shirley addressed the UN International Indigenous Preparatory Meeting for WSIS in Ottawa, Canada. There, the UN created the International Indigenous Steering Committee which the Navajo Nation joined and which President Shirley was asked to co-chair.

In June, President Shirley sent his Chief of Staff, Patrick Sandoval, to represent him at the IPSC meeting in Brazil. This resulted in a MOU which the Navajo Nation signed to bring a model of the Navajo satellite-based network to 300-to-1,100 Brazilian indigenous sites.

The project is expected to begin a major job creation initiative for Navajo people while helping indigenous people around the world obtain ICT to allow them to become self-sustainable.

Through funding from ITU, OCCAM, the Brazilian government and other organizations, the Navajo Nation will provide the same type of ICT services that it delivers to its own communities via satellite and wireless.

“The most amazing achievement to me is that we were able to provide this connectivity without harming or disturbing the earth,” President Shirley said. “We did not dig any ditches or lay a foot of cable. Nothing was done to destroy our sacred land to achieve the goal of bringing information, communication, education, health, and better government to our people.”

The Navajo Nation ICT Community Development objectives include:

- Providing stable telecommunications to every Navajo community.
- Increase the visibility of technology projects in each community and increase individual participation.
- Serve as a catalyst for increasing technology-related activities.
- Create well-trained, community-based staff.
- Offer leadership and management training in finance, property management, personnel, government development and land use planning.
- Provide an online business site for local craftsmen, weavers and entrepreneurs to market their products.
- Promote self-sustainability and technology projects at each chapter.

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TO WATCH SUMMIT WEBCAST GO TO:
www.itu/wsis/tunis/webcast/index.html

PHOTOS AVAILABLE

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