Opening Address
Opening Ceremony : Connect A School Connect A Community
3 May 2011, Akuressa, Sri Lanka

Dr. Eun-Ju Kim, Regional Director
ITU Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

H.E. Mr. Chandima Rasaputra, Minister of Education Southern Province,
Mr. H G Sirisena former Chief Minister of Southern Province
Mr. S Sahabandu, President counselor, Member of the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission,
Mr. Weerasekera, Director, Zonal Education,
Mr. Zoyza, Country Manager, Intel EM Ltd,
Mr. Kodithuwakku, Chairman, Kamburupitiya Kodithuwakku Development Foundation,
Mr. Sunil, Chairman, SLS Development Foundation,
Distinguish Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Students, who are the very future.

On behalf of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) , its Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in particular, first of all, I would like to thank the Telecom Regulatory Commission (TRC) of Sri Lanka for organizing this opening ceremony of the Computer Distribution under the ITU project called *"Connect A School Connect A Community"*. I warmly welcome all of you, especially the school teachers and students, who I hope benefit from these ICT tools in enhancing the quality of education and sharing knowledge amongst the schools as well as communities at large.

Under the Actions adopted at the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 to ensure one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – i.e., *all educational institutions connected by the target date of 2015,* this ITU Connect a School, Connect a Community initiative is designed to promote broadband Internet connectivity for schools so that schools can serve as community ICT centers for rural, marginal urban and isolated areas with a particular focus on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups such as women and girls, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and children.

It aims not only to raise awareness of appropriate policy and regulatory frameworks among policy-makers and regulators in cross-sectors from communications to educations but also to take actions together with various authorities gathered here today through distributing ICT tools – i.e., computers connected with telecommunications - especially for the students in remote schools and the disadvantaged and vulnerable ones with disabilities in particular so

as to achieve the WSIS and MDG targets of connecting all primary, secondary and tertiary schools to ICT by 2015.

 Ladies and Gentlemen,

ICT has been considered as the very key enabler for the overall socio-economic development through creativity and innovation starting from the students – boys and girls alike, as Internet itself was indeed incubated from the universities and R&D institutes. Moreover, ICT has been proved to offer the digital opportunities to not only normal or bright students but also ones with disabilities, indigenous groups, those in special needs and rural or underserved groups.

In this regard, I would like to share with you that ITU together with TRC has been implementing a joint ICT Development Program for the persons with special needs at ICT Centres located at Universities, Special Schools, Special Education Units of Schools, and Vocational Training Centers at Katawela, Bandarawela, Wathuragama, Kaburugamwa, Agunakolapelessa, Seeduwa, Wattegama, Kalegana, Mathugama, Bellanthara, Ambalantota, Naththandiya, Dehiwala, Thanamalwila, Moratuwa, Colombo, Monaragala and Ranaviru Villages. As you would be aware that Sri Lankan Government has established Ranaviru Villages for the disabled soldiers, who were the victim of war. These villages have established ICT centers, while Ranaviry Authority supervised these places with paying for the ICT instructors who are teaching at these centers.

By extending ICT to broadband with faster and wider bandwidths to schools, students will be able to enjoy more creative or tailored ways of educations including e-educations. Coming back to the school connectivity in rural and remote regions such as Akuressa, for instance, connecting schools to broadband enables a new generation of distance learning that goes far beyond traditional correspondence courses or broadcasting-based services. Broadband enables services including videoconferencing, real-time distribution of classroom materials, and collaboration between students in the classroom and other distance learners. Connecting schools in these remote areas of Sri Lanka is the first step forward in this direction.

One of the major challenges to provide school connectivity is how to fund such projects. As Mr. Sharma mentioned in his introduction, ITU provided initial funding for the school connectivity in Sri Lanka, which included 25 computers, printers, and UPS. It is now the Governments or relevant organizations in Sri Lanka, who need to act as catalyst by providing more funds for the ICT to be used for education with strong commitments and appropriate policies or regulations.

For examples, first, Governments need to envisage ICT as a key enabler for overall socio-economic development as its vision or strategy for now and the future. To realize the vision, they can include ICT as one of educational curricula at schools with budgets, as the students are for the future of any countries including Sri Lanka. Second, telecommunication or ICT regulatory frameworks such as licensing or universal service obligation (USO) can include the school connectivity as a part of the conditions with its funds. Third, appropriate policies or

regulations can also encourage the private sector to connect the schools through offering incentives such as preferential tariffs or discounted taxes etc.. Last but not the least, Sri Lankan Government can also form public-private partnership (PPP) to not only facilitate the school connectivity but also ensure its sustainability.

In order for Sri Lanka to move forward, please let me share with a few examples from other developing countries. One of the priorities from the Chile's Digital Strategy for 2007-2012, for example, is to increase the intensity and depth of students' ICT usage. The goal is not only to establish school connectivity, but to ensure that the infrastructure is robust and high-quality enough to support the educational process. To achieve these goals, Chile's Digital Strategy aims to double the number of broadband connections, covering the entire country during the 2007-2012 period. According to the ITU's Digital Development Indicators Report published in early 2009, there were 6,835 school facilities connected to the Internet at the end of 2008, and there were 24 students per computer. Another example from Asia and the Pacific region is SMART School program in Malaysia. Likewise, a growing number of countries are elaborating "ICT for education" (ICT4E) policies.

Dear officials, partners, teachers and students.

I am very pleased to initiate and distribute these ICT tools today. But, I am sure, you all agree that it should be neither sufficient enough nor to be the end: i.e., we need to find ways of extensions as well as sustainability. One way of sustaining the school connectivity is to extend the access to larger communities following school-based telecentre, of which concept can offer services similar to Internet cafés, such as access to PCs, Internet connectivity, and video and audio communications software. Instead of being purely driven by profit, school-based telecentres can be also focused on meeting community needs, particularly for rural and underserved populations. In Sri Lanka, especially developing e-agriculture applications for local communities would be very useful, considering the fact that 80% of rural communities earn their livelihood through agriculture. Another way of sustainability is to train the staff, who can troubleshoot problems, perform routine maintenance, identify necessary upgrades and even extend its scope to the school-based community centre.

Here, the role of TRC is very critical not only to ensure the sustainability of school connectivity, but also to coordinate all concerned and provide support for training of these 25 schools, of which initiative was undertaken by the Department of Education and Intel through organizing the training for 8 days to these schools located at Akuressa and Matara under Information Communication Technology Driving License (ICTDL). Should you complete the training with satisfaction, you will receive certificate afterwards. I would also like to appreciate the efforts of telecommunication operators concerned for providing Internet access to provide connectivity, whilst I am sure that TRC will be supportive to make the access affordable for schools and communities in Sri Lanka.

Having said the importance of not only connectivity but also sustainability for the schools, I am very happy to announce the support of ITU to fund the Internet access connectivity charges for these schools for one year, while encouraging other partners like TRC, educational ministry, operators, and schools themselves to join the public-private

partnership with more creative and innovative ways to not only sustain the schools connected today but also extend more schools to be connected and benefited in future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Taking this opportunity, I do reiterate strong commitment of ITU to connect the schools, communities and beyond in Sri Lanka not only with ICT tools but also various knowledge and capacity buildings, as ITU has been implementing several ICT projects: e.g., Workshops on Next Generation Network (NGN) Regulation and Migration Strategies and on Bridging Standardization Gap, Training for Judges of the Sri Lankan Court of Appeal and Officers of the Attorney General's Department, and country-specific assistances on Interconnection Framework and Pricing, National Emergency Telecommunication Plan, and Persons with Disability in close collaboration with the NETEC, Thailand.

Before closing, please allow me to extend my sincere appreciations to H.E. Mr. Rasaputra, Minister of Education; the TRC of Sri Lanka under the leadership of Mr. Palpita, Director General; senior officials of Local Governments; Mr. Kodithuwakku and Mr. Sunil from Development Foundations; teachers; representatives; children of all the schools; and dear partner, Intel, for your kind trusts in the ITU, through which our projects can be implemented together in your country, Sri Lanka, as well as for organizing this Ceremony today through your hard work to prepare and coordinate for its success.

Also, I would like to thank and congratulate Mr. Maduranga for his dedications with his whole hearts and efforts from the stages of conceiving the project, identifying the schools, and mobilizing the resources. I do encourage others to be inspired for the even better and more creative initiative to make your schools, communities, Sri Lanka and even the world better place for all, regardless of boys and girls, old and young, and persons with disabilities.

I am very confident that all the teachers, students and communities in this area would greatly benefit with the empowerment with the ICT in not only improving the quality of knowledge but also enhancing the quality of life and productivity in your daily livelihood.

In conclusion, I encourage all of you to replicate the success of this schools connectivity project in other parts of Sri Lanka to connect all the schools before 2015 possibly with broadband to meet the WSIS and MDG targets, while hoping you – especially students – lead your country to become a fully connected information society for a greener and creative Sri Lanka in the years to come.

Thank you.