



## **Top UN official stresses need for Internet multilingualism to bridge digital divide**



Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyo Akasaka

14 December 2009 – Multilingualism must be fostered on the Internet to help bridge the digital divide and the United Nations stands in the forefront of those seeking to promote linguistic diversity in the interests of greater political, economic and cultural access for all, a top UN official said today.

“Creating content in local languages is, and will be, as important as enabling connectivity in order to be able to reach and engage peoples worldwide, whether on economic, political, or scientific initiatives,” Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyo Akasaka told the Second Global Seminar on Linguistic Diversity, Globalization and Development in São Paulo, Brazil.

Mr. Akasaka, who is also Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Coordinator for Multilingualism in the UN Secretariat, cited statistics showing that 96 per cent of the world’s nearly 7,000 languages are spoken by a mere 4 per cent of the world’s population, with “a staggering 50 per cent” expected to die out within a few generations because they are not represented in government, education and the media.

“But the statistic that is particularly relevant for our discussion is this: only about 35 per cent of all Internet users are native English speakers. Yet English websites dominate the Internet, with almost 70 per cent of all sites readable only in English,” he cautioned.

“This has obvious implications for those who can, and cannot, take advantage of this online world,” he added, noting that about two-thirds of English-language sites are devoted to e-commerce and that e-commerce accounted for nearly \$2.4 trillion in business worldwide in 2006. “It literally pays to speak English!”

He cited the “crucial role” played by the media not only in reporting on local and world events in multiple languages, but with their educational services, from quizzes to language instruction, on their online sites.

Media companies are on the front line of developing new ways to translate the Internet into different languages, real-time translation of Internet chats is on the horizon, thanks to better and faster translation tools, and new technology is helping to add captions to videos automatically, helping those who are hearing-impaired as well as those who do not speak the language of the video, he said.

“Clearly, the media, through multilingual content and technology, must continue to expand and encourage the exchange of ideas, knowledge and culture – as it always has,” he declared. “The United Nations is your strong ally in this movement. The United Nations, and my Department, the Department of Public Information, promotes multilingualism in the United Nations, in cyberspace, and in countries every day.”

Mr. Akasaka cited the UN’s own role in producing and disseminating multimedia news products and services in different languages: its website available in all six official UN languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish; UN webcasts of meetings of the General Assembly and Security Council in English and the original language of the speaker; UN Radio daily programming in the six official languages as well as in Kiswahili, one of the fastest growing languages in the world, and Portuguese.

The UN also produces weekly programming in 13 languages - the eight languages already mentioned, and Bangla, Hindi, Indonesian, Urdu and French Creole. Meanwhile, the network of 63 UN Information Centres regularly produces information in more than 40 languages and maintains websites in over 30.

The UN centre in Accra has made the Universal Declaration on Human Rights available in 11 languages of Ghana alone, the Mexico City centre translated the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into six local languages, and the centre in La Paz, Bolivia, organized the first-ever Model UN conference for students in an indigenous language, Aymara.

In Brazil, the Rio de Janeiro centre, beyond serving the entire Portuguese-speaking world, translates key UN documents into indigenous languages, including Guarani.

“Our aim in all of this is to inform and engage civil society – in their own languages – on the work of the United Nations, and how it affects their daily lives. We are doing a lot, but more needs to be done,” Mr. Akasaka declared, stressing the need for additional resources and expertise.

“Governments, meanwhile, need to help raise awareness of the importance of generating information in local languages to encourage greater multilingual content and use. They also can play a key role in passing laws to promote and protect languages,” he added, calling for the must removal of political or other impediments to content on the Internet.

“We know that there is a link between the preservation of languages, culture, and the protection of our biodiversity. Clearly, the efforts needed to preserve our biodiversity are no less urgent than those that are needed to protect endangered languages. We can make a difference if we want to. The United Nations stands ready to work with credible, creative and cutting-edge partners in these endeavours.”

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