PRESS RELEASE

As Internet user numbers swell due to pandemic, UN Forum discusses measures to improve safety of cyberspace

Cost of data breaches expected to top $5 trillion by 2024

Katowice, Poland, 6 December – An additional 782 million people came online in just two years since 2019 – more than twice the population of the United States – but at the same time, unequal access, incendiary hate speech and cybercrime have been tearing at the fabric of the global web, prompting the UN Internet Governance Forum to seek measures that leverage the power of the Internet while tackling the risks.

Taking place in Katowice, Poland, from 6 to 10 December, the Forum brings together over 7,000 innovators, big tech executives, young people, ministers and parliamentarians to spur efforts to build an open, secure and free digital future for all.

The Forum's theme "Internet United" calls for stepping up collective efforts to achieve universal access and meaningful connectivity, economic inclusion and human rights protection online.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the life-changing power of the Internet," said United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. "Digital technology has saved lives by enabling millions of people to work, study and socialize safely online."

"But the pandemic has also magnified the digital divide and the dark side of technology: the lightning-fast spread of misinformation, the manipulation of people's behaviour and more," he added. "We can only address these challenges united, through strengthened cooperation."

"We need 'Internet United' and a united response to the digital issues that we are facing recently, especially since the global pandemic has accelerated the process of digitalization in the areas of economic, political and social life," said the Prime Minister of Poland Mateusz Morawiecki. "These important topics are being discussed during this year's UN Internet Governance Forum in Katowice.''

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), during the COVID-19 pandemic, Internet user ranks grew to 4.9 billion in 2021, from 4.1 billion in 2019. Remote education, remote work and

remote health services came within the reach of many. However, approximately 2.9 billion people, 96 per cent of whom live in developing countries, remain without Internet access and risk being left behind by the digital revolution.

Noting the impact of the pandemic on our digital landscape, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Liu Zhenmin said: "The Internet Governance Forum could deliver its promise for shaping a digital future for the world – turning the COVID-19 crisis into opportunities. Indeed, this is easier said than done, as global Internet governance is complex. But united, we can succeed, together."

Ensuring an open, free and safe Internet would create the right conditions to reap the rewards of a digital future. For example, it is estimated that 230 million "digital jobs" in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030 could generate nearly $120 billion in revenue, if supported by some 650 million training opportunities. The use of artificial intelligence is forecast to generate nearly $4 trillion in added value for global markets.

But surging Internet use has also been accompanied by a spike in data breaches. A lack of Internet accountability has made the Internet a vehicle for the spread of incendiary hate speech, violent extremism and misinformation on the pandemic. Cybercrime is also on the rise with more than 7,000 data breaches recorded in 2019 alone, exposing more than 15 billion records. The cost of such breaches is expected to top $5 trillion by 2024.

While the Internet had often become the only way to continue education or employment during COVID-19-related lockdowns, cyberbullying and digital violence have made it a hostile space for many, especially women. In Europe, 44 per cent of children who were cyberbullied prior to COVID-19 reported that the abuse had increased during lockdown, according to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. In 2018, it was reported that women and girls were 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men.

Over the course of five days and over 250 sessions, the Internet Governance Forum will discuss concrete measures to achieve economic inclusion and human rights protection online, universal access and meaningful connectivity. It will also seek common solutions to four cross-cutting issues: climate, e-waste and the environment; data and consumer protection; digital cooperation; and trust, security and stability.

The outcomes of the Forum will directly inform and guide the policies, programmes and business plans of governments, national parliaments and private companies' boardrooms. With a track record of informing policies on everything from data privacy to community connectivity in regions as diverse as the European Union and West Africa, the Internet Governance Forum is the prime brainstorming platform for the global Internet community.

Whether joining the Forum in person or virtually, through the state-of-the-art 3D online platform, every participant of the meeting enjoys equal footing and access to the debates.

About the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

The IGF, convened annually by the UN Secretary-General, is a Forum for multi-stakeholder dialogue that seeks to maximize the opportunity for open and inclusive dialogue and the exchange of ideas on Internet governance issues; create opportunities to share best practices and experiences; identify

emerging issues and bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the public; contribute to capacity building for Internet governance.

More information:

Website, schedule and list of speakers: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/dashboard/igf-2021

Live webcasts of all sessions: https://www.youtube.com/user/igf

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