

Diplomacy goes virtual

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Article blurbLeast Developed Countries with limited resources to establish diplomatic missions abroad are set to benefit from "virtual diplomacy"

Least Developed Countries with limited resources to establish diplomatic missions abroad are set to benefit from "virtual diplomacy".

Djibouti will soon become the first African country to employ cyber diplomacy, according to Diplo Foundation Project Development Officer, Eva Tanner. The project is set to begin in 2008 and may set the pace for other African countries to adopt virtual diplomacy.

Speaking exclusively to Hana, Tanner said "virtual diplomacy" would enhance diplomatic services for developing countries especially those with limited capacity to have actual embassies and consulates in foreign countries.

"The mandate that Diplo has is to promote developing countries to have a voice and a presence globally", said Tanner, adding that virtual diplomacy would be inclusive of areas not normally given attention such as culture and tourism.

Speaking at the same forum, the project manager of the virtual Second House of Sweden, Stephan Geens said that virtual embassies will not engage in consular services such as issuing of visas but rather public diplomacy where governments talk to people as opposed to traditional diplomacy where governments talk to governments.

The Director of DiploFoundation, Jovan Kurbalija said studies have established that 80 percent of Internet users will engage in virtual life presence especially in the area of entertainment and that although Second Life as a platform is at the "crystal ball" stage, there are reasons for virtual reality to establish itself as the next big tool on the Internet.

Panelists lambasted the lack of support from mainstream media saying that the media emphasises narratives that are in the extreme and ignore the good that come from the virtual world.

Questions arose as to whether the platform used by virtual embassies - Second Life- would further increase the digital gap considering that it is an immersive medium employing 3D technology which is unavailable or too costly for the very poor countries it is supposed to help.

Tanner said other issues that can be addressed by virtual embassies are immigration, the diaspora and consular protection. She said the project of virtual embassies was launched in Geneva in May 2007 to specifically provide diplomatic solutions for Least Developed Countries whose financial and human capacities are limited.

The nature and scope of changes brought about by the Internet in education, business, government and other areas of life cannot be overemphasised. Diplomacy is no exception and diplomats make extensive use of computers and the Internet in their daily work. The amount of information and software available has made Information and Communication Technology (ICT) a vital tool in most diplomatic activities. According to Geens, the virtual embassies established so far do not have virtual ambassadors just yet but stressed that virtual diplomacy can co-exist with traditional diplomacy.