

Final Remarks: Paul Hoeffel, Chief, NGO Section
Closing Session, 56th Annual DPI/NGO Conference

10 September 2003

As Co-chair, together with Fannie Munlin, of the Planning Committee for this Conference, I would like to make a few concluding remarks. I must admit that I have been looking forward to this moment for several days now – the conclusion of a DPI/NGO Conference that is successful enough to send our NGO colleagues home with a rekindled fire in the belly, a renewed commitment to working with the United Nations and some new tools and insights to bring back to your communities and constituencies.

On behalf of all of us here at the United Nations, I want to tell you how important it is to us that the NGO community has dedicated this Conference to the UN staff who risk their lives – indeed, who have lost their lives – while attempting to provide assistance to people in many troubled parts of the world. As Mr. Tharoor, our Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Information, acknowledged at the opening session, your presence here during these troubled and dangerous times is a heartening affirmation that we are not alone even when the going gets very rough. Ambassador Kumalo of South Africa told us yesterday, with heartfelt enthusiasm, how glad he felt on Monday when he saw the long lines outside the building and then found the General Assembly Hall packed to the rafters with NGO colleagues, here to affirm and support the work of the Organization.

Before we head home – or better – before we head to our farewell reception outside on the UN esplanade – I would like to make a few brief observations about this year's Conference, our 56th Conference. I want to comment about shared concerns that are important to us in the Department of Public Information and among your representatives in the NGO DPI Executive Committee and the wonderful Planning Committee that have worked so hard to make these three days unfold as they have.

One of our shared concerns is that this Conference, which has justifiably been described as the premier NGO event at Headquarters each year, be accessible to as many interested NGOs as possible. We have made some important advances in our outreach efforts.

Our policy, as you know, is to invite only those NGOs that are associated with the Department of Public Information or have consultative status with the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council. About 3,000 in total - many more than our Headquarters facilities can handle adequately.

Our speakers have been mercifully sparing with statistics, but let me provide you with the latest numbers from our Conference database. In all, 3,500 representatives of over 700

NGOs from over 100 countries pre-registered for the Conference. Despite financial and safety concerns and increasing difficulties obtaining visas, over 2,000 of you were able to join us this week – a record number. 800 of you have come from developing regions - sixty-five countries in all. That is forty percent of all participants, almost double the proportion from last year alone. We did not think that this was possible and it greatly exceeds our expectations.

Mr. Gianni Picco asked a pointed question to his panelists on Monday: why are people so afraid of diversity? The question had additional poignance as it was posed in the context of a United Nations gathering, a place where diversity is embraced as a founding principal, where new voices are pursued with determination. The Planning Committee worked very hard to identify speakers who would bring new and diverse voices from the frontlines of civil society campaigns around the world. I think we succeeded in reflecting that diversity.

It is also important to note that bringing many of these panelists here was made possible mainly through the fundraising undertaken by the NGO Executive Committee, under the steady and inspired leadership of Joan Levy. One person in particular deserves special thanks for her tireless fundraising efforts. I'd like to recognize Sherrill Kazan from the World Council of Peoples for the United Nations.

This Conference is fundamentally about communications. Most of you are associated with DPI because your organization has a communications capacity that enables you to reach out to your constituencies with information and news about the United Nations in your thematic area. Of necessity, DPI and our NGOs have had to embrace the information technology revolution. And this year, for the first time, we have been able to web cast the plenary proceedings of the entire Conference on the Internet.

The web site includes an interactive component that enables remote viewers to ask questions to our panelists live and to enter into online discussions with people anywhere in the world. For me, one of the thrills of the Conference was the moment the first question came to the moderator on the podium, printed out from an Internet user in Maryland. We want to thank the generous and talented faculty and students of the Art Centre College of Design in Pasadena for designing the interactive web site and the logo of the Conference, which we have used in so many forms. I would also like to thank the students of De Paul University in Chicago who came en masse to serve as rapporteurs for the 31 Midday NGO Workshops that we have enjoyed for the past three days.

You, dear friends, are the final judges of the value of the proceedings of the past three days. I think one of the underlying themes that our speakers repeatedly voiced to the Conference was the need for consultations, for feedback, for guidance in our work from those with whom we interact. It is not an easy task. This feedback is crucial to making our work effective and relevant. It was Mrs. Chenoy talking about education in India who remarked that it is necessary to reach out and consult with all sectors of society, to bring activists together, she said, to link schools to social movements to ensure that education for our young people is not learning for dominating but learning for human rights and

gender rights. We need your feedback: and so I must ask one more time that you take a few minutes now to fill out the green Conference Survey that have been distributed out once again, if you have not already done so.

Finally, I would like to thank Fannie Munlin for the great job she did in guiding this Conference since we began meeting last January. At the final Planning Committee meeting last Thursday, Fannie thanked the Committee members for their dedication, noting that the nine months we had been working on the Conference was like having a baby. She then qualified her remark by noting that she had never actually had a baby. Nevertheless, I want to tell you Fannie, you have certainly delivered!

Thank you.