

STATEMENT BY MR. KIYO AKASAKA
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL
FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION
AT THE OPENING OF THE THIRTY-SECOND SESSION
OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION
MONDAY, 26 APRIL 2010, 10:00 A.M.
Conference Room 2, North Lawn Building

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the annual session of the Committee on Information as you begin your deliberations on “Questions relating to information.”

This is a very important time in the year for the Department of Public Information. Over the next two weeks, this 113-member subsidiary body of the General Assembly will focus almost exclusively on the Department’s policies and programmes. It is an opportunity to raise and discuss existing and new issues and challenges associated with United Nations public information and communications policy. It is an opportunity to plan and look to the future, and to adapt the Organization to an ever-changing world.

Over the years, through this deliberative process, the Department of Public Information has forged a close partnership with this Committee. This partnership has been instrumental in guiding our efforts to provide and disseminate accurate, timely and coherent information in ways that respond to the mandates given by Member States; that meet the demanding requirements of today’s rapidly-evolving communications industry; and that meet the expectations of the global public. It is a partnership that we are proud of. It is also one that we continue to build on, including, for example, through the introduction of more frequent opportunities to engage with you on the issues of the day.

Starting last fall, the Department initiated a new series of conversations with Member States on timely and emerging issues on the UN calendar, as well as in the field of public information and communications. These conversations provide a forum for in-depth exchanges. Our last two forums focused on what we believe is an important issue for all of us - the emerging role of social media - and how Member States and the Department can benefit from the reach and popularity of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The Department of Public Information will continue to organize inter-sessional discussion forums and briefings on our programmes and on emerging issues for Member States. This will include a briefing session in September before the opening of the General Debate of the new session of the General Assembly. As representatives to the Committee on Information, we count on your active participation in these forums and briefings, as well as on your advice and expertise in promoting and expanding the reach of UN public information and communications.

In this regard, I am particularly grateful to the Chairman of the Committee, Ambassador Antonio Lima - and to the other members of the Bureau - for their constant support and encouragement. My colleagues and I greatly value your guidance.

Mr. Chairman,

The General Assembly, in its resolutions 64/96 A and B, requested the Secretary-General to report to the 32nd session of the Committee on Information on the activities of the Department and on the implementation of its recommendations on questions relating to public information. Through consultations with the Bureau of the Committee, it was decided that the information requested in the above resolution would be grouped into the three reports listed in your agenda (A/AC.198/2010/1). These reports, organized according to our sub-programmes, provide an overview of the work and results of the Department.

I would like to take this opportunity to add to the substantial information contained in the reports. I will focus briefly on new initiatives, as well as on current and future challenges. Later

today, at the interactive dialogue with Member States, which will take place in this conference room from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m., you will have a further opportunity to discuss and review different aspects of our work. I encourage all of you, especially those attending the Committee for the first time, to join me and my colleagues in this dialogue.

Mr. Chairman,

It was Albert Einstein who said, “I never think of the future - it comes soon enough.”

For those of us who work in communications, that future arrived with the Internet and new information and communication technologies. The revolution in ICTs and the availability of cheap mobile phones around the world have changed not only how we communicate – but who can communicate. Today, almost anyone, anywhere, can create, receive, and share messages with people near and far. It is essential for the United Nations to keep pace with these new technologies, and to take advantage of them in ways that enrich and complement our work in traditional media – print, radio and television. Traditional means of communication continue to be the primary and dominant tools for the Department to disseminate public information about the United Nations to millions of people, including to those with limited or no access to the Internet. Our Creative Community Outreach Initiative, for example, is designed specifically to engage the film and television entertainment industry to help raise awareness and mobilize the public around the Organization’s priority issues.

I hope that many of you have had a chance to see the special feature on new media in the April edition of our publication, Africa Renewal. The feature looks at how Africans are putting new technologies to use, including for political participation. I should mention that Africa Renewal itself makes use of Twitter to inform its followers around the world about the latest political and economic developments in Africa.

Allow me to provide a few examples of how the Department is embracing new media and ICTs to maximize our outreach, and to inform and engage new audiences around the world, especially young people.

- The Department – both at Headquarters and in the field – is making increasing use of social media tools such as Facebook in implementing communications campaigns on issues ranging from MDGs, to climate change, to ending violence against women.
- The UNIC network uses Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts in multiple languages to disseminate UN information. Over 10,000 followers on Twitter receive daily updates of various press releases, news stories, and media alerts from around the UN system.
- The mobile version of the UN News Centre portal in Russian has become one of the top 10 visited segments on the Russian-language version of the UN website. Almost 85 per cent of the total mobile page views on the UN News Centre site are accessed from China.
- Smart phone applications are being introduced for key UN documents and publications, including the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and United Nations Today.
- The successful online video contest launched last year on YouTube – the Citizen Ambassadors to the United Nations campaign – will be held again this year with a mobilization on the Millennium Development Goals and the MDG summit in September.
- The Holocaust and the United Nations outreach programme has a Twitter campaign that invites young people to imagine what they would have tweeted to Anne Frank while she and her family were in hiding from the Nazis.
- And the Department’s media accreditation and liaison operation is increasingly using Twitter to inform and update journalists about key events at the UN.

The Department is also applying new technologies as part of our continuous efforts to modernize our programmes and systems. Here are some examples:

- Digital print-on-demand, now being discussed with companies in South Africa and India, will eventually allow the efficient and environmentally sound global distribution of DPI print products.
- On-line collaboration tools and applications, like the Centres Information Management System that we have developed, will make it easier to collect data and share information from UNICs, reducing time and the potential for error in the process.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department remains committed to promoting multilingualism at the United Nations. A separate report of the Secretary-General on multilingualism provides information on activities undertaken by the Department on this issue.

I would like, however, to flag a new initiative aimed not only at promoting the use of the six official languages at the United Nations, but also at recognising and celebrating our rich cultural diversity and multilingual skills and talents. Earlier this year, the Department launched “Language Days at the United Nations” to celebrate each of the official languages at UN duty stations worldwide. The aim of the designated days is to educate, inform, and entertain, with the goal of increasing awareness and respect for the history, culture and achievements of each of the official languages. I am sure that many of you took part in our information fairs, film screenings, and other events organized for French Language Day at the UN, which was held on March 20th and for English Language Day at the UN, which was observed last Friday – on Shakespeare’s birthday. Russian Language Day, which falls on 6 June – the birthday of the great Russian poet, Pushkin, is next on our calendar. We count on this Committee, and on Member States, to join and support us in finding ways to enrich and enliven our multilingualism agenda, particularly in the context of the 2010 International Year of Rapprochement of Cultures.

Mr. Chairman,

I have stressed on numerous occasions the importance I place on the evaluation of the work of the Department. Measuring the effectiveness of our products and collecting feedback from our audiences are fundamental aspects of our programmes.

In the light of increased Internet-based communications, we have redoubled our efforts to evaluate our online presence. For example, we conducted an assessment of the Secretary-General's "We Must Disarm" online campaign. The assessment showed that using social media was effective in driving traffic to the official UN Peace Day website. A closer look at the campaign audience, however, revealed that most users were based in the United States. In order to diversify the range of social media outlets we use, and to ensure the involvement of people from all regions in our online campaigns, we have asked UN Information Centres to identify local social media tools as a step towards building more inclusive online communities.

Meanwhile, we were encouraged by a recent survey of UN Country Teams that showed that our efforts towards improving joint communications strategies across the UN system appear to be yielding positive results. Based on the survey findings, we are increasing our efforts to provide country-level UN Communication Groups with the tools they need to further develop joint activities. In June, when the principals of the UN Communications Group meet in Shanghai for their 9th annual meeting, concrete steps to bolster UN communications at the national and regional levels are expected to be adopted.

Mr. Chairman,

I am delighted to share some good news with you. Members of this Committee are aware of the long-standing General Assembly request to establish a United Nations information centre in Luanda to address the needs of Portuguese-speaking African countries. Last December, the General Assembly agreed to allocate funds to establish such a centre. The Department is discussing the practical implementation of that decision with the Government of Angola, including through the Permanent Mission of Angola in New York. We will continue to work with the Mission to move this process forward. We expect UNIC Luanda to play an important role in disseminating information about the UN in the Portuguese language, particularly to the

four other Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa. We are especially honoured that the Minister of Social Communications of the Republic of Angola, H.E. Ms. Carolina Cerqueira, has travelled to New York to attend this opening session of the Committee.

While the establishment of UNIC Luanda is good news, I regret to say that the overall financial situation of our network of UN Information Centres is less than positive. This time, one year ago, I appealed to those Member States that host a UN information centre to consider either providing the UNIC with rent-free premises or subsidizing its rent. I am compelled to repeat that appeal. This year, however, the situation has become more acute, as several UNICs are in the process of relocating to new premises. Although security concerns are driving most of the relocations, despite the strain on our budget, we welcome the opportunity for UNICs to move to premises shared with other members of the UN Country Team, as it enhances the communications and public information role played by UNICs. Since such moves usually mean considerably higher costs for rent, maintenance and common services, the support of Member States for the centres they host is vital. In this regard, let me take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the many countries that do provide generous contributions and ongoing support to our field offices.

A final word on resources: The Department is determined to make the most strategic use of our available resources. I'm afraid to say, however, that new and additional mandates, when unmatched by accompanying additional resources, place a heavy burden on the Department. We will do our best to comply and meet your and the public's expectations, but, frankly speaking, every unsupported new mandate will mean taking away resources from some of our existing programmes.

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,

The Committee on Information and the Department of Public Information are linked by a common goal and a common purpose. We are both committed to making the world better aware of the role and relevance of the United Nations in today's world. We are also on the frontline of

developing and defending UN public information and communications policy. Part of our mission, individually and collectively, is the strong support for freedom of the press and freedom of information. I hope that all of you will participate in the event organized by the Department on Thursday, the 29th of April, on the occasion of this year's World Press Freedom Day. This is an important part of our mandate that requires our constant vigilance.

My colleagues and I look forward to our work together in the weeks ahead.

Thank you.