

## **Opening Statement by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Interim Head of the Department of Public Information (30 April 2001)**

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to address the Committee on Information as it begins its twenty-third session. As you are aware, the Secretary-General has asked me to serve as the Interim Head of the Department of Public Information, following the departure of my distinguished predecessor, Under-Secretary-General Kensaku Hogen. I know that you join me in expressing appreciation for Mr. Hogen's leadership of the Department of Public Information. We shall all benefit from the excellent work that he did during his three years in the post.

I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the newly-elected Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Milos Alcalay, and the members of the Bureau. I have every confidence that under Ambassador Alcalay's able guidance, the Committee will make even more progress towards helping the Department accomplish its important mission. I would like to thank the Ambassador for the kind words addressed to me. My colleagues in the Department of Public Information and I very much look forward to working with the Committee, its Bureau, and you, Sir, to help make this a productive session. Allow me also to pay tribute to the outgoing Chairman, Mr. Elhassane Zahid, as well as to the other members of the Bureau for their efforts on behalf of the Department of Public Information which have led to the further strengthening of the spirit of cooperation between the Committee and the Department in pursuit of our common objectives.

I would like first to inform the Committee that in observance of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, the Department of Public Information is organizing an event with the theme "Fighting Racism and promoting diversity: the role of the free press" at 10 a.m. in this conference room. The observance has been planned to coincide with this session of the Committee on Information, and as the Chairman has just informed you, the Secretary-General will address it. I have invited the Chairman of the Committee to address the observance, and would like to invite all of you to attend.

Mr. Chairman,

Last year, the Committee took the initiative to revise its agenda, by adding a new item, which allowed for an in-depth consideration of the Secretary-General's reports before it. I believe we can all agree that this was most useful, in that it provided a good opportunity for more discussion of the issues between the Committee and the Department. Also, I am told that the past session was characterized by an excellent cooperative relationship among delegations. And, I believe that overall there was a more positive assessment by Member States of the work of the Department, for which we are both grateful and encouraged. I trust that this year's session will generate the same kind of innovation and support, allowing us to work together closely to spread the message of the United Nations with more vigor and purpose.

For my part, with your support and guidance I will strive to improve the Department's efficiency and outreach with the objective to "energizing", rather than restructuring, our work. I have made a modest beginning in this direction over the last three months and I look forward to achieving further progress in the months ahead. When I began my assignment in the Department of Public Information, I convened a "town hall" meeting to talk with all the staff of the Department, and have also visited virtually every one of them in their offices, to see how the work of this Department is being done. From what I have seen, I believe that the Department should be proud of what it is achieving in the face of limited resources, especially in relation to the proliferation of mandated priorities, which make up the Organization's work programme.

An overview of the wide range of the Department of Public Information's activities is included in the comprehensive report of the Secretary-General entitled "Reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications" (A/AC.198/2001/2), which you have before you at this session. In it, we have highlighted our most recent efforts to further develop the conceptual framework and operational priorities for the reorientation of United Nations information and communications policies, aiming to develop a culture of communications throughout the Organization. Seven other reports have also been prepared, as called for by the General Assembly, on specific subjects such as the innovative pilot radio project, the ongoing work of the United Nations information centres, the United Nations Web site, and the information campaign for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. These reports were all available well in advance of our session this year, and I trust they will be particularly useful in your deliberations, as they offer a detailed picture of the Department's day-to-day activities at Headquarters and in the field, in some of the main areas of our work.

Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to briefly outline what we believe to be our principal mission, and highlight some of our current priorities, both for 2001 and beyond.

The primary objective of the Department's public information programme — to build broad-based global support for the work of the United Nations — goes back to resolution 13(I) of 1946 and again, is clearly articulated in the medium-term plan for 2002-2005, approved by the General Assembly this past December.

The Millennium Summit and Assembly have reaffirmed that the United Nations is "the indispensable common house of the entire human family". The world's leaders have called for the Organization to live up to the faith being placed in it — by achieving clear and measurable results. At the same time, the Secretary-General has underscored, and certainly everyone in this room would agree, that the challenges and substantive goals of the United Nations cannot be attained without garnering public support for the Organization through our efforts to create an "informed understanding" of the Organization's work and purposes. How can we possibly hope to succeed with our global campaign to eradicate poverty, for instance, without mobilizing public support, both in donor countries and amongst the poor? How can United

Nations peacekeeping efforts be successful without an accompanying information programme, including in the mission area, to explain to people what we are trying to do?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the communications revolution has opened up enormous possibilities for the Department of Public Information. This is especially important to our priority effort to provide developing countries with immediate access to news developments from the United Nations worldwide. At the heart of this effort are our daily 15-minute news bulletins in the six official languages which, since September, are being broadcast by hundreds of radio stations. In addition, building on our very popular United Nations News Centre on the Web, we will soon launch a regionally-oriented news service which will carry news of United Nations developments directly to thousands of journalists in every region of the world. I should also mention that, as part of this effort to reach journalists in developing countries, we have also initiated a series of high-level briefing programmes with the generous support of the Government of Japan. Fifteen journalists from Africa participated in the first such programme last year, and another 15 from Asia will be here later this month.

We can now provide news of the Organization to every corner of the world in an instant. We have the will and the expertise to do this, but a financial investment will need to be made if we are indeed serious about modernizing our communications infrastructure.

Mr. Chairman,

I do believe it is useful to look at the work of the Department with a fresh eye, and I am doing that. At the same time, I want to stress that the Secretary-General has not sent me to the Department of Public Information to wield an axe. I am struck by the fact that the Department has lost 103 posts since the 1992-1993 biennium B over 12 per cent of its total strength. At the same time, the Department has been asked to do more, and despite the reduction in staff, we are delivering. I believe we must now focus on what the Department of Public Information must do, how it must do it, and with what resources.

The Department of Public Information will continue to disseminate timely, comprehensive, balanced and reliable information through print, audio-visual and Internet media, and to maintain a world-class library system. We are developing effective advocacy campaigns in support of General Assembly objectives. We will partner with the agencies and programmes of the United Nations system, and with key redisseminators, including the media and civil society, including non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and the private sector. A key example of this approach is "The UN Works" programme, developed by the Department, to demonstrate to people around the world how the Organization is working to help solve the problems of the twenty-first century, in particular those relating to economic and social development. And, of course, we have this programme on the Web as well.

To enhance the lines of communication and help circulate ideas freely within the Department, I have created a "senior leadership team", composed of our Directors and other senior staff, who meet every day in my office to formulate strategies and exchange information. At the same time, the Department is actively collaborating with many other areas of the United Nations. First and foremost, we work with the other substantive departments in the

Secretariat, both at Headquarters, and at United Nations Offices in Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna on a daily basis to further develop our "client orientation" and help them formulate their messages in order to realize their mandates. This coordination is a very high priority of the Secretary-General, and consequently, I have continued to convene the Communications Group, which regularly brings to the table United Nations system colleagues tasked with communicating the United Nations story to the outside world. The Department is in contact continually with these system partners to maximize outreach, avoid duplication, and better focus the Organization's message. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Activities of the Joint United Nations Information Committee in 2000" (A/AC.198/2001/9) on the activities of JUNIC in 2000, the Department will continue to play an active role within this Committee, especially this year when this subsidiary organ of the Administrative Committee on Coordination is reviewing its processes with a view to strengthening capacities for inter-agency dialogue.

I can assure the members of this Committee that we are continuing to respond to the General Assembly's call to maintain and improve our activities in the areas of special needs to developing countries, as, for example, in the work of our information centres, in the strengthened media outreach and training programmes for the media from developing countries, and through the Internet-related training seminars we organize.

In addition, to cover the work of the main organs of the United Nations, the Department is publicizing seven major international conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly to take place this year. The objective will be to demonstrate that these are not "talk fests", but action-oriented gatherings which will provide tangible results for the world's people. The Department is, for example, taking a very proactive role in the Third International Conference on the Least Developed Countries, being held in May in Brussels. However, I must point out that additional resources will be necessary to effectively carry out the information campaigns for these conferences and special sessions. We are giving this matter priority attention and count on your support as we seek the required funding.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department began to reorient its work over four years ago, and we have made real progress towards creating a culture of communications within the Organization. As to the future, and the next biennium, the Department will use as its road map the medium-term plan, which was the basis for our submission to the programme budget for 2002-2003. We will make a conference room paper outlining the programmatic aspects of this submission available to the Committee during this session. I have taken small steps to adjust the allocation of staff resources within the Department and will constantly be on the lookout for opportunities to rationalize our staffing and put resources where they are most needed. I have also insisted on efficiency and accountability in our daily work. I am pleased to say that the staff of the Department have responded very positively. I hope to hold a second meeting with all the staff of the Department following the conclusion of this Committee's session to share with them your sense of how the Department is doing and where it should be going.

The challenge now for the Department of Public Information is to translate "reorientation" into "modernization" — in other words how to translate a "process" and an "approach" into a detailed blueprint for better serving the "We the peoples" of the United Nations Charter in the twenty-first century. The Department will work to ensure that the information and communications function will continue to be placed at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization and that the imperative of communications infuses the Organization's policy-making. The Secretary-General has already invited me to address his Senior Management Group at the end of May, following the conclusion of this Committee's deliberations, on the "Information Challenge". We will draw from the past to document and disseminate accurate and timely information about United Nations achievements, experiences and lessons learned. At the same time, we will reflect the present, to provide timely news and spread the words and images of the Organization, using the best available technology. The Department will also look at the future, to foster an awareness of the global challenges to the peace and well-being of our world, as well as to the role the United Nations can play in making it a better place for the generations to come.

We will continue to work, I assure you, to project an open, transparent Organization, which the Secretary-General has worked hard to achieve, and which is a change now being recognized by many members of the world press.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department's embrace of new technology in all areas of its work will become even more critical to its success in the future. The overall goal is to develop an infrastructure capable of developing instantaneous transmission of text, image, and voice messages from the Organization to the world at large. The Department will continue to work to strengthen the United Nations web site as a major communications tool to enable hundreds of millions of people to directly access information about the United Nations. In this connection, guidelines will soon be officially issued as an administrative instruction, which will help coordinate this Internet effort, as called for by this Committee. Photocopies of the text of these guidelines are available in the back of the conference room. Furthermore, Committee members have traditionally praised the resources and services of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, and I would like to assure you that these will continue and be enhanced for Member States as well as for other users of the Library.

However, I would like to assure you that our increased use of electronic media will not be at the expense of the traditional means of dissemination. We have taken good note of your statement this morning regarding the bridging of the digital divide. Our publications programme will remain vital, and multilingual, resources permitting. Likewise, library resources in print formats will also be acquired, to meet the needs of Member States and staff. Strides will continue to be made in radio broadcasting, clear evidence of which is the success of the pilot project for direct international radio broadcasting, as outlined in the Secretary-General's report entitled "Progress report on the implementation of the pilot project on the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations" (A/AC.198/2001/7).

Our information centres, services and United Nations offices will continue to present the work and achievements of the United Nations to local audiences around the world, and their means of outreach will continue to be creative and diversified, based on their knowledge gained in their respective areas, and local needs.

The Department will continue to face challenges regarding resource availability and resource allocation. The Department of Public Information represents 5 per cent of the United Nations budget with 428 staff at Headquarters and 307 in the field. It is one of the larger Departments of the Secretariat and, like any administrative entity, there must be periodic self-assessment, evaluation, and fine-tuning to maximize use of our staff and programme resources as part of a results-oriented approach. We will strive to focus our work as sharply as possible, so that we do not spread ourselves "too thin", thereby reducing the impact of the United Nations' message. We will try to ensure that there is efficiency and no waste. To accomplish this, we must have clear mandates to work with. With the help of the Committee on Information, we will be able to better prioritize the competing items on our work programme.

Distinguished delegates,

You will have noticed that in the Secretary-General's report on the "Equitable disbursement of resources to United Nations information centres" (A/AC.198/2001/5), he appeals to Member States to provide rent-free or rent-subsidized office space for United Nations' information centres in developed countries, and to assist through cash contributions for information services. The proportion of our resources being spent on rent in the developed world has become unconscionable. I would hope that the Committee will endorse this request of the Secretary-General, and that the Member States concerned will see their way to easing this burden on our slender resources. Any savings resulting from such an exercise can be directed to improve the quality and reach of the services we provide in developing countries. Using the report I mentioned above as a foundation on which to build, I also intend to carefully review the overall allocation of resources to United Nations information centres, as requested by the General Assembly, with a view to maximizing the effectiveness of these offices, while maintaining, in particular, their reach in the developing world. Once again, I look forward to the support of Member States in this regard.

The Department's goal is to live up to its familiar initials, if I may challenge some of our interpreters here — DPI — through making a difference by promoting the United Nations and influencing world opinion. We will be dynamic in our work, pro-active in our methods, and interesting in our outputs. I believe that we are on the right track. However, in the wise words of the American humorist, Will Rogers, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there". I can assure you that the Department of Public Information is not "just sitting there" and, with the Committee's views to give us guidance and hold us to the highest standards, we will move ahead rapidly on the right track.

I look forward to hearing the views and receiving the guidance of the distinguished members of this Committee under your able leadership.

Thank you.

