

Closing remarks by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Interim Head of the Department of Public Information (24 April 2002)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,

I would like to express my appreciation to all the delegations who have spoken during this general debate for their kind words on the work of the Department, and to add my voice of welcome to yours, Mr. Chairman, for the contributions of our two newest Member States, Azerbaijan and Monaco, today. I was particularly encouraged by the support that so many of you have generously expressed for my leadership of the Department. Your endorsement of the broad thrust of the Secretary-General's Report on the Reorientation of UN activities in the field of public information and communications, as well as your general support for the remarks in my opening statement, will motivate my colleagues and me to continue our efforts to enhance United Nations public information and communications work.

My entire opening statement was devoted to the comprehensive review of the Department, as outlined in the Secretary-General's Report, which requested the Committee on Information to give general guidance and direction for the work of the Department. Through your statements in the general debate, you have provided us with a good understanding of your thinking on the direction in which the Secretary-General hopes to take the Department. The general debate has been characterized by insightful and constructive remarks by delegations. I have listened with great interest to your statements, and would now like to offer some further clarifications in connection with the issues and specific questions you have raised. I apologize that the extensive nature of the issues raised by distinguished delegates in this debate obliges me to respond at some length. We will try to have my remarks transcribed and available in this room during the course of the afternoon.

Mr. Chairman,

I have heard many delegations commend the Department's new focus on performance management as an important tool to measure and prioritize our activities, with a view to evaluating their public impact and ensuring that we have a tool to help us judge better what we are doing and whether we should continue doing it.

It was heartening to hear the general views expressed by delegations that a transformed Department was essential to advance the goals of the Millennium Declaration, and that a clear relationship should be established between the Secretary-General's road map for the Millennium Development goals and the programmes of the Department.

Monsieur le Président,

J'ai noté avec plaisir que la plupart des délégations ont accueilli favorablement la nouvelle définition proposée pour notre mission qui met l'accent sur l'information la plus large possible des peuples du monde. Mais j'ai également noté, comme l'a éloquentement exprimé le Représentant permanent du Bénin, l'importance pour le Département de continuer de traiter

les délégations comme l'un de ses publics cibles, et de leur assurer les meilleurs services d'information possible. J'ai bien pris note, Monsieur le Représentant permanent, de ce que vous avez dit, et je le prends très au sérieux.

Practically all delegations, most recently the representative of the United Republic of Tanzania this morning, stressed that the United Nations should work to bridge the digital divide between the developed and developing countries and contribute to ensuring that the global information and technology revolution benefits the developing countries. In particular, the distinguished delegate of Venezuela on behalf of the G-77 and China, as well as Tunisia, underscored the importance of the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society and called for DPI to play a role in promoting it. I am pleased to report that the Secretary-General shares this view, and the Department is currently discussing ways and means to become more actively involved in the preparatory work for this event.

I would like to address several issues which delegations raised with regard to the Department's advocacy and outreach activities. Spain, on behalf of the European Union, requested clarification on the coordination and common strategies between the DPI and DPKO to strengthen the capacity of information components in UN peacekeeping operations. The distinguished delegate of the United States raised a related issue, pertaining to DPI's request for additional resources from the support account for peacekeeping, to provide information support to peacekeeping operations.

With a view to implementing the Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations, known as the Brahimi Report, issued in August 2000, DPI and DPKO agreed in May 2001 on the division of responsibilities in strengthening the Secretariat's capacity to provide planning and operational support to information components of peacekeeping operations. DPI is now given the primary responsibility in 12 areas, mostly in pre-mission planning and promotional activities, while DPKO is given the primary responsibility in eight areas, mostly dealing with the management of ongoing peacekeeping operations, with the two Departments sharing an equal responsibility in one area, the facilitation of media coverage of peacekeeping operations. On this basis, DPKO sought additional posts from the support account to perform these functions.

However, the ACABQ recommended last year that DPI, and not DPKO, should have a dedicated technical unit to perform the information support functions. On this basis, DPI concluded that as the public information support for peacekeeping operations would be part of its Peace and Security Section, it would suffice to have two additional Professional posts, far fewer than had been requested by DPKO. This Section, despite the small size of its staff, has been carrying out a wide range of activities, which are described in the Secretary-General's Report on the role of DPI in UN peacekeeping. It is, however, simply unable to dedicate staff resources to field information support. Should DPI not be provided with these two additional posts, its ability to provide information support would remain limited and insufficient, as it is now. The report of the Secretary-General on the role of DPI in UN peacekeeping describes the rationale for our request, which is currently before the ACABQ.

In the implementation of the Brahimi Report, DPI has already been working closely with DPKO. For instance, just last week, DPI worked with DPKO in handling the decision of the

Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission. We are also working closely with DPKO and UNTAET to publicize the successful work of the UN in East Timor, to culminate with the independence of the Territory on 20 May. These are just two current examples of our collaboration with DPKO.

The distinguished delegates of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria and Yemen stressed the importance of the special information programme on the Question of Palestine. I wish to reassure them that the Department, at this time of tragedy and turmoil in the Middle East, is devoting high priority to this question. Within the framework of its special information programme, the Department is organizing an international media seminar in Copenhagen next month in cooperation with the Danish Foreign Ministry. Through this seminar, we hope to make our own contribution to the process of constructive dialogue, without which no durable peace can be established in the Middle East.

We appreciate your support for the promotional campaigns developed by the Department for conferences and special sessions. In this regard, the Permanent Representative of Jamaica, on behalf of the CARICOM, gave us a timely reminder of the need for the department to develop a programme to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the convention on the Law of the Sea.

Many members of the Committee have expressed their continuing support for the programme for Broadcasters and Journalists from Developing Countries. Several have recommended that this programme be strengthened in light of its usefulness in helping to reduce the existing disparities in information flows between developing and developed countries. The Department welcomes this and will strive to see that adequate support and resources continue to be devoted to this programme. We acknowledge that, as a result of the fact that the resources allocated to this programme have remained stagnant, while the costs of running the programme have risen, the Department has found it necessary to decrease the number of participants each year, a process that will at some stage need to be arrested.

The Department would also like to acknowledge the favourable comments made by several delegations, including the distinguished representatives from Jamaica and the Republic of Korea, regarding its outreach activities, including exhibits, special events, and guided tours, noting that while they primarily serve the public at Headquarters, these activities yield intangible benefits for the Organization. The permanent representative of Jamaica has also noted that increasing the number of exhibits that travel to venues beyond Headquarters will allow us to maximize their value as a communications tool and reach even wider audiences.

I also welcome the affirmation by many delegations of the vital importance of the freedom of the press in today's world. I look forward to seeing all of you at our commemoration of World Press Freedom Day on 2 May in this room.

Mr. Chairman,

Many delegations have stressed the vital role which UNICs play as the voice of the United Nations in the field, and called for this role to be strengthened. In this regard, I wish to thank

all those who expressed their appreciation for the work of information centres located in their countries, in particular the eloquent commentary we have just heard from the distinguished delegate of Ghana.

The distinguished representative of Japan recalled that 35 per cent of the Department's budget is used for the global network of UNICs, and he welcomed their proposed review. I wish to point out that included in this portion of the budget is also the budgets of the UN Information Services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna as well as in the regional commissions.

I would also like to thank the distinguished representative of the United States for his delegation's support for the ideas raised in the report of the Secretary-General with regard to the information centres. With regard to his statement concerning services to "120 countries that do not currently host information centres", I wish to clarify that the 77 DPI branch offices around the world serve 153 countries. Additionally, DPI distributes UN information materials to all UNDP offices in the field, as well as to all UN peacekeeping missions around the world.

The distinguished representative of the Russian Federation referred to the extensive efforts of UNIC Moscow in translating DPI materials into Russian, while the Deputy Permanent Representative of Mexico referred to the excellent work of UNIC Mexico City in translating DPI materials into Spanish. These, and a number of other centres, provide quality translations of public information materials for dissemination to other field offices, and for posting on the web. UNICs Cairo and Mexico City have been particularly helpful in providing materials in Arabic and Spanish, respectively, while UNICs Bonn and Lisbon have been reliable partners in providing German and Portuguese translations for use by other field offices in countries where these languages are spoken. I should like to thank the delegate of Indonesia for expressing appreciation for our Monday briefing on the work of UNICs Islamabad and Dakar, which illustrated the range and variety of efforts undertaken by the Department.

I wish to reassure the distinguished representative of Bangladesh that I am fully aware of the strong desire of his Government to restore the post of Director to UNIC Dhaka. I will bear his Government's views in mind as I continue to review the allocation of posts to UNICs in the context of the ongoing review of the network of UN information centres.

The Permanent Representative of Jamaica called for the establishment of an enhanced information component in Kingston. I wish to reassure her that the Department is convinced of the need to outpost an Information Assistant in Kingston to serve as a liaison and, with the support of UNIC Port-of-Spain, act as a focal point for the information activities of the UN offices in Jamaica. Practical arrangements to implement our plan will be made in consultation with the host government.

Several speakers referred, in particular, to the possibility of redirecting resources from UN information centres in those developed countries where the rental costs of premises are exceptionally high, to other priority areas, including to Centres in developing countries. This is an option which I intend to study further as part of the comprehensive review, but I should point out that measurable action on this question will take time to implement, in view of the

existing contractual and lease agreements. In this connection, allow me also to take this opportunity to thank those delegations who expressed support for the Secretary-General's call to all Member States to provide rent-free or rent-subsidized premises. The Committee endorsed this call in its draft resolution last year, and I hope you will do so again this year.

I will also explore further the possibility of establishing regional hubs, in which the majority of delegations who addressed this subject, expressed positive interest.

Mr. Chairman,

Almost all speakers have commented favourably on the United Nations website, and its enhanced multilingual character. As some of you have noted, many new documents have been added to the site over the past year. The first phase of the test to directly link to parliamentary documents has been successfully undertaken with the second phase to begin shortly. However, I do need to point out that while linking the English documents has been rendered somewhat easier by the direct linkage, the amount of work necessary to make these documents available in the other languages has not changed substantially. They still need to be accessed on the ODS to retrieve subject and title information before the link can be made.

Some delegations have commented on the possibility of utilizing high quality external assistance in translating pertinent material for the website. This is a valuable process, but needs to be undertaken with a degree of caution. As we informed you in the informal briefing on Monday, we have received over 900 pages of translations into Spanish from the University of Salamanca in Spain. I would draw your attention to the fact that we have been able to process these pro bono translated pages only because we had the benefit of the Associate Expert provided by the generosity of the Government of Spain. Without the benefit of similar staff assistance, it will be difficult to proceed with similar arrangements with the other languages, since it is not only an issue of translation, but of having the staff resources to upload, post and update the information.

Several delegates, notably Kazakhstan today and China yesterday, addressed the need to more rapidly achieve linguistic parity on the web site among the six official languages. The delegate of China suggested that the structure of the web site operation be adjusted by dedicating separate language units for each official language. This option deserves further study. However, as indicated in the Secretary-General's report on the website, such an approach would require additional resources. For example, when the decision was taken to produce UN documentation in all official languages, the General Assembly made the necessary provisions to establish dedicated translation services. No such provision has been made for website operations.

The distinguished representative of Guyana has referred to the web site of UNIC Port-of-Spain. As she correctly noted, this site is currently under construction, and we expect it to become operational in the very near future, adding to the outreach of that Centre to the audiences in that region.

I should like to thank the Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan for his intervention this morning and to repeat in public the regrets already conveyed directly to his delegation on the subject of an error on the website relating to his country. DPI will do its best to improve the quality control of its outputs at all levels.

A number of speakers have indicated the importance they attach to DPI's continuing to maintain the traditional means of distribution – print, radio and television, while pursuing the use of new technologies. In looking to the future, it appears that many developing countries are proceeding towards increasing their use of new technology, especially the Internet as a means of communication. In the case of the traditional media we do have to rely on redisseminators who have their own policies on information dissemination. As such, the final shape of the information is beyond our control. For example, we can "sell" a story to a journalist, but cannot control whether it is actually published by his editor. In the case of the Internet, access to the user is direct, with no intermediary involved. Hence the Internet is seen as much more than merely the convergence of the three traditional media formats. We will continue to keep on top of the trends and attempt to reallocate resources when possible, with the guidance of Member States.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department notes the strong endorsement from a number of delegations for the maintenance, and the possible enhancement, of DPI press releases in English and French, a service that is seen as particularly important to developing country delegations and, as we heard from Monaco this morning, not only to developing countries. As noted in the Secretary-General's report on reorientation, this is a resource question on which we are seeking the guidance of the Committee and of the General Assembly.

The Department also notes the appreciation expressed for the enhancement of the UN News Centre and development of the e-mail news service. I should add here that this latter service is not directed principally to the person on the street, but to the mass media. In researching this audience base, we confirmed that the mass media in virtually every developing country does use e-mail. In the context of the many calls to enhance the multilingual nature of the UN web site, let me assure you that the Department is currently engaged in developing news sites in all official languages with a view to launching them in the course of this year, and is committed to their widest possible use in all regions of the world.

Monsieur le Président,

Je remercie le distingué Représentant permanent du Monaco pour ses remarques ce matin dans lesquels ils nous a rappelé que l'effort de revitalisation du Département, dans le domaine de l'information se doit, plus que jamais, tenir compte de la diversité et de la richesse culturelle de nos nations en continuant, dans cette perspective, à promouvoir et à renforcer le multilinguisme. J'aimerais assurer le Représentant permanent que le multilinguisme dans l'information est une question prioritaire pour le Département et pour moi personnellement. Je sais qu'il aurait beaucoup apprécié la présentation informelle offerte par le

Département aux membres du Comité lundi après-midi au cours duquel mes collègues ont parlé dans toutes les six langues officielles de l'Organisation!

Where radio is concerned, we are particularly gratified to hear words of encouragement and support from several delegations regarding the live radio project. We are making every effort to improve the content and substance of the broadcasts in six official languages. In this context, I would like to express our sincere thanks to all those delegations who have graciously accorded timely interviews to our radio producers on a variety of issues. By doing so you have helped us to craft the content of the messages and information you, the Member States, would like us to convey and share with our listeners. We look forward to working in this way with many more of you in the future.

In terms of the impact of the broadcasts, I want to assure the Committee that we continue to request our partner stations to provide us with detailed surveys and feedback that will assist us in preparing a comprehensive report for your review at next year's session. While we are making efforts to assess the size of our radio audiences in various regions, I would like to point out that the major broadcasters who carry our programme — such as National China Radio, Voice of Cairo, Radio Nigeria, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Caracas, to mention just five — reach tens of millions of listeners every day. We heard the delegate of Nigeria inform us that the UN Radio programme in his country reaches 50 million listeners.

The distinguished representative of Jamaica, speaking on behalf of CARICOM, pointed out that an assessment of the live radio programmes should be based not only in terms of the numbers of active listeners, but on the effect that these programmes have in the regions. I thank the distinguished representative for that insightful observation — it is a point of view shared by the department. We are conscious that as an organization of Member States, a numerically small audience in a dozen different countries is as important as an audience of millions in just one country.

The representative of Jamaica has also called for more programmes with a Caribbean focus to complement what is already being carried in the live radio broadcasts. In this regard, I wish to inform her that every Friday, the Caribbean Unit of the Radio Section produces and sends to the region, through the Caribbean media corporation, or directly to individual stations in that part of the world, a 15-minute Caribbean news round-up magazine programme. The contents of the programme focus specifically on Caribbean issues targeted to the peoples of the region. We will do all we can to sustain this programme and, whenever financial and human resources permit, to produce other programmes for the region.

On the question of introducing radio programming in Creole for Haiti, I would like to assure the distinguished delegate from Jamaica that ever since resolution 38/82b of 15 December 1983 was adopted, the radio section has made every effort to fulfill its obligations in that respect. In fact, under a special service agreement we now have a producer who comes in every week to produce a 15-minute French/Creole programme for Haiti, but which is also distributed to a number of other stations in the region. I only regret that we did not inform the Caribbean delegates earlier that we had initiated such a programme. You see we are not as

good at blowing our own Department's trumpet as we try to be in publicizing the work of the Organization as a whole.

We take note of the suggestion of the distinguished representative of Bangladesh regarding the rescheduling of the live broadcast time in Asia to the convenience of the larger audience. We will explore that possibility.

The distinguished delegate of Belarus, in his intervention, expressed a desire to see the live radio broadcasts are used to focus on and provide information on such issues as AIDS, Chernobyl, disarmament, terrorism and children. The Department is pleased to inform the delegation of Belarus that within the last year, for example, the Russian programming unit in Radio produced a total of 18 special feature programmes on Chernobyl alone, and 23 features on the subject of HIV/AIDS. The latter subject was also covered 42 times in the daily news segment of the Russian news programmes. And it is certain that the coverage of all these issues will continue to be given prominence in these broadcasts.

On TV, the distinguished delegate from Spain, on behalf of the EU, proposed that the Secretary-General consider launching a feasibility study for a global TV satellite network, an intriguing proposal which we would certainly wish to explore within the obvious constraints of financial and staff resources, from which we suffer. Unless we are able to mobilize such resources from external partners, I regret that such an idea may not be feasible for DPI to implement. However, I am encouraged that this proposal has been made by the EU, since the Western Group is in the best position to help us find the financial and staff resources required for such an initiative.

Mr. Chairman,

Several delegations referred, in their statements, to the Department's flagship publications, namely, the Yearbook of the United Nations and the United Nations Chronicle. The complimentary remarks by the representatives of India, Jamaica on behalf of CARICOM and the United States regarding the quality and usefulness of the Yearbook are greatly appreciated. Such comments lead me to conclude that Member States find value and utility in what is the only authoritative reference work on the Organization and that they want the Department to continue to issue the Yearbook, irrespective of the cost involved in its production. If my understanding is accurate, I trust that, as in the past, you might find it possible to reflect this in your draft resolution.

Concerning the Chronicle, we appreciate one delegation's description of the publication as "a stimulating and thought-provoking publication and as a platform for intellectual discourse on a wide variety of issues currently engaging attention of the international community", a view echoed by another delegation's categorization of the journal as a valuable reference and information tool for the wider public. I have received similar comments from others; last week a distinguished Canadian Senator, who is also a professor, told me the Chronicle is a vital tool for his graduate students and for those in the Senate.

The United States called for a close look at the Chronicle to ascertain whether the professional time and other costs involved in its production were justified in relation to its readership and impact, given that the magazine generally contains information that readers can easily find elsewhere, and also whether the human and financial resources should not be reprogrammed towards other DPI activities, such as enhancing the multilingual nature of the UN web site.

It has been stated, but bears repeating, that the impact and readership of the Chronicle are far greater than the subscriber base of 9,000 readers would indicate. Because many of the subscribers are libraries and academia, there are, indeed, multiple readers of every copy of the Chronicle such institutions receive. The greater part of the journal's content is no longer a reporting of news which can be found elsewhere, but thoughtful articles on issues of concern to the Organization and its Member States by eminent persons in the field. Moreover, the increasing popularity of the online edition and the recent introduction of a Chronicle Feature Service has allowed articles written for the publication to be re-disseminated to newspapers and magazines worldwide, in cooperation with the network of United Nations Information Centres. In our comprehensive review, we will continue to study the right balance between issues of cost of production, revenue potential from subscriptions, audience and impact. Meanwhile, we note the comments by a number of delegations, that the multilingual character of publications should be strengthened by publishing it in the six official languages.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department would like to thank those delegations, in particular Jamaica, Morocco, and Nigeria, that have expressed their appreciation and support for the work of the Library. I would like to respond to some of the issues raised concerning the work of DHL.

Monsieur le Président,

En ce qui concerne des ouvrages en langue arabe, un sujet soulevé par la délégation d'Algérie, malgré les coupes budgétaires qui ont entraîné une diminution des services électroniques ainsi qu'une réduction du nombre des livres et des publications périodiques, la Bibliothèque a, néanmoins, essayé d'améliorer l'équilibre linguistique en ce qui concerne ses achats. C'est particulièrement le cas pour les ouvrages en langue arabe (lesquels, heureusement, sont généralement bon marché). Pour le premier trimestre "deux mille deux", on a ainsi commandé 42 monographies en arabe, environ 16 % du total des achats pour cette période.

On the automation of technical services in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, we are regularly seeking to rationalize its processes, and will continue to do so in the context of the review of Library services. However, we are pleased to report that all technical services, including cataloguing, indexing, acquisitions and serials control, as well as circulation of library materials, are already automated and performed completely online.

In conclusion, and reflecting on the debate we have heard regarding the possibility of a new name for the Department, I would like to address the concern voiced by two delegations that

a change in the name of the Department would not be in the spirit of General Assembly resolution 13 (I) of 1946. In considering such a change, we had taken the view that the use of the word "communications" in the proposed new name would demonstrate a more modern and pro-active approach to the dissemination of information. At the same time, the reference to "external relations" relates to the critical role which external partners (including NGOs, academic institutions and so on) must play in reaching the widest possible global audiences. This would be in keeping with the importance accorded to civil society as a partner of the Organization, as described in the Millennium Declaration. Though no decision has yet been made on this matter, I should like the delegations concerned to be assured that the proposal has been raised in this spirit.

In response to concerns raised by several delegations, notably that of Bénin today, I would like to reiterate that the comprehensive review is not a cost-cutting exercise, but one through which the Department will more effectively carry out its mandated activities. I would like to reassure you that our intent is not to sacrifice those activities which have shown good results.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

With this summary, I hope that I have addressed the main points raised in the general debate. My colleagues and I remain available to discuss with you further any aspects of the Department's work. We look forward to enhancing our already constructive dialogue with the committee's Bureau throughout the coming year.

Overall, it is clear that the Secretary-General's report on the reorientation of DPI has been received and addressed by this Committee in a constructive spirit, though there is clearly a significant difference of perception between two groups of Member States with regard to the nature, purpose, and motivations for this exercise, a difference we hope to bridge as the reorientation of the Department unfolds. I would like to close by saying that I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations, which will provide us with guidance in carrying the comprehensive review of DPI to a successful conclusion.

I do wish to emphasize that the Committee on Information's input to the review will be integral to the recommendations which are then made to the Secretary-General, and ultimately will impact on his decisions in this regard.

Thank you.