

Opening statement by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Interim Head of the Department of Public Information (22 April 2002)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your most generous words in launching our meeting. Your kindness towards the Department of Public Information, and to me personally, only accentuates how great a pleasure and a privilege it is for me to address the Committee on Information as it begins its twenty-fourth session. I am honoured once again to work with our distinguished Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Milos Alcalay, who has assumed additional responsibilities this year as Chairman of the Group of 77. I would especially like to thank him and the distinguished members of the Committee's Bureau for their support throughout for the work of the Department.

You may recall that when I addressed you last year, I had served as the Interim Head of the Department of Public Information for only a few months, following the departure of my distinguished predecessor, Mr. Kensaku Hogen. With the experience of, and insight into, the Department's work which I have gained over this last year, I hope to address constructively with you the issues which are foremost on your minds — and to gain your understanding and support for a newly-focused department. Under the Chairman's guidance, and with the active participation of all members, I am confident that the Department will be steered in the right direction, one which will permit it to achieve the mandate for which it was created in 1946, by General Assembly resolution 13 (I): "to promote to the greatest possible extent, an informed understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations among the peoples of the world".

Mr. Chairman,

We are meeting at an unusually interesting time in the history of the Secretariat, in the first year of a successful Secretary-General's second term in office, as the Organization repositions itself for even greater relevance as the indispensable global institution of our globalizing 21st century. The Department of Public Information is key to this continuing transformation. At the same time, many Member States have called for changes in DPI, some suggesting a streamlining of its operations, others asking for it to do more, particularly in the developing world. This debate, I regret to say, is not a new one. Over the years, the work of the United Nations in the field of public information has often come under the close scrutiny of Member States, who have historically been divided on the subject. It may amuse you to note that in 1960, Professor Leon Gordenker of Princeton University wrote an analysis of what was then the Office of Public Information (OPI) in the *American Political Science Review*. He noted that soon after the UN was established, the policy and budget of this forerunner of DPI became "the perennial centre of a complex debate", with the level of expenditure for public information activities being challenged in the budgetary committees as early as 1948. In this debate, a clear "clash" emerged on issues of substance, priorities, and funding. In Professor

Gordenker's words, "those governments which stood primarily for economy joined others, which objected to the content of the OPI program, to demand lower information appropriations. They were opposed by a majority, including all the Latin American states and many underdeveloped countries, which supported both the substance of the information programme and the budget". However, despite the repeated debate and attacks, Professor Gordenker observed that the Office proved "enduring and resilient". He wrote this 42 years ago.

As the French like to say, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Some Committee members may not be aware that since that time in the Department's history, and particularly in the last 20 years, it has been the subject of at least seven periodic reviews and reappraisals, with a major restructuring carried out in 1987-1988. Yet, despite these attempts at reform, the Department continues to face criticism, often characterized by the point of view that the Department's functions are not central to the purposes of the Organization and may therefore be curtailed. Obviously this point of view is not widely held in this Committee, but it often prevails in the financial and administrative bodies, where some delegates prefer to give priority to funding other activities of the Organization. As a result, we have been caught in the paradoxical situation of receiving specific mandates from the Committee on Information in the annual draft resolutions submitted to the General Assembly, while, in the same session, attempts are made in other legislative bodies to curtail the resources required to fulfil these very mandates.

As you know, this critical view of the Department climaxed last December during consideration of its programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003. While, in the end, the General Assembly approved the relevant section of the programme budget, in the same resolution, resolution 56/253 of Christmas Eve 2001, it requested the Secretary-General to conduct a comprehensive review of the management and operations of the Department. We in the Secretariat, and I personally, embraced the proposal for a review as an opportunity to examine DPI's overall effectiveness and efficiency, its focus on the substantive priorities and mandates of the Organization, and the need for greater coordination within the Secretariat on public information activities. The Report of the Secretary-General on the "Reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications" (A/AC.198/2002/2), which is before the Committee, therefore sets out the Secretary-General's vision for the direction in which he hopes to take a "transformed" DPI — one with renewed focus and a greater clarity of purpose.

Mr. Chairman,

I know that I hardly need to point out here that the review of the Department is part of a broader, second round of reform launched by the Secretary-General at the beginning of his second term. With a view to strengthening and revitalizing the Organization, the entire Secretariat will carry out a candid re-examination of all its major activities. Our Department's exercise fits into this overall reform process, and its results will form part of the comprehensive report which the Secretary-General will submit to the 57th session of the

General Assembly later this year, to propose institutional, programmatic, and administrative improvements in our work.

In addition, there is no doubt that the results of several other reviews which are being carried out independently from that of DPI, including those relating to UN system library services, Secretariat publications, and the Organization's commercial activities, will have an impact on the work of our Department. There is also a review of the United Nations information centres currently being carried out by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the report of which is expected shortly. In view of this series of reviews, it is now more critical than ever before that the Committee on Information provides its expert guidance regarding what it sees as the core communications functions of the Department.

The Secretary-General has delegated to me the authority to establish the parameters and necessary procedures for conducting the comprehensive review of the Department. In doing so, I wish to reassure Committee members that I have not been driven by budgetary considerations in working on the reform, nor has this been conceived as a cost-cutting exercise. The review is aimed at greater efficiency and effectiveness, and if the possibility of savings arises along the way, such measures would be implemented. But what is essential here is that the Department demonstrates its ability to adapt to a changing world, demonstrates its willingness to learn and to change, and makes an honest effort to use its resources to obtain the maximum impact possible.

Mr. Chairman,

In carrying out the comprehensive review, and with the expert pro bono assistance of a highly-regarded management consulting firm, we made a serious effort to ask ourselves the following question: if we had to reinvent the Department from scratch, how would we do it? Which activities would we emphasize, and why? What are the functions that most Member States would want to see us perform in the service of the substantive goals of the Organization?.

Some answers are obvious. Even if DPI were abolished, the United Nations would still need the ability to convey news of its work to the mass media; to provide authoritative accounts of its deliberations and actions to the press, public, governments and academia; to set up facilities to accredit, house, supply and guide the media based at United Nations Headquarters locations; to provide written information, visual images and sound to those media not based at such locations; and to respond to queries from media and members of the public across the world. Today, we must add to this the capacity to maintain an attractive and functional website on the Internet. These core tasks are inescapable, and not even our severest critics would suggest that the United Nations could survive without the capacity to perform them. But how we perform them, and to what extent, are matters for judgement. Do we, for instance, issue press releases covering every official meeting that takes place at the United Nations, or should we confine ourselves to major events and conferences? If the latter, how do we decide what to cover without causing offence to Member States? Do we provide audio-visual coverage of every statement made by every delegate, or only film, record and photograph those speakers in whom there is prior evidence of media interest? If we were a

purely commercial press relations agency, our decisions would clearly differ from the ones we would be inclined to make as a politically-conscious Secretariat, responsive to the wishes of Member States.

The issues become more complicated as we move beyond the unavoidable functions to the desirable ones. In order not to be merely reactive to events, do we need a capacity to elaborate a communications strategy? If so, do we need communicators with background knowledge in each of the major priority areas of the Organization, who are able to convey to ordinary people the nuances of our efforts in promoting such issues as sustainable development and disarmament? Given the importance of the various conferences and special sessions called by the General Assembly, do we need a capacity to advocate their goals? My inclination would be to answer "yes" to these questions.

Then come the traditional activities, which to use an American expression come "with the territory" — guided tours for visitors, briefing programmes for visiting school and college groups, a capacity to arrange exhibits prepared by UN bodies and outside groups here at Headquarters, and staff capable of mounting seminars, concerts or commemorations of special occasions. No comparable Organization or ministry anywhere in the world can do without such elements. Add to them administrative staff to help manage the personnel and budgets of the Department, and you suddenly find you have three-quarters of the Headquarters structure of DPI.

What do you not have, in this imaginary exercise, which the existing DPI possesses in reality? The list is short: a library, established by the General Assembly and aimed principally at serving delegations and the staff; a cartographic section, housed in DPI but serving principally the political and peacekeeping departments; and several publications, some as old as the Organization itself. Of course, the Library is also mandated to oversee a system of depository libraries and to provide reference tools for the public at large; the cartographers' maps are accessible to the public; and our various publications are information tools with wide-ranging audiences. Finally, there are the Information Centres around the world, themselves created by the General Assembly to bring the Department's outreach directly to the peoples of nations far removed geographically from United Nations Headquarters.

In other words, you end up with something very much like the present DPI.

If these, the basic elements of DPI are therefore largely immutable, what should we do differently? For the last two and a half months, my senior colleagues, with whom I have worked closely in the course of this review, and I have grappled with all these questions, assisted by the expert consultants, who conducted over 70 interviews with DPI staff, senior Secretariat officials, representatives of Member States, and many individuals representing a range of the Department's clients, including other Departments and Offices, diplomats, media and NGO representatives. The report before you spells out our principal findings and insights. Now it is up to you, members of the Committee, to give us your thoughts on these matters, to tell us what you expect from DPI.

Mr. Chairman,

The Secretary-General has put forward his vision on how to position DPI for greater impact in the report on the reorientation that you have before you. This report, which represents a first step in the comprehensive review of DPI, outlines several important issues and questions which emerge from the in-depth analysis and assessment of the Department which has just been completed. These relate to a lack of clarity around DPI's mission; the existence of fragmented activities with unclear linkage to a coherent overall strategy; a limited capacity to understand whether our programmes and activities match "customer" needs, and an organizational structure which does not make clear to external constituencies who does what in DPI, and how its components and relevant parts of the rest of the Secretariat work together. The aim of the Report is to highlight the main issues and findings which have emerged so far, and to define new directions and the broad areas of focus for the Department. It does not contain proposals for changes in organizational structure which may result from the review, as these still remain to be elaborated. In continuation of the "town hall" meetings which I have held over the last year with DPI staff, I have asked them to join me in another meeting at the conclusion of this session, so that I may brief them on the Committee's views on our reform process and obtain their input and ideas as to the way forward. It is the strong view of the Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretary-General that the participation of staff in the reform process is essential, and that they must feel they are first-string players on a strengthened team, if we are to be successful in transforming the Department.

In the present circumstances, Mr. Chairman, it did not seem appropriate to set out a long list of the Department's successes, of which we continue to be proud. These can be found in last September's Report of the Secretary-General on Questions Relating to Information, A/56/411. The Committee's support for DPI's many activities and products is also reiterated in General Assembly resolution 56/64. However, in order to update you with regard to some of our most recent innovations, and to give you a picture of our current work, I would like to invite the members of the Committee to join us this afternoon in Conference Room 5 from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. for an informal briefing which I trust you will find informative.

In the context of the review of DPI, we asked ourselves the most fundamental and searching questions. Why, for example, is it important for the United Nations to have a DPI? The basic justification for establishing an information structure within the Secretariat can still be found in General Assembly resolution 13 (I) of 13 February 1946, which I quoted at the beginning of my statement. To achieve its objectives, the United Nations relies on an understanding of its activities on the part of the public at large. As the Secretary-General has frequently pointed out, the United Nations Charter begins with the words "We the peoples" and it is in the support of the peoples of the world that the United Nations' survival lies. Strong communications outreach is therefore critical for the Organization. From my first days in DPI I have said to my staff that they do not come to work here to write a press release, design a poster or put up a website. They come to work in DPI, I tell them, because without their work the substantive purposes of the United Nations would not be fulfilled. Peacekeeping would not succeed if people did not understand what the peacekeepers were trying to do and how they were doing it; the battle against poverty would not be won if people in the developed world were not aware of the great challenge of development and people in developing countries could not appreciate the United Nations' efforts to help resolve their problems. The activities

of DPI are not, in other words, ends in themselves; they serve as a means to help the United Nations fulfil its substantive goals.

Some delegations have pointed out to me that their own countries have dispensed with their old Ministries of Information; they argue that the United Nations perhaps does not need one either. But the Department of Public Information is working to reach people in every region of the world, to garner their support for the work of the Organization. This is especially relevant in developing countries where vast segments of the population still are not part of the information and technology revolution. In this outreach, we must also fulfil a multitude of mandates, as well as win intergovernmental support for the specific actions we are taking.

The challenge is how to organize the Department to work most effectively on the broad front expected of it. While there is no question that our specific objectives can be refocused, and our working methods improved, we in the Department are seeking the continuing support of the Committee for the important role of communications and public information in the life of our Organization. Your renewed commitment to the need for enhanced communications in a new information age, and to developing a culture of communications within the Organization, is essential for us to succeed. I am confident that if we work together we can find solutions to give the United Nations the "voice" that the world must be able to hear. At the same time, this voice risks being muffled in a multitude of mandates, and we seek your understanding in helping us focus our energies on the most crucial of them.

Mr. Chairman,

On behalf of my Department, I am calling upon the Committee on Information, at this first stage of the comprehensive review, to endorse the broad directions of our reorientation, embodied in particular in the redefined aspirations of DPI. These are captured in the following proposed mission statement, which you will find in paragraph 19 of the Secretary-General's Report. It reads and I quote: "The Department of Public Information's mission is to manage and coordinate United Nations communications content-generated by the activities of the Organization and its component parts-and strategically to convey this content, especially through appropriate intermediaries, to achieve the greatest public impact."

These words may not be poetry, but this mission statement is built around the concept that the content which the Department must communicate is generated by the substantive work of the Organization — and not by the Department itself. DPI, as the manager and coordinator of United Nations communications strategy, is responsible for connecting the work of the substantive departments with those best positioned as disseminators. As a result, it is not the responsibility of the Department to create the substantive content, or to reinvent the priorities of the Organization. These you will find summarized in paragraph 22 of the Report, and they are established by the General Assembly and the Secretary-General, in accordance with those set out in the Millennium Declaration. Instead, the critical work of the Department of Public Information is to disseminate throughout the world the core messages of the Organization. In this effort, the Department's communications outreach will include all the breaking news from the Organization, as well as the focus on the long-term challenges faced by humankind and how the United Nations will address them in the framework of the

Millennium Declaration. In the context of this mission, DPI will be expected to conceptualize and strategize, to "market" if you will, these priorities, using intermediaries, such as the mass media, to the greatest possible effect. All of our efforts will be judged against this template. And through the United Nations Communications Group, we will strengthen our partnership with the information offices of the rest of the United Nations system to ensure that we build on each other's efforts and speak with one voice.

The traditional media and the Internet are being utilized by the Department, as in, for instance, the live radio programme, which has a huge potential listenership, and the United Nations News Centre (in English and French) and its e-mail list of correspondents--- a new initiative just launched two weeks ago. We have also made progress in enriching the United Nations web sites, with the specific aim of reducing the gap between the use of English and the other five official languages of the Organization.

Multilingualism in public information emerged as a priority concern of the Committee at last year's session. The problems and resource constraints which have restricted our ability to satisfy you fully in this area are well known. To facilitate your discussion in this regard, I am pleased to inform you that we are distributing this morning, as requested by the General Assembly in resolution 56/64, a conference room paper on the use and command of all six official languages by the staff of the Department of Public Information.

The proposed new mission statement for the Department has inspired the first phase of our reform, and we are now evaluating our activities and processes in relation to this new paradigm. As part of this analysis, a number of significant policy options for which the Committee's guidance is required have been raised. These issues are outlined in detail in the Secretary-General's Report, but I would like to highlight three of the most important: our audiences, or target groups; the work of the United Nations information centres; and performance measurement of DPI programmes and activities.

First, the Department must better identify its target audiences. In line with our new approach, our primary targets must increasingly be the "external intermediaries", the media and civil society, through whom we would seek to reach the world. The Report seeks the Committee's guidance on the extent to which the Department should remain responsible for other activities that serve other "clients", including delegations.

In an attempt to more effectively allocate our resources, and to achieve greater effectiveness in programme delivery, some hard decisions and choices will have to be made. Some activities may need to be discontinued or drastically reduced. Alternatively, there may be a case to transfer certain activities elsewhere within the Secretariat. Within the Department itself, some consolidation of functions may be necessary.

Questions concerning some of the Department's traditional activities have arisen during the review. For example, we must be sure that our leading publications, such as the United Nations Yearbook and the Chronicle, as well as direct outreach activities, such as the special events, exhibits, and the guided tour operation at Headquarters locations, are having the desired impact, commensurate with the level of resources devoted to those activities. In

certain instances, these activities reach relatively limited audiences. On the other hand, Member States value and have grown accustomed to some of these activities, and consider them worthwhile, for reasons outside of strict cost considerations. The views of the Committee will be valuable in this respect, as the Department reviews the relative importance of these activities.

The second special area of review concerns the United Nations information centres. As this operation accounts for approximately 35 per cent of DPI's budget, and is of particular interest to many members of the Committee on Information, it warrants detailed consideration. The information centres are the voice of the United Nations in the field, and as such are central to the Department's ability to convey information in a way that is accessible to local audiences around the world. The Centres' activities, however, are now being performed in a changing environment, due to the immediate and almost universal availability of information via the electronic media. And where our target audience is the mass media and leading civil society institutions, and not directly the person on the street, we can comfortably use the internet as a means of communication and dissemination in virtually every country of the world. The United Nations web site in the six official languages has therefore contributed to addressing the needs for the Organization's information materials in many countries. It will, therefore, be necessary to analyze the cost and benefits of information centres as they relate to the needs of their local audiences. The creation of regional information centre hubs would merit consideration. Also, the high costs of rental space for centres in developed countries will need to be addressed, as we seek to get the most value for the limited resources at our disposal.

As the Secretary-General's Report on Reorientation explains, performance management must be a vital part of all DPI's major activities and programmes, and I intend to place greater emphasis on evaluation of the impact of our activities. This is particularly important in view of the new culture within the Organization of results-based budgeting and programme evaluation. As an important step in this direction, DPI was the first department to organize a workshop on evaluation techniques for all its programme managers in January of this year. I also propose to carry out an annual programme impact review to justify which programmes should be maintained, expanded or eliminated. This will permit us to more accurately gauge the return on our investments, and to emphasize activities of high impact and low cost in carrying out our functions. These new efforts will provide a tool in the future for Secretariat and Member States to make enlightened choices regarding the information services which DPI provides.

Mr. Chairman,

To bring this excessively long oration to a conclusion, let me stress that the Committee on Information has a key role to play in the reform of DPI. After this session of the Committee, taking into account your views, I will be in a position to finalize the proposed plan for the reform of the Department and prepare recommendations for the consideration of the Secretary-General.

The Secretary-General will then take decisions on the next steps, and for those measures which are under his authority, implementation will begin immediately. For those measures

requiring legislative approval, and as a second stage, proposals will be included in his report on the comprehensive review of the entire Secretariat to the next session of the General Assembly. The final results of the reform process will become a road map for the preparation of the Proposed Programme Budget for 2004-2005, and a revision as required of the Medium Term Plan for 2002-2005, which was prepared, of course, back in 2000, at a time when we worked under very different assumptions.

Reform, as the Secretary-General has often pointed out, is a process, not an event. I have no illusions, and nor should you, that we can reinvent DPI overnight. When all is said and done, and the changes we have begun are implemented, it is my expectation that DPI will be a very different department from the one which I headed when the COI met last year. The Department will be repositioned to work more strategically, as an effective vehicle to communicate the work of the United Nations. There will be greater clarity in its work, and more effective integration with other parts of the Secretariat. To achieve this, we will dedicate our attention to departmental communication strategies on priority themes, we will provide focussed communication guidance to the departments and we will set out DPI's roles and responsibilities in a clear manner to all our clients. The staff of the Department will have the opportunity to be trained to carry out new functions, where necessary, and will be better integrated with their colleagues working in other areas of the Department. The repositioning of DPI will not come without some transitional pain, and a certain amount of re-learning, but we think it is the best way to ensure that the United Nations has the most effective communications mechanisms in place, and to ensure that DPI becomes a leading voice in communicating the work of the United Nations to the world's public. Even as this vision is being shaped, it is essential that we work together with the members of this Committee, to make this a reality.

Mr. Chairman,

In concluding, I must express my personal hope that, after this comprehensive review, Member States will give us the necessary time to implement what we have set out to do. Many of my able and talented staff feel they have been collectively targeted by being subject to continuous criticisms and reviews which their colleagues in other departments have not been obliged to endure. You will understand that continuous criticism, particularly if it appears to be based on extraneous considerations, can have a demoralizing impact on hard-working colleagues. Let us recognize the good work they are doing, and let us give them a chance, through this process, to do even better what the Organizations wants them to do. This will require a team effort by all concerned — from DPI staff, to Secretariat colleagues and our key partners, most importantly Member States.

The reformed — or I should say — transformed DPI, will be one which is a stronger, faster, and more efficient operation than in the past, more in tune with the needs of the United Nations and its Member States. I am hopeful that the positive and creative results of this session will help give a new direction to the Department, and I will listen attentively. And with your support, perhaps we can once and for all put an end to the incessant criticism about DPI,

and empower the Department to live up to the expectations that you, and the public at large, have of our important information and communications work.

It is in this frame of mind, that my staff and I eagerly look forward to hearing your views, and, in the process, to further strengthening the spirit of cooperation between the Committee on Information and the Department of Public Information in pursuit of our common objectives.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.