

Statement by Canada and Australia (30 April 2003)

Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the delegations of Australia and Canada.

I would like to thank Mr. Tharoor for his introduction to the relevant reports of the Secretary General and for the briefings. I would like also to thank his whole team for committed service, especially in the pressured circumstances of recent months.

Mr. Chairman,

Our delegations have taken the floor to voice support for the commitment and efforts of the Secretary-General to place communications at the heart of strategic management of the Organization. We agree entirely that the United Nations has an important story to tell, and that it needs to be told well. We share his vision of effective communications as a key element in the reform and revitalization of the United Nations, to be pursued both by developing further the culture of communications in the Organization, and enhancing the focus, effectiveness, and impact of the Organization's work in this field. This is why we were excited by the ideas and actions set out in the Secretary-General's reform report, Agenda for Further Change. Although the reorientation of public information activities had been in process for years, the Secretary-General's Agenda identified serious issues and imparted fresh momentum to the process of change.

We welcome the fact that a unifying thread among the various documents is their focus on reform. The Secretariat has been thoughtful, and, dare we say, innovative, in developing organizational arrangements and substantive tools for the more effective discharge of their mandates. It cannot have been easy to do this work against the backdrop of tumultuous world events that must necessarily have diverted their attention. Before turning to the reform issues in detail, there are two achievements I wish to mention first.

We are impressed with the progress made during the pilot project on radio broadcasting. We appreciate the emphasis by the Secretary-General on the cost-effectiveness of this means of communications to large audiences and believe that a persuasive case can be made to continue this activity and develop it further. The question of how the relevant resources should be provided for is a separate matter, which no doubt will be taken up in the context of the programme budget for 2004-05. Our point of departure on this is the obvious one. We encourage innovation and experimentation to find better ways of accomplishing our common goals. When they are found, they should be financed by redeploying resources from less effective or less proven activities, rather than by merely adding a new layer of activity. This is what prioritization is about.

Second, we applaud the great progress made in expanding the use of the web-site as a medium for the dissemination of information, for news and media relations, as well as for reflecting multilingualism within the United Nations. Demands on the website have been growing exponentially. While it would be useful, as the ACABQ suggested last year, to have

more evaluative information on the use of the website, the achievement of the Department in both feeding and stimulating the demand is estimable.

The report on the reorientation of public information activities does address some key aspects of the reform process. We appreciate the reasoning underlying the new operating model for the Department and the emphasis attached to partnership with substantive departments in shaping priorities and crafting messages. If it is the Secretary-General's judgement that this new organizational structure will enable more purposeful, co-ordinated and results-oriented public information work, we fully support him. To achieve its intended results, the reorganization needs to be backed up by consistent efforts to define specific objectives more clearly, to define measures of success, and to assess the results achieved.

We also very much appreciate the Secretary-General's proposal to rationalize the network of UN Information Centres around regional hubs, starting with the creation of a Western European hub. Frankly, we see little alternative to the regional approach if we are to attain positive results from the resources available. As presently constituted and operated, the UN information centres are not shown to produce results commensurate with their cost. The proposed criteria for the regionalization of information are headed in the right direction, but can be refined further and improved, including by clearer reference to the need for cost-effectiveness.

The report of the OIOS on the structure and operations of UN information centres has reinforced this view. The shortcomings identified by the OIOS are serious and we agree that they highlight the need, as the OIOS put it: "for urgent rethinking of the concept of UN information centres in terms of usefulness and continued relevance and for closer assessment of various resource and operational issues."

It is a good idea to start in high cost areas, such as Western Europe, and to re-deploy resources to priority activities. There are three points we would make, however, about the approach set out in the Secretary-General's report. First, it is not obvious that redeployment to country level information centres would be a good use of the resources, if that strengthening is not linked to the regionalization strategy. Second, we query the link between resource savings in Europe and enhanced evaluation activity. Evaluation is a core responsibility of the Department, and does not hinge on new resources becoming available for that purpose. Finally, the scope for re-prioritization seems too closely linked to savings on Western European operations. Why should one small piece of the DPI operation be assumed to be the only source of resources for reallocation and innovation?

Important aspects of the reform process are addressed, but the process is a continuing one. The comprehensive review of the management and operations of DPI requested in the budget resolution has not been provided, although the few paragraphs on public information in the Agenda for Further Change report do summarize the direction of desired change. The assessment of the publications program is pending. We had also anticipated fresh insight on what we can expect from the evaluation of the impact of DPI's programs which is supposed to be underway. We appreciate the information that has been provided on the co-ordination arrangements to address improvements to library operations. Beyond that, we emphasize our

full support for the very useful specific actions outlined by the Secretary-General in Agenda for Further Change, such as a clear division of labour among libraries, including clear leadership, digitization, and enhanced electronic access.

Mr. Chairman,

We recognize that results-based budgeting is still relatively young in the UN, and that the results approach is particularly challenging in the area of public information. Looking at the programmatic elements of the proposed programme budget for 2004-05, it may nevertheless be possible to improve the presentation further, in order to express more substantive objectives and clearer indicators of achievement. We can be more specific on this in the context of the open-ended working group.

Mr. Chairman,

The membership of the UN has long been aware of the potential importance of public information for the work of the UN. The world presents a tough and competitive public information environment, and, within the UN, member states present multiple and competing visions of priority. DPI has a daunting task in this setting. We appreciate the dedication of public information staff and the vision of its leadership. We have every confidence that pursuit of the reform path set out by the Secretary-General will equip the Organization with a public information service that meets the needs of the organization more effectively than ever.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.