

Statement by H. E. Mr. C. Mahendran, Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations (30 April 2003)

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, let me congratulate you for being elected to Chair the annual session of the United Nations Committee on Information. I have every confidence that under your able guidance, the Committee will make even more progress this year. Let me also take this opportunity to assure you the fullest cooperation of my delegation in pursuit of our common objectives and to make this session a success.

Mr. Chairman,

I also take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Shashi Tharoor on his appointment as the Under Secretary General for Communications and Public Information. Under his astute leadership, I am confident, the Department will continue to make progress and achieve the Millennium Goals as well as executing the mandate of the Secretary General to improve accessibility to information and communication technologies.

Mr. Chairman,

The extraordinary progress we have witnessed during the last decade, in the field of information, we are aware, owes a great deal to the rapid advances in communication technology. Although wide access to information has played a substantial role in economic and social development, we have witnessed a deepening digital divide between the developed and the developing countries. For any knowledge-based economy, a universally accessible and efficient information technology and communication infrastructure is essential. This will facilitate economic development by providing new opportunities, enhancing the productive capacity of the economy, reducing cost of production and ensure efficient delivery of public service and reduction of poverty. Therefore it is imperative that information technology is harnessed in such a way that it would benefit all humanity.

My delegation is pleased to note that the United Nation is addressing the role of information and communication technology in development in order to bridge the digital divide. We would like to underscore the importance of urging all the relevant stakeholders to take further steps in bridging this gap.

The Government of Sri Lanka recognise that information and communication technology leads to forging of closer relationships, eliminating traditional intermediaries while creating new ones, reducing costs and increasing the reach to global markets in a way hitherto inaccessible by conventional means. In order to address information and communication technology in a holistic manner and to speed up the implementation process, my Government had already set up a Steering Committee comprising constituents from both the Public Sector and Private Sector with a view to address issues such as human resources development, infrastructure, policy reform on e-Governance and legal issues. The Government, in this connection, will also be taking measures to define and designate concerted means of

acquiring, adopting and implementing information and communication development. These efforts are targeted to provide access to information resources across the Nation and to avoid the manifestation of the 'digital divide'.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department of Public Information of the United Nations is considered by many to be the 'voice' of the United Nations. I wish to recall the statement made by the Interim Head of the Department, during the 24th Session of the Committee, summarizing the importance of the Department.

I quote — " Even if the Department of Public Information 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 facilitate 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 web site 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." — I unquote

Mr. Chairman,

We are pleased to note that a new Mission Statement has been formulated clarifying the goals and purposes, which is expected to enhance the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the Department. By establishing of Strategic Communications, News & Media and Outreach Divisions, we hope, would strengthen and streamline the Department and improve efficiency and the better usage of the limited resources available. By achieving this Department would be able to negate the effects of any budgetary constraints, at least to some extent.

In this new information age the latest technology should be used for the dissemination of information to build a broad base support for the programmes of the United Nations, which has no substitute for the unique legitimacy, which is globally accepted. But, we should not forget that only about five percent of the world population has Internet access and the majority of them are concentrated in industrialized countries. A vast majority of the world population live in abject poverty in the out-reach areas of the developing and least developed countries and their immediate concern may be not for information and communication technology. Therefore every possible support should be given to these countries to develop infrastructure and to achieve greater access to new information and communication technologies, without, I repeat, without retarding priority programmes on development issues already in place. In order to reach the majority of these population traditional methods of communication should be used more and adequate resources for these methods should be allocated.

In this regard my Government welcomes the continued development of the international radio broadcasting capacity of the United Nations. We are encouraged to note that the United

Nations Radio programmes, broadcast with the participation of the partner stations, are listened to by more than 133 million worldwide. Considering the extensive outreach potential in all regions and the cost effectiveness, continuation of this, I am confident, will lead to an even greater understanding about the United Nations and its activities.

As it is difficult, practically, for the countries maintaining relatively small Missions in New York to sufficiently cover all the meetings, we appreciate the issuing of daily press releases by the Department, which are very useful. We also appreciate the contribution made by the United Nations Information Centers. These Centers considered being the 'field voice' of the Department are very important in disseminating information work of the United Nations. We are encouraged by the efforts of some UN Information Centers to develop their web sites in local languages, in order to reach key constituencies at local level.

Mr. Chairman,

My Government notes the recent report of the Secretary General on strengthening of the United Nations, which proposes the idea of rationalising the network of information centers around regional hubs. This is expected to ensure more equitable distribution to all regions in order to take advantage of the vastly altered world media landscape. However, we must ensure that these restructuring envisaged should be done in a manner that would not deprive the developing and the least developing countries of the services already provided by these centres.

The United Nations web site, which has done a commendable task of enhancing parity among official languages of the UN has been one of the most popular and sought after as well as cost effective medium used in the dissemination of information. The popularity of this could be gauged by the fact that more than 10 million accesses were recorded within a 24-hour period in February this year. With the continued decreasing cost per unit this could become one of the most effective medium of dissemination of information in the future, even in developing countries.

Mr. Chairman,

My Government appreciates very much the continuing efforts of the Secretary General to improve the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, which is 'a virtual library with world outreach'. We welcome the proposals that will blend the existing traditional library functions with advanced technologies, which will enhance the existing facilities and be more efficient and effective.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we are on the threshold of an information revolution, which will usher in opportunities in almost every sphere of human activity hitherto unimaginable. But unfortunately the majority of the global humanity is so far untouched by this. There is a great responsibility bestowed on us to spearhead the strategy of achieving the goal of bridging the digital divide and ensuring that information and communication technologies would spearhead global peace and development. Sri Lanka looks forward to working towards making this shared objective a reality.

Thank you.