

Statement by Mr. David A. Traystman, United States Advisor (30 April 2003)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States congratulates the new Chairman of the Committee, Ambassador Chowdhury of Bangladesh, and the other members of the bureau on their election. The United States welcomes Mr. Tharoor's statement of April 28th and commends Mr. Tharoor, his managers, and all members of the Department for their hard work. We pledge our support for the Secretary-General's efforts aimed at reforming and revitalizing the Department. My delegation looks forward to working with all members of this Committee in a constructive manner as we consider the many important issues before us.

On Friday, May 2nd, we will commemorate World Press Freedom Day. A cornerstone of American democracy is freedom of the press, enshrined in our Constitution's Bill of Rights. We strongly believe that a free press is fundamental for true democracy. For this particular body — the Committee on Information — it is important that we recall the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' affirmation that "everyone has the right to freedom of expression. this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Mr. Chairman,

As we all know, it is our responsibility, as representatives of Member States, to engage DPI in a frank and constructive dialogue on its shortcomings, when necessary, while at the same time, to commend the Department for its many accomplishments. Such a frank exchange of views will shed light on the issues and lead to improvements in the Department's efficiency and effectiveness for the benefit of all. As my delegation has stated in the past, in any large organization charged with carrying out a wide range of activities, there are always bound to be areas of improvement. It in this spirit, and in light of the fact that the General Assembly, in resolution 57/300, reaffirmed the role of this Committee in guiding the process of DPI restructuring, that my delegation would like to comment on the issues before us.

The General Assembly, in resolution 56/253, called on the Secretary-General to conduct a comprehensive review of the management and operations of DPI. The Secretary-General in the DPI reorientation report considered by this Committee at its twenty-fourth session last year (A/AC.198/2002/2) reported that "the Secretariat accepted an offer of pro bono assistance from a highly regarded management consultancy firm to assist the Department in the conduct of the review, which began in January 2002 and will conclude in May of this year [2002]." The Secretary-General continued that "in the course of this review, over 70 interviews have already been carried out with a wide range of interested individuals, including a cross-section of DPI staff and other members of the Secretariat, representatives of Member States, non-governmental organizations, the media, and other "clients" of the Department's services." The Secretary-General went on to note that "the current comprehensive review, when completed, will form the basis for the report on the comprehensive review to be submitted by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its 57th session, requested in resolution 56/253." As reported in this year's reorientation report (A/AC.198/2003/2), the Secretary-

General's reform report on "Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change" (A/57/387) contains the principal conclusions of the comprehensive review.

While fully supporting the relevant proposals in the Secretary-General's reform report and looking forward to their implementation, my delegation would like to highlight the fact that the reform report contains recommendations on only three aspects of the Department's activities: the network of UN information centers, UN system libraries, and UN publications; sets out the Department's new organizational structure; and anticipates the results of the three-year evaluation of the impact and cost-effectiveness of all of the Department's activities.

As the main subsidiary body mandated to make recommendations to the General Assembly on the work of DPI, and in light of the fact that the General Assembly, in resolution 57/130 B requested this Committee to examine thoroughly the comprehensive review once it has been finalized, this Committee must be furnished with the complete report containing the results of the comprehensive review as called for by the General Assembly.

Mr. Chairman,

I would now like to comment specifically on several of the issues before us.

The United States commends the Department for implementing its new organizational structure. We especially note its designation of focal points to work with substantive departments to identify target audiences and develop information programs and media strategy for priority issues. We are also pleased to note that DPI's Strategic Communications Division serves as the secretariat of the UN Communications Group and that Under-Secretary-General Tharoor chairs weekly meetings of the Group. In line with the emphasis placed on the importance of coordinated action within the Organization in the Secretary-General's reform report, we commend Mr. Tharoor for recognizing the potential of the Communications Group and for guiding the Group in developing joint communication strategies with other UN agencies.

The United States fully supports action 9 in the Secretary-General's reform report concerning the integration of UN system libraries. As noted in the report, "the UN libraries have been operating independently with very little centralized oversight and direction." My delegation will introduce language during negotiations calling on this Committee to recommend that the General Assembly should decide that the Dag Hammarskjöld Library will assume responsibility for setting policy and coordinating the work of all UN libraries. My delegation notes that the report on "Modernization and integrated management of United Nations libraries" (A/AC.198/2003/5) prepared pursuant to the request in paragraph 14 of resolution 57/300 reports on the establishment of the Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated Management of United Nations Libraries and informs that the Steering Committee working through "coordinated management" and "collaborative policy-making" will aim to "facilitate interdependency". While my delegation supports the establishment of the Steering Committee and views it as a good first step in improving the performance of UN libraries, we note that the report does not address the important recommendation of the Secretary-General calling for central management of UN system libraries by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. My

delegation calls on the Secretariat, during introduction of the report in question later this week, to expand on the reasons given in the Secretary-General's reform report underlying his recommendation that the Dag Hammarskjöld Library should assume responsibility for setting policy and coordinating the work of all UN libraries. The General Assembly, in resolution 57/130 B called on the Secretary-General to include in his comprehensive review the results of the overall review of library services of the United Nations system. Paragraph 35 of this year's reorientation report refers to the "in-depth review" of all UN libraries. My delegation calls on the Department to make the complete report of the in-depth review available to the members of this Committee prior to convening of the open-ended working group during this session.

Mr. Chairman,

The General Assembly, in its decision 57/579, called on the Secretary-General to implement the proposal in his report on "Strengthening the Department of Public Information within the existing capacity, in order to support and enhance the United Nations web site in all official languages of the Organization" (A/57/355) through the "redeployment of resources" within DPI. As my delegation has stated on several occasions, the performance of DPI's web site team is a textbook example of what can be accomplished using existing resources, when dedicated professionals apply the knowledge, commitment, flexibility and creativity necessary to get the job done. We especially commend the web site team for its live webcasting of UN meetings and its timely posting of items on its News Centre page. In this regard, I would like to stress the fact that it is incumbent upon program managers to identify activities that should be eliminated and to shift resources, both staff and funds, to high-priority areas. Working towards parity in the use of the six official languages on the UN web site is a priority activity. DPI managers, as mandated in the budget regulations, should identify and make the case for elimination of lower impact activities thereby freeing-up staff and financial resources for higher-priority activities, such as improving the web site and funding the international radio broadcasting capacity. Program managers and Member States must make the difficult decisions necessary to reprioritize the Department's activities and reprogram staff and financial resources. This is the threshold we must cross. With this in mind, we are pleased to note that the Department plans to redeploy posts to the Department's Website Section to enhance the Section's language capacity; although, as noted in the reorientation report, the redeployment is predicated on the creation of a regional hub in Western Europe.

My delegation would also like to commend the Department for the continued development of its international radio broadcasting capacity. Radio is indeed an important means of communication for the United Nations, particularly in developing countries. The General Assembly, in resolution 56/64B, continued the project for the 2002-2003 biennium subject to further review by this Committee. While this Committee does not deal directly with finances, it does not operate in a vacuum and must be aware of cost implications. It is my delegation's strong belief that with the thorough and sustained prioritization of activities required of program managers, no additional resources should be required for the continued implementation of this project. DPI's managers must identify and make the case for elimination of low priority activities which would free-up funding for continuation of the radio

project. Barring the Department's success in shifting resources to support this priority activity, we call on the Department to circulate a statement of financial implications for this Committee's information. We must have a breakdown of the estimated costs as a prerequisite for the Committee to decide whether to recommend to the General Assembly that the radio project should be continued during the 2004-2005 biennium.

Mr. Chairman,

Integrating the Official Document System (ODS) with the UN web site will significantly enhance the multilingual nature of the UN web site by providing free, public access to all UN parliamentary documents in the six official languages. We commend the Information Technology Services Division of the Office of Central Support Services and DPI for their continued development of the ODS. My delegation looks forward to further consideration during the main part of the 58th General Assembly of the question of making the ODS freely and publicly available on the UN web site. We will present several questions to the Secretariat on this topic during the Committee's consideration of the relevant report later this week.

My delegation would like to commend the Department for assuming a leadership role in the High-Level Committee on Management on establishing a UN portal - an inter-agency search facility encompassing the public web sites of all UN system organizations. We look forward to the imminent implementation of the search pilot project and encourage the Department to continue to guide the High-Level Committee in this endeavor.

The United States supports the Secretary-General's effort to rationalize the current ad hoc arrangement of UN information centers and offices and is pleased to note that a number of information centers share premises with other UN agencies in UN houses. UN system offices are maintained in over 170 countries. Several UN agencies each maintain offices in more than 120 countries worldwide. My delegation notes that the Department included in its guidelines for establishment of regional hubs the importance of factoring-in the Secretary-General's UN houses initiative and the many UN system offices worldwide. An integrated system of all UN system offices will better meet the needs of all involved. My delegation will present language during negotiations encouraging the Department to work within the UN Communications Group and the High-Level Committee on Management to ensure that all UN system offices are factored into the Secretary-General's regional hubs proposal and to report on such collaboration. My delegation will also present language calling on the Department to revise the fifth criteria in its guidelines for establishment of regional hubs to emphasize that the existence of UN houses, other UN offices, and regional organizations will be an important factor in deciding on the optimum location of a regional hub. The overriding consideration, in line with the Department's new mission statement, should be to improve the Organization's ability, as a whole, to communicate the activities and concerns of the Organization to achieve the greatest public impact. The perceived impact on the autonomy of any particular organizational unit should have little bearing on the regional hub decision-making process. My delegation would like to ask the Department to circulate a paper listing the existing UN houses and the UN system offices housed therein, the locations of designated UN houses, the five information services and eight UN offices, and the sixty-five information centers.

We have carefully read the OIOS report on the "Review of the structure and operations of the United Nations information centers" (A/57/747), and we note the considerable amount of work to be done to make the UNIC program a fully functioning and effective element in the UN's public information campaign. In this regard, we also note the importance DPI and the Secretary-General have placed on establishing a regional hub in Western Europe. The success of this important initiative will have a direct impact on DPI's ability to shift resources to priorities. However, we encourage the Department not to "place all of its eggs in one basket" so to speak, but to seek additional methods by which it can support new priorities. We agree with the Secretary-General's statement in his reform report emphasizing that the Organization's products must not be seen as ends in themselves. My delegation has previously stated that we believe a rethinking of the usefulness of the UN Chronicle, among other activities, merits consideration and we would like to resubmit such a proposal to the Department at this time. While appreciating the efforts of those involved in its preparation, resources used to produce the Chronicle would be better spent, for example, enhancing the UN web site in the six official languages or translating UN materials into local languages.

I would also like to highlight the excellent work being done by the Department's Photo Unit, especially its timely distribution of digital images of UN meetings and UN events. These images play an important role in conveying the message of the critical work being undertaken at Headquarters.

Mr. Chairman.

I must also respond to the statement made earlier in this Committee by the delegate from Cuba. It was my delegation's hope that this dialogue would have been limited to matters listed on the agenda. However, the Cuban delegation, as in the past, has chosen to politicize this Committee. The United States Government has steadfastly observed our international obligations, particularly those of the ITU concerning avoidance of harmful interference to the services of other countries. For 44 years the Cuban people have been denied the right to choose their own representatives, to voice their opinions without fear of reprisal, to meet, or to organize freely. We continue to feel that the Cuban government's opposition to Radio and TV Marti is driven solely by an underlying fear of the consequences of the Cuban people having full knowledge of their own country and the world around them; a freedom to which all members of the human race are entitled.

I would like to quote from three recent statements.

The first, from Secretary of State Powell, delivered on April 10th, and referring to the show trials conducted by Cuba in a vain effort to silence a growing opposition: "In recent days, the Cuban government has undertaken the most significant act of political repression in decades. Nearly 80 representatives of a growing and truly independent civil society have been arrested, convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in summary, secret trials. Their only crime was seeking basic human rights and freedoms."

The second, from UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Vieira de Mello, delivered on April 9th, and referring to the recent summary executions of three Cubans accused of

hijacking a boat: "There are questions about the fairness of such expedited proceedings, which have been closed to the public and observers, and I am calling for transparency." Cuba must ensure that the accused benefit from due process, including the right to an adequate defence."

The third from UNESCO Director-General Matsuura, delivered on April 7th: "I am very concerned about the situation of freedom of expression and press freedom in Cuba. Reports regarding the wave of recent arrests, in which at least 24 journalists and as many as 78 human rights activists have been jailed, were worrying. Promoting the free flow of ideas by word and image is part of UNESCO's constitution. The arrests and subsequent trials represent a serious infringement of the right to freedom of expression and other basic rights recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I urge the Cuban authorities to respect fundamental rights of journalists and other individuals arrested for speaking their mind."

In closing, I would again like to commend all members of the Department for their hard work and to pledge United States support for their continuing efforts to make the Department increasingly more efficient and effective.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman