

## **Opening Statement by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information (28 April 2003)**

Mr. Chairman,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a special pleasure and a privilege for me to address this twenty-fifth session of the Committee on Information. In India, where I come from, and I know also in Bangladesh, your own country, Ambassador Chowdhury, the 25th year is called a silver jubilee and is considered an occasion for great celebration. For the past 25 years, this Committee has provided support and guidance to the Department of Public Information, helping it to define its task in a constantly changing global information environment and to meet difficult challenges. On behalf of my Department and my staff, I wish, on this silver jubilee, to acknowledge the positive contribution of this Committee and to express my appreciation for its continued support.

I should like to take this opportunity to warmly welcome the newly elected Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, and the members of the Bureau. I have every confidence that under Ambassador Chowdhury's able guidance, this Committee will make even more progress towards helping the Department accomplish the new goals it has set for itself. I am especially indebted to you, Mr. Chairman, for your kind words addressed to me. The interest you have already shown in the work of the Department is greatly encouraging. And your inspirational opening statement has started this meeting with just the right tone and in the right direction.

I should also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the outgoing chairman, His Excellency Ambassador Milos Alcalay, and the other members of his Bureau. Ambassador Alcalay has presided over the Committee with rare commitment and vigour at a time when the Department of Public Information has been undergoing a comprehensive reorientation of its work programme. His diplomatic skills, his dynamic leadership, and dedication to the success of this Department have been an inspiration to us all. And once again, I thank you, Ambassador Alcalay, for your many kind words addressed to me personally, of which I hope to prove worthy.

Mr. Chairman,

We are meeting at a time when the recent and ongoing events in Iraq and the humanitarian situation facing its people have posed serious challenges for the United Nations. Many were deeply worried about the broader, long-term implications of this war — both for the region and the world. Serious questions have also been raised about the future of the Organization. People in certain quarters were declaring that the United Nations was now "irrelevant" and even comparing its fate to that of the League of Nations. Others were genuinely concerned about what they saw as the United Nations' failure to prevent the war and the consequent weakening of the Organization.

The world is slowly coming to realize that neither of these negative analyses is true. The breadth and depth of the disappointment in so many countries at the failure of the Security Council to find a collective solution showed how much was expected of the United Nations. We should be encouraged by the conviction of people all over the world that the United Nations is the institution where decisions on matters of collective peace and security should be taken. In this respect, the Secretary-General has said it is his belief that the United Nations family "may come out of this difficult experience more relevant than ever before".

For us in the Department of Public Information, the greatest challenge has been finding ways and means to increase global awareness and understanding of the multiple roles of the United Nations in the Iraq crisis. The need to ensure that the immediacy and intensity of the situation in Iraq did not overwhelm communication of what the United Nations was doing in many other critical areas around the world was no less challenging. We did succeed in conveying the message that success or failure in any one area, however important, does not make or break the United Nations. At the same time, we learned once again that the general public, and even the mass media, rarely distinguish between the role of the United Nations as a "stage" on which Member States play their parts and may agree or disagree, and that of the United Nations as an "actor", intervening with its agencies and staff in various situations. Let me abandon the theatrical metaphor and simply state: when DPI speaks for the UN, it therefore represents the Organization as a whole — you, the Member States, included.

Since the beginning of the crisis at the end of 2002, the Department of Public Information has played a central coordinating role in conveying a consistent message on the United Nations role in the Iraq crisis. I chaired a system-wide Inter-Agency communications task force to ensure coordinated information-gathering and a rapid-response communications strategy, and we issued regular media guidance and talking points to UN officials around the world. Initially, our efforts focused on the need to seek a peaceful solution, and therefore concentrated on the role of the UN inspectors and the Security Council process. Once the conflict had begun, we concentrated on the need to ensure the protection of Iraqi civilians and meeting their humanitarian requirements, as well as the centrality of the issues of Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity. Today the focus is on post-war Iraq and the nature of a possible UN role. This guidance, which is constantly revised to ensure its relevance to unfolding developments and to highlight what are considered the "messages of the day", is circulated to all senior UN officials and Directors of UN Information Centres so they may proactively communicate such messages to the global public. As a result, hundreds of print-media and broadcast interviews have been given by senior officials in major media across the world. In addition, as part of the communications strategy, opinion pieces by the Secretary-General and senior officials, including myself, on different aspects of the crisis have been published in newspapers around the world.

In close cooperation with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UN agencies and programmes, we established in March a press centre in Amman, to provide daily briefings on humanitarian developments. Our communications efforts have been directed not only at the media, but also at the public at large. The success of this effort was clearly conveyed by the headline of an article about our Department's Public Inquiries Unit

published by the Wall Street Journal on 26 March 2003: "Cubicle front Lines: UN staffers listen to an agitated public". In March 2003 alone the Unit, an often unheralded part of DPI, handled almost 25,000 inquiries that included walk-in visitors, telephone calls, letters and e-mails.

In our continuing efforts to focus on the situation in Iraq, we have organized a special event on 2 May in observance of World Press Freedom Day, with the theme "The Media and Armed Conflict". As we have learned, the conflict in Iraq has claimed the lives of a number of journalists, injured several others, and damaged several media locations. In the words of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, my colleague, Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello, "the right to freedom of information is dealt a fatal blow whenever a journalist is killed or injured in the performance of his or her vital role". I am very pleased to confirm the information you have already been given that Secretary-General Kofi Annan will address this event, which I think is a clear indication of the importance he attaches to the role of the media and that of this Committee in dealing with the questions of armed conflict and press freedom. Ambassador Chowdhury, in his capacity as Chairman of this Committee, has also agreed to speak. I invite all of you to attend this important observance. As part of our invigorated programme of educational outreach and collaboration with academic institutions, we are also commemorating this special day at Columbia University on the 1st of May. More information on this event can be found at the back of the Conference Room.

While the debate on the United Nations role in Iraq continues, it is already clear that the relevance of the United Nations will not be determined by its conduct on one issue alone. As the world reaffirmed in the Millennium Declaration, "the United Nations and its Charter are the indispensable foundations of a more peaceful, prosperous and just world". The world still faces, to use the Secretary-General's phrase, innumerable "problems without passports": problems of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, of the degradation of our common environment, of contagious disease and starvation, of human rights and human wrongs, of mass illiteracy and massive displacement. More than 30,000 children continue to die each day from preventable communicable diseases. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is claiming at least 8,000 lives every single day. These are problems that no one country can solve on its own, and they are, therefore, our shared responsibility. They will remain relevant when Iraq has faded from the headlines, and DPI will continue to draw them to the world's attention.

I would now like to report to you, as requested in paragraph 66 of resolution A/57/130 B, on the activities of the Department and on the implementation of your recommendations. As you know, there has been a great deal of change over the last year and Ambassador Alcalay referred to that. I shall not be presumptuous enough to speak of a "new DPI", but I can certainly tell you of a "renewed" DPI. Last year, the Department presented to the Committee the results of the first phase of the comprehensive review of the management and operations of DPI. As part of the Secretary-General's new vision for the Department, we have further refined the Department's mission, which is "to help fulfil the substantive purposes of the United Nations by strategically communicating the activities and concerns of the Organization to achieve the greatest public impact". With this mission statement as our guide, our aim is to achieve more focused messages, better identification of target audiences, prioritization of the

allocation of limited resources among the many mandated activities and identification of programmes that could be improved upon or eliminated.

The Secretary-General took the process further in September 2002 with his reform report "Strengthening of the United Nations: An agenda for further change" (A/57/387), which launched the second phase of the Department's comprehensive review. The report contained five specific actions aimed at improving the Department's ability to deliver effective and targeted information programmes. We were greatly encouraged when the General Assembly, in its resolution A/57/300, welcomed these proposals.

With your endorsement of the initial proposals last year in May, and with the Secretary-General's action plan as our guide, we have taken concrete steps towards moulding a more effective DPI. The reorientation report, contained in A/AC/198/2003/2, reflects the implementation of the Secretary-General's vision and our comprehensive review of this Department's work. It details the new operating model for the Department, based on a Division-by-Division reform programme.

This model is inspired by the fact that the Department's work is not an end in itself. While the substantive departments of the Secretariat and organizations of the UN system are responsible for generating the content, the Department of Public Information will coordinate and refine, as well as present and distribute, the relevant information. This work will be based on the priorities laid down by the General Assembly, with the Millennium Declaration as its guide, and those established by the Secretary-General, including: the eradication of poverty, conflict prevention, sustainable development (you all know the CSD is meeting in parallel with us), human rights, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the battle against international terrorism and the needs of the African continent.

The new organizational structure includes a Strategic Communications Division, a News and Media Division and an Outreach Division. The Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, though reporting directly to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, remains administratively part of the Department and works in close synergy with us.

Mr. Chairman,

The Strategic Communications Division is responsible for devising and disseminating United Nations messages. Staffed by communications professionals specializing in the substantive areas of the Organization's work and functioning in close cooperation with the relevant substantive departments, the Division is responsible for developing communications strategies to promote the work of the United Nations on priority issues.

A new element in the operating system, resulting from the reform of DPI, is the introduction of the concept of the Secretariat departments as "clients", which identify their own priorities, and the Department of Public Information as "service provider", working along clear guidelines given to us by the Departments. The issue-driven promotional campaigns which the Division will devise will be implemented using all the assets of the Department, including through print,

radio, television and Internet, through working with the media, outreach to civil society, private sector partnerships and, at the local level, through the United Nations information centres.

A vital aspect of this new approach is its extension to the field. Under the Department's new structure, the network of information centres, services and information components of UN Offices have been made an integral part of this Division.

I would also like to refer to the Office of Internal Oversight Services review of the structure and operations of United Nations information centres, which you have before you in *A/57/747*. It includes 15 recommendations that will serve to streamline and revitalize the operations of the centres. I am pleased to report that DPI is already taking steps to address the issues raised, such as the submission by all UNICs of an annual plan setting their proposed activities around strategically selected messages.

Another mechanism to encourage strategic partnerships within the United Nations system is the work of the revitalized UN Communications Group. At the weekly meeting at UN Headquarters which I chair, this common communications platform provides a forum for consultation and coordination on communications policies, issues and programmes of the UN system.

A good example of the new partnership between DPI and the organizations of the UN system is the communications strategy being developed for the World Summit on the Information Society (2003 and 2005) in cooperation with the International Telecommunications Union. The Department is taking an active part in the UN Information and Communications Technology Task Force, as it prepares for the world summit. In particular, we are working toward engaging the media as stakeholders of the information society, and emphasizing the role of freedom of speech and the press. In this connection, DPI, in association with the TV industry and the Government of Switzerland, is organizing a parallel event in Geneva in December 2003, the World Electronic Media Forum, which will focus on the role of the electronic media in the information society. The current campaign for the International Year of Freshwater (2003) is another DPI effort that has involved many UN system partners.

We have also taken into account the General Assembly's call for the United Nations to enhance its public information activities in support of development in Africa. The Africa Section, now located in the Strategic Communications Division, is working closely with its client departments, including the newly formed Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, to formulate comprehensive communications campaigns that highlight priority issues on Africa's development agenda. The magazines, *Africa Recovery* and *Afrique Relance*, continue to provide a valuable means for promoting Africa's issues and concerns to an influential segment of the target audience both in Africa and elsewhere in support of the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

A key element in the successful implementation of the new operational approach will be the work of the News and Media Division. As you know, we rely heavily on the hard-working United Nations correspondents of the major media who are based at UNHQ; their knowledge of the complex workings of the organization make them an indispensable resource for us.

But we have also now taken advantage of the revolution in global communication technology to reach out directly to the media in all world regions, and I am pleased to report on the rather dramatic progress we have made thus far. In radio, for example, the voice of the United Nations, both from headquarters and the field, is heard daily around the globe, by about 17 million listeners in seven languages every day, thanks to the agreement of some of the world's major broadcasters to carry our programmes daily. I very much hope this Committee will support the long-term continuation of what, two years ago, had started as a radio pilot project.

UN Radio also enables our partner stations to cover some crucial UN-linked events which they themselves cannot have access to, such as news from the daily UN briefings on developments related to Iraq.

The establishment of the Internet Service in the News and Media Division — to create a more integrated operation for the delivery of the large quantity of multimedia content it provides — is one example of how the reform of the Department is helping to ensure that we serve the media better. The new integrated effort, which includes the Internet Service and UN Radio, will result in UN News Centre web sites in all official languages by the end of this year.

I should also mention that since the introduction of the United Nations News Service last April, over 15,000 subscribers in 130 countries, among them a large and growing number of developing countries, have signed on. News apart, the great strength of the News Centre is the ease with which users can instantaneously access information related to any particular issue from across the entire UN system, whether the subject be terrorism or LDCs. It is not surprising, therefore, that numerous external sites, including those of major media outlets are creating direct links to the News Centre as a source of breaking news and related materials on UN activities.

Mr. Chairman,

A new Outreach Division has also been created to firm up our partnerships with civil society, the academic community, the media and an expanding network of depository libraries. The newly created Civil Society Service, which brings together under one umbrella several sections whose work is closely related, is now far better equipped to meet the demands placed on it.

The benefits of this consolidation are already amply visible. The NGO Section, which serves over 1,400 NGOs associated with DPI as well as the 2,200 in consultative status with ECOSOC, continues to build new bridges with civil society, including the networks of non-governmental organizations. Its efforts have been strengthened by the Educational Outreach Section, which includes the UN Chronicle, which will focus primarily on expanding and strengthening our relationship with academic institutions. The number of visitors to Headquarters is on the rise, with attendance for the guided tour, which marked its fiftieth anniversary at the end of last year, reflecting a growing public interest in the United Nations. I would like to believe that this result is at least partly due to our outreach efforts.

Many of you had feared that as a result of heightened interest in the Internet, the Department was abandoning the print media. Let me assure you that we are conscious that printed materials remain indispensable in many parts of the world. The Yearbook of the United Nations, now a part of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, is on target to release its 2001 edition this summer. I am pleased to announce that the Yearbook is now available on CD-ROM for electronically-minded scholars and I don't want to underestimate these efforts to eliminate the backlog which had built up in previous years.

In another development with regard to UN publications, the new Publications Board, which was set up under the Secretary-General's reform programme as a standard-setting body with representatives from across the Secretariat, has begun functioning. A new mechanism has also been established in the area of library services reform: the Steering Committee on the Modernization and Integration of United Nations Libraries, which held its inaugural meeting in March and adopted an action plan hoping to maximize cooperation amongst the various libraries of the UN System.

The UN Works Programme, now part of the Outreach Division, is a multi-media platform that puts a human face on critical global issues and shows how effective projects can change the lives of ordinary people. UN Works has successfully tapped into the resources of media companies and leveraged the ability of UN Goodwill Ambassadors to reach global audiences through original television programming, including the latest "What's Going On?", a \$2 million TV Series funded by the private sector, and Public Service Announcements on major TV stations. I would commend its website to you: [www.un.org/works/](http://www.un.org/works/).

The changes that I have described are already working well, and will be further strengthened by your support for this new operating model. I invite you to join me and my colleagues in an informal briefing for the members of the Committee this afternoon in Conference Room 5, from 3:00 - 5:00p.m., to hear more about how the reorientation process has progressed and to give you the opportunity to obtain more information about our work.

Mr. Chairman,

To plan and implement further changes while remaining within our budgetary ceiling, we have had to re-prioritize some of our activities and are proposing to transfer resources accordingly in the biennium 2004-2005. In doing this, we have had to identify areas where savings could be made without diminishing the impact of our mandated programmes.

As you will recall, the Secretary-General, in his reform report, proposed to rationalize and consolidate the information centres located in Western Europe into one regional hub. This would release resources for a strong, efficient information hub and for redeployment to activities of higher priority, including information centres in developing countries.

This proposal was driven by the realization that now, perhaps more than ever before, it is essential to create a better understanding among people around the world of the Organization and to garner public support for its work. At the same time, it is clear that the resources

available at the field level to accomplish this, using the existing structural arrangements, are simply insufficient.

The plan to close the nine existing national centres in Athens, Bonn, Brussels, Copenhagen, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome and replace them with one regional hub, is reflected in the Department's submission for the proposed programme budget for the next biennium. The intention is to benefit from the synergies within the European Union and take advantage of the high level of computer connectivity in the region. I should like to point out here that the United Nations information services in Geneva and Vienna will not be affected, as they perform functions essential to the work of major United Nations offices in those cities.

As envisaged, the hub would be staffed and resourced to work in all languages of the European Union, and its programmes in the European Union countries would be based on a common list of UN priorities. We would seek to concentrate our operations in fewer strategic locations around the world and to equip these regional hubs with a critical mass of staff, supported by sufficient operating resources, to project a more coordinated message in the regions concerned. The new operating concept would also allow us to redirect resources to other priorities, including to information centres in developing countries, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 57/130 B. In particular, the centres in Africa and the Middle East would see an increase in resources, enabling them to deliver more effective and targeted programmes at this crucial time. Consideration is also being given to the possibility of expanding the UN information centre at the UN Office at Nairobi into an Information Service, which could possibly become a regional hub. We are also considering a hub in a developing country to cater to the needs of the Lusophone community.

In addition, resources would be redirected to two areas that Member States have asked us to devote more attention to: multilingualism, which our outgoing Chairman already mentioned, the United Nations Web site, and the systematic evaluation of the impact of our activities.

None of us enjoys closing an office which is operating well. In implementing the regionalization process, the interests of our loyal and hardworking UNIC colleagues who will be affected by the closure of offices, will not be overlooked. DPI and the Office of Human Resources Management have formed a working group devoted to this question, and are providing guidance to the affected staff.

I look forward to hearing the Committee's views on the Secretary-General's proposal on regionalization and to receiving your guidance on our plans to adopt a more strategic and impact-oriented approach to our communications efforts in the field. In this connection, the Committee requested in paragraph 44 of resolution 57/130B more detailed guidelines and criteria for the regionalization of the information centres. These have been prepared by the Department and are attached in Annex I to the reorientation report. I look forward to the Committee's discussion on these nine proposed criteria and to their endorsement.

I apologize Mr. Chairman, for the length of my intervention this morning, which exceeds the length in previous years, but as you can see we have a great deal on our agenda this year.



Mr. Chairman,

The Department has made significant progress in the use of the six official languages, thanks in large part to the emphasis which you, and the Committee, have placed on this issue. Let me cite some examples.

The Secretary-General, in paragraph 8 of his report contained in document A/57/355, presented proposals for strengthening the Department to support and enhance the United Nations website in all official languages of the Organization. Recognizing that the current resource capacity of the Department was inadequate to sustain the rapid expansion in the use of the web site or to keep pace with the daily addition of new material in all the official languages, the Secretary-General recommended identifying additional resources in the total amount of \$1,297,500. The General Assembly, in its decision 57/579 of 20 December 2002, requested the Secretary-General to proceed with the implementation of his proposal through the redeployment of resources within the Department of Public Information, giving priority to the language posts required.

Accordingly, the Department is using innovative approaches to achieve the goal of multilingualism within its existing resources. As a first step, as I mentioned earlier, some of the savings to be released from the closure of UNICs in Western Europe will be redirected to website activities, both at Headquarters and in the field.

We are taking a number of measures to advance parity among official languages on the United Nations website. Since its launch three months ago, the Arabic News Centre has already established its value, and we are currently redeploying resources in order to have, by the end of this year, a News Centre in the three remaining official languages. Steps are also being taken to make available the databases operated by the Department in all official languages. Among the many databases and web sites that are already fully multilingual, is the Dag Hammarskjöld Library's United Nations Documentation Research Guide. It is available through the new Security Council portal and can also be accessed from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library home page. Also available in all six official UN languages is the fourth edition of the UNBIS Thesaurus.

With reference specifically to the French language, thanks to a generous offer from TV5, we will shortly have access at Headquarters to its French language programming. This is a concrete step towards the promotion of a multilingual working environment.

Some of you may already know that the Secretary-General has entrusted me with a new function — that of Coordinator for Questions related to Multilingualism throughout the Secretariat. As I assume this important role, I am determined that DPI, already the most multilingual of Departments, with staff in over 70 countries and websites in 30 languages, takes the lead in narrowing the gap between current realities and the expectations of Member States.

Mr. Chairman,

Another vital aspect of our work, and one which I know is of interest to Committee members, concerns performance management. In line with the Secretary-General's reform programme, the Department has taken steps to make performance management an integral part of everything we do. This includes training of all our programme managers in evaluation and audience research techniques, as we started doing in January 2002, the first Secretariat department to do so. We are introducing an annual programme impact review to ensure the alignment of the Department's activities with its priorities. An important part of the Department's broader reform effort to institutionalize a new culture of performance management and evaluation, this annual review aims to make evaluation a part of the daily work of programme managers. To accomplish this, the Department has requested the assistance of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, through both its Management Consulting Services and the Evaluation Section. The former is helping DPI to complete a series of change management projects and the Evaluation Section is assisting the Department in the three-year review of DPI products and activities requested by the General Assembly.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department's ability to deliver effective and targeted information programmes will depend not only on how it organizes itself, but also on resource allocations aligned to its programmatic needs. New priorities have been set, a new operating model has been put in place and both short and long-term goals have been defined. None of the above can be achieved unless a revised programme budget is adopted that better reflects the agreed priorities of the Department. Mindful of this need, the Secretary-General in paragraph 43 of his reform report has suggested that, since the budget for the biennium 2004-2005 will be adopted in 2003, we should take advantage of this opportunity and "review and update the programme of work thoroughly" and "adopt a programme budget that is aligned with our agreed priorities".

To translate the new operating model of DPI into programmatic terms, we have changed the sub-programme structures as contained in the Medium Term Plan for 2002-2005. We now have a new sub-programme structure, which will enable us to meet ACABQ's request that we align our organizational structure with our sub-programmes: Strategic communication services, News services, Library services and Outreach services. The endorsement of this Committee is being sought with regard to this new structure and the related programme of work, which is outlined in the report before you, A/AC.198/2003/3.

The proposed programme budget for 2004-2005 has been prepared on the assumption that the regionalization of United Nations information centres in Western Europe will be implemented. The proposed programme budget for 2004-2005 also takes into account the transfer of the Cartographic Section to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Mr. Chairman,

The Secretary-General has stated that one of his priorities in revitalizing the United Nations is to restore public confidence in the Organization by reaching out to new partners and by

"bringing the UN closer to the people". His distinguished predecessor Dag Hammarskjöld understood the value of effective public information five decades ago, when he noted that, "to translate diplomacy into the language of the daily press and the headlines of the daily press, is not only a very difficult job, it is also a highly responsible job because, as we know, public opinion is one of the decisive factors in the modern world — perhaps the most decisive factor in the creation of policies, international policies in particular" — and that is Dag Hammarskjöld fifty years ago.

At this critical juncture, I would like to appeal to this Committee to send a strong message to the General Assembly and to the world: that the United Nations matters and that its voice must be heard. In a world that sees a growing number of walls emerging, dividing peoples and cultures, effective public information can greatly contribute towards bringing those walls down - so that we can see all that we share in common, and strive all the more effectively to fulfil our common aspirations.

Thank you very much.