

Statement by Mr. York Chor Tan, Representative of Singapore (19 April 2005)

I would like to thank USG Shashi Tharoor for his engaging presentation yesterday morning, which, although lengthy, was substantial and I personally found it informative and not in the least all boring. I would also like to thank him and DPI for organising the useful interactive session with us yesterday afternoon. We were clearly shown that the DPI has very much "mainstreamed" its work in every part of the UN system. It is encouraging that DPI is moving with the times, and it is comforting to learn of the wide interest shown in the UN underscored by the over 2 billion visits per year to the UN website. I wonder which other organisations in the world has a similarly high rate of visits to their websites. This, probably more than anything else, shows that the UN is far from being irrelevant.

In my delegation's view, it would be fair to say that overall, the DPI has discharged its work with a fair amount of distinction. My delegation would like to say well done but keep it up. It was wise for DPI to be the trailblazer in the UN on results-based performance, with which DPI staff can strive to stay on track with what is their work and not be distracted by what is not DPI's work.

Incidentally, my delegation had wanted to touch on two points which were dealt with rather extensively yesterday afternoon, which have to do with expectations. I would like to use this opportunity just to state our views briefly.

The first point is about resources, or I should say, the lack of resources — a problem that everyone of us is familiar with. In our daily lives and work, there are many things that each of us would like to do, if only we had the resources. Similarly, we need to recognise that DPI can only do that much with its stretched resources. DPI has to work within the resources it has, and not with the resources it would like to have. My delegation commends the creative efforts undertaken by DPI to seek partnerships with other organisations to leverage on their capabilities and resources.

The second point concerns the UN's mixed image. Some Member States expect DPI to fix the problem by putting out good news on what the UN is doing to neutralise the bad news. To some extent, the DPI has been doing that valiantly and creatively. However, as the USG has politely explained, communications — or public relations — is no magic bullet or panacea to all that the UN suffers from. Besides, there is no way that DPI can match the market reach of the conglomeration of modern media. Even more importantly, countering bad news by trying to draw attention to good news is a hardsell, even assuming that we had a lot of earthshaking good news to begin with. There is an old proverb "good wine needs no bush", or in other words, good merchandise needs no advertising. But unfortunately, when it comes to selling news, it is the exact opposite: good news doesn't sell while bad news sells well.

Ultimately, if we really want to rehabilitate the UN's image, we will need to address those sources of bad news that we can deal with. For example, the UN Secretariat does face various systemic inadequacies in transparency in decision-making, senior managerial accountability etc but various steps have been announced lately to tackle some of these problems. Beyond that, we need to recognise that the UN does take a lot of the flak that it

does not deserve, either due to wrong expectations being placed on it by the public at large and often by Member States too, or due to outright attacks against the UN. Since its early days, the UN has been a convenient scapegoat par excellence of certain quarters, but unfortunately, these days, the CNN multiplier effect amplifies bad news manyfold and instantly project it into every living room. So we need to understand the limit of what DPI can do to counter such deliberate bad news.

Singapore stands ready to extend its continued support to the Department of Public Information.