Closing remarks by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information (20 April 2005)

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

It is my pleasure to address the Committee again at the end of what has certainly been a rich and intense debate over the last three days and to express my appreciation to all the delegations who took the floor to comment on the work of the Department of Public Information. My colleagues and I are very grateful for your expressions of support for the work of our Department as the public voice of the United Nations.

We have listened attentively to your statements and suggestions, both during the formal sessions and during our interactive dialogue on Monday afternoon. I believe that many of your questions have already been answered in detail during Monday's session.

I would therefore suggest that, in view of my comprehensive and lengthy opening statement, and our extensive dialogue on Monday afternoon, I limit my intervention today to the specific issues and questions raised during the general debate, which I will try to address in clusters. Also, in the interest of time, in most cases I will not specify which delegations raised which questions.

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to thank all those delegations who recognized the actions taken by DPI in connection with its reorientation process over the last three years, and the advantages of our new operating model based on a strategic approach to our communications challenges. We intend to continue our efforts to make our outreach more strategic, focusing on several priority issues as a means of maximizing our limited resources for greater impact.

I am pleased to reiterate — and I am so pleased that many of you have recognized this — that DPI has led the efforts to coordinate a unified UN message, both through the UN Communications Group and in the field, where UNICs coordinate the communications work of the UN country teams. One delegate correctly pointed out the importance of improving the UN system presence and performance at the country level, and the role that DPI can play in helping UN system partners speak with one voice to enhance a unified UN image.

Indeed, DPI is very conscious of the importance of this issue which, I am pleased to tell you, will be discussed by the heads of information of the UN system organizations at the forthcoming annual session of the UN Communications Group. As has been pointed out, "system coherence" is one of the areas addressed by the Secretary-General in his report "In larger freedom: Towards development, security and human rights for all". In this respect, may I add that the new Chef de Cabinet will also take part in this session to address the issue of generating and sustaining support for the 2005 UN reform agenda.

Mr. Chairman,

I have of course taken note, with some concern, of the comments made today about the quality of yesterday's press release summarizing the morning and afternoon sessions of this Committee. I wish to assure delegates that they are indeed entitled to expect the highest standards from DPI when it comes to summarizing accurately the statements made in this Committee, and I have therefore pulled the summary from the UN web site. It is being revised thoroughly to more accurately reflect the wide range of issues raised in the General Debate. I do wish to once again assure delegations that certainly there was no other agenda at work; I assume some hasty drafting by over-stressed, and over-stretched staff members. But the matter has received the attention it deserves.

Mr. Chairman,

Several delegations referred to DPI efforts with regard to the support for the public information components of peacekeeping operations. In this regard, I wish to reiterate that, indeed, all activities of such components are financed, in their entirety, from the budgets of the respective operations. As for DPI's backstopping activities in support of efforts on the ground, these are covered from the DPKO peacekeeping support account, as I mentioned on Monday afternoon, and not from the regular budget of our Department.

Delegations have also emphasized the special needs of the African continent in the area of public information and communications. I wish to assure you that DPI will continue to pay special attention to these needs.

We have of course listened attentively this afternoon to the comments raised, in particular by one delegation on behalf of several, on the Portuguese-language capacity of DPI. I am pleased to inform the delegation concerned and the Committee that we have recently added a P-3 level Portuguese radio officer, so that two professionals are now available to serve the 5-minute programme that we produce in Portuguese. Increased resources could only come at the expense of other areas, and I am afraid therefore that I am not able to oblige the delegations concerned beyond that point within the available resources.

Web presence of Portuguese, on the other hand, remains a major problem, since we already have considerable difficulty in moving towards parity in official languages, and I will come back to the web site in other languages in just a minute. We would be happy of course to discuss innovative ways of exploring what might be done outside the regular budget when it comes to non-official languages like Portuguese.

Now, a number of delegations addressed the issue of dialogue among civilizations, which remains a priority for my Department. Many spoke favourably of our efforts to promote respect and understanding amongst peoples through an examination of different manifestations of intolerance. The series of seminars launched by DPI in 2004 under the umbrella "Unlearning intolerance" generated wide media interest, resulting in more than 600 articles in the media in the US, the Middle East, South East Asia, Australia and Africa.

These efforts were further reinforced through the activities of the UN information centres, which reported numerous activities during the last year, including a seminar on inter-religious

dialogue in Harare, a poster competition in Yerevan and media roundtables in Minsk and Almaty, all conducted by the respective UN information offices there. UNIC Sydney, in conjunction with an advertising company, successfully placed advertisements with the theme "tolerance free of charge" in Australia, and you can see a sample advertisement in the back of the room as part of the COI exhibit. Moreover, our centre in Tehran has organized a number of activities, working within their existing — and rather limited — resources.

I would like to remind delegations that the third seminar in the Unlearning Intolerance series is to be held in conjunction with World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2005. As several delegations have noted, freedom of expression is an "essential foundation of the Information Society", a position strongly taken by this Department on the occasion of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva. This year's commemoration of World Press Freedom Day will focus on the media's role in what we call "fanning the flames of tolerance", a particularly charged responsibility in the information society age when media can so deliberately be misused to promote hate and, indeed, to unlearn tolerance.

I would like to take this opportunity, if I may again Mr. Chairman, to reiterate my invitation, and yours, to invite all the distinguished delegates present here today to participate in this observance on 3 May. Details of the venue and time will be made available to the Committee certainly before the end of the session.

Mr. Chairman,

Virtually all speakers referred to the issue of the further rationalization — if I can use that word — of the UNIC network. I am pleased to note the constructive tone of the discussion, and the support by several delegations for the revised plan submitted by the Secretary-General. We hope that the Committee will equip DPI with the necessary flexibility to strengthen the existing centres, and redeploy our limited resources on the basis of emerging communications needs for maximum impact.

I have taken note of the clarification issued this afternoon by the European Union on their position on the subject, and I am happy to say that we look forward to working very closely with the countries concerned to strengthen the work of the Regional United Nations Information Centre covering the countries of Western Europe.

I believe we all agree that our ultimate goal is to have an effective and efficient network that will best utilize the limited staff and limited budgetary resources at DPI's disposal to promote the objectives and the work of the United Nations across the globe. While the Department of Public Information will continue to pursue all avenues to further reduce our costs and use creative solutions to maximize our resources at the field level, we are hoping, of course, that host Governments will extend extra-budgetary support, in cash and kind, to supplement our resources and strengthen the ability of our network to effectively tell the UN story.

Several delegations have suggested that new information centres should be established. One delegation proposed that the Department reestablish its presence in Addis Ababa where DPI has had no staff for a number of years. The report of the Secretary-General on the further

rationalization of the network of information centres (A/AC.198/2005/3) has clearly outlined that the resources at our disposal will not allow us to do this. In fact, I had looked into the possibility of moving a post or two, but moving a post without the resources to support it, was agreed by all concerned to be not an efficient way of proceeding. I do want to say however, that the United Nations Information Service in Addis Ababa, with some 18 staff as part of the work of the Economic Commission for Africa, has been doing a very good job, and we have had a number of meetings with the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa. Mr. Amoako and I have met, I would say, more frequently on the public information needs in Addis, than I have been able to do with all the other heads of Economic Commissions. So I am pleased to say we have a strong public information awareness in that Commission, and as we proceed with the implementation of our new regional strategic communications model of operations at the field level, we will continue to explore with our colleagues in ECA effective ways of working more closely together in the promotion of our common objectives.

Several delegations mentioned, and we have heard the Angolan delegation today reiterate, the very generous offer by the Government of Angola to provide rent-free premises to open an information centre in Luanda to meet the communication needs of the lusophone countries, particularly the lusophone countries of Africa. My Department has discussed this matter bilaterally with the Angolan delegation directly, and we intend to continue the dialogue. I must, however, reiterate for the benefit of the Committee that within our current regular budget, we do not have the resources to meet the substantial one-time and recurrent costs of operating any additional centres within our DPI network.

This does not mean that the audiences in Angola and other Portuguese-speaking countries do not have access to public information about the United Nations. The Desk for Portugal at RUNIC Brussels provides Portuguese translations of key UN statements, documents and a range of information materials to all UN offices in Portuguese-speaking countries on a daily basis. That is not just in Europe, though it is based in Brussels. Our records indicate that web users in Angola and other Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and beyond regularly access the RUNIC Brussels web site in Portuguese. Moreover, I have already talked about the effective use of the DPI's radio programmes in Portuguese in the five lusophone countries in Africa, and I would like to think that we will build on this rather useful platform of support. Without minimizing the importance and value of the generous offer by the Government of Angola, we believe that until we are in a position to take it up, in other words, until Member States decide to allocate resources specifically to that function, we will have to make do with strengthening our cooperation within existing resources.

With regard to a similar request by CARICOM, to post a National Information Officer in Kingston, which would presumably be part of the UNDP office there, again I am afraid the resource constraints have not allowed us to proceed with such an arrangement. However, I can assure you that DPI will make every effort to work with the Governments concerned to find practical solutions that would strengthen our communications outreach to the region. And certainly, the request to the Government, to look once again at the question of the cost of

premises in Trinidad, would be an important way of releasing operational funds for expenditure in the CARICOM countries.

A number of delegations have spoken specifically about the work of UN information centres in their respective countries, and I would like to thank them for their expressions of support. May I add that, in cases where any deficiencies or omissions in the work of the specific centres may have been pointed out to us — there was at least one yesterday — we will make every effort to address and correct them.

Mr. Chairman,

We talked about the World Summit on the Information Society when I mentioned press freedom issues. Several delegations have referred to the promotion of that second segment in Tunisia of WSIS, and the UN's own work towards bridging the digital divide. I am very pleased to let you know that we are working closely with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the lead agency for WSIS II, to publicize the Tunis phase of the World Summit, and of course we will cooperate closely with the host country in that regard as well. As part of our joint efforts, we are developing a communications campaign to bring attention to the crucial issues of the information society, including innovative issues of using ICT creatively for development. In the lead-up to the Summit, we have also been publicizing the deliberations of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms and the Working Group on Internet Governance — which are dealing with the two major issues that came out of the Geneva segment of the Summit, and need to be resolved. We are also helping to give greater visibility to the work of the United Nations ICT Task Force, which aims to promote information technologies for development.

Additionally, DPI, together with UNESCO and the World Broadcasting Union, is preparing a forum for electronic media as a parallel event to the Tunis Summit. This is similar to the one that was organized for the first segment of the Summit, held in Geneva last year, though on a smaller, a more modest scale, again for financial reasons. But the forum will span the range of issues that you will want to imagine: technical issues regarding the information society, the impact of ICT on developing country broadcasters, and broader issues such as cultural diversity, the dialogue among civilizations, the safety of journalists in conflict zones, and other considerations like these, which this Committee has demonstrated are of great importance to you, its Members.

Mr. Chairman,

A number of delegations addressed the main issues relating to the UN web site and expressed appreciation for the efforts of DPI to ensure its further multilingual development. I will now try to address the issues and questions raised by the delegations on this very broad topic.

As delegations are aware, ODS was made public and integrated into the UN web site as of 1 January 2005, while the "Global Search" of the ODS was only formally unveiled this week, after the testing phase. As a result, there has not been sufficient time to meaningfully assess

how ODS is being accessed through the web and what the overall impact has been in terms of increased traffic to UN documentation via the website. This is, of course, an issue of major concern to the Department, and we will be making a preliminary assessment in the report of the Secretary-General on questions relating to information, to be considered by the Special Political and Decolonization Committee later in the year.

As indicated in the Secretary-General's report contained in document A/AC.198/2005/6, we consider such web site traffic analysis as an integral tool for the development and enhancement of the UN web site. With some of the new software and hardware upgrades in place, we have already begun collecting the elements necessary for deeper comparative analysis of web site use. As of January this year, we have been able to log more parameters for analysis and also preserve these logs for further analysis later along additional parameters. We are now looking at the more heavily used sites with a view to ensuring adequate prioritized maintenance. The statistics on the number of overall page views of the UN web site in 2003 and 2004 sorted by official languages is being circulated to the delegations as I speak, as also are the number of page views of the UN News Centre. As for similar statistics for the General Assembly and Security Council sub-sites, these are being prepared and will be circulated shortly. However, I can state that, in general, these statistics follow the same usage pattern as the overall site.

The top layer page is the main home page for each language. The second layer pages are those that are reached from that top page, such as the News Centre, Peace and Security, Humanitarian Affairs and so on. The top layer page in English and French has been rendered accessible for persons with disabilities, and this feature will be extended to other languages shortly. Work is underway to provide the same functionality for the second layer pages, but this will likely take more time because of the number of second layer pages. The Press Releases are largely text pages and as such are accessible to persons with disabilities who have "assistive technologies" installed.

Let me also assure the delegations who raised the issue of parity on the web site, including on the News Centres, that we will continue our efforts to meet this difficult challenge within the resources available. In addition to the arrangements in place with the universities for *pro bono* translation of material for the UN web site, we will continue to assist and urge other departments to provide more language content. We continue to look for ways to strengthen the News Centre within existing resources, in part through providing additional functionality to these sites.

On the issue of the establishment of a UN system gateway, this is being discussed at the inter-agency level in the wider context of developing a content-management system for the UN family. With regard to an inter-agency search facility, the current version of the Google search appliance limits the aggregate content to be indexed, making it impossible to search the entire system. I think some of you may have heard of, or even seen, a very interesting column by a web expert describing the UN's "vast and rambling" web sites. The problem is that we are indeed a very de-centralized system, and our web sites do tend to ramble in a de-centralized fashion. But when the new version of the Search system becomes available later

this year, the UN will test it and, in coordination with the CEB Secretariat, we will undertake another attempt to crawl all the web sites of the UN system.

And on the specific question asked this afternoon, I wish to assure the delegate concerned that DPI will work with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to ensure the updating of the Chernobyl web site in the remaining official languages Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish.

Mr. Chairman,

A number of delegations also raised issues relating to the report on the new strategic directions of UN libraries (A/AC.198/2005/4). I must say we were very much encouraged by the number of positive comments from delegations — my staff counted at least seven delegations specifically mentioning this — on the new focus of the libraries, on the role of the Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated Management of United Nations Libraries, as well as on plans for revitalizing their services and activities, and extending their scope.

With regard to the concern that traditional library services may be discontinued, a concern that several delegations mentioned, I do wish to reassure the Committee that traditional library services will continue to be provided as long as they are needed, and UN documents in print format will remain at the core of the collections of UN libraries. We may be moving from "collections to connections", but we will not go to connections *at the expense* of collections.

However, UN libraries will continue to explore all opportunities to make use of the most appropriate technology for the tools and services they provide to the Member States and the Secretariat, keeping in mind the inequalities of local infrastructure and resources. The libraries will have to help address the challenges of a rapidly changing information environment by advocating enabling technologies and developing and providing training for their stakeholders.

It is the Department's intention to continue to support the depository libraries in their delivery of the most current and reliable information through better electronic tools and through targeted printed materials.

We are also looking into the possibilities for extending the role of UN libraries in public information, and we will try to organize more events such as the Conversations and Lectures Series commemorating the centenary of Dag Hammarskjöld's birth, which I hope many of you were able to attend the first session of a few weeks ago. There will be three more to follow this year.

In response to the specific request for more information on the new knowledge-sharing services of the Library, I am pleased to note that the services will include information management consulting initiatives which will provide direct support and coaching to staff members and delegations in managing information and sharing knowledge. Partnerships will be developed with other Secretariat Departments to implement the strategy.

I am sorry, Mr. Chairman, that my replies have taken so long, but I really did want to try and do justice to the bulk of new questions. I hope I have done so without addressing or repeating some of the points already exhaustively made on Monday afternoon in the interactive session. I should like to thank all of you who responded to the survey we distributed at the interactive session itself, as part of our responsiveness to the ACABQ, the CPC, and the Fifth Committee about measurable indicators of our impact. You gave us a response rate of 75 percent, which means that 25 percent of the delegates didn't bother to fill in the survey forms — shame on you! [laughter] But the rest of you have proved to be exemplary survey participants.

As to the survey results, we have some bad news, which is that you think DPI is only somewhat effective in raising awareness of the work of the UN in your countries. This is especially true for those delegates who indicated that they are participating in this Committee for the first time. The good news seems to be that the more you learn about the work of this Department, and the longer you participate in this Committee, the more positively you view the results of DPI's efforts, judging by the survey answers of those of you who are not here for the first time.

70 per cent of you said that humanitarian relief, such as the role of the UN in the aftermath of the tsunami, received high coverage in your country's news media; that is very pleasing. You also confirmed that the most difficult challenge we face, is promoting the MDGs. So it is good news for us that you consider Government organizations to be effective communicators, and we would certainly urge you all to use the means at your disposal, as Governments, to help us promote the Millennium Development Goals.

In terms of the most important issue under discussion, or at least the most lively issue under discussion during this session of the Committee: twice as many of you assigned the regionalization of UNICs top priority over other issues such as UN Reform and improving the image of the Organization. So while the few press reports on our opening session focused on my comments on the poor image of the Organization, which, as I said, has never been much lower, you have all said that regionalization of UNICs is far more important than that issue, and that has given us something to think about.

Overall, we are happy to see that all of you found the interactive session useful, and that no less than two-thirds of the respondents said it was very useful. Thank you for the many helpful suggestions you made on how to improve the format of this session. Some of you said that you should be allowed to provide us with questions in advance. We enjoyed the exchange, but we are willing to have that, too, and we will try to accommodate as many of your suggestions as possible in our planning for next year's session.

Mr. Chairman,

I really had better stop here, or I will outlive my welcome, and as you know, these days we are particularly well-disposed to our interpreters; we don't want to tax them too long. I hope I have addressed all the major concerns raised by the delegations over the last three days. I do want to reiterate that my staff and I remain available, both in your informal session, at your

working group, and in our offices when we are not here, to address individually any other questions that you may have.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.