

Closing Remarks by Mr. Kiyo Akasaka, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, at the Conclusion of the General Debate at the 29th session of the Committee on Information (2 May 2007)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,

Thank you for giving me the floor to address the Committee, as you conclude your general debate for this 29th session. Please allow me to begin by thanking all the delegations for their kind words addressed to me, to my predecessor, Mr. Shashi Tharoor, and to the Department of Public Information and its staff. I am particularly grateful for the warm and generous welcome that you have extended to me at the start of my tenure as Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information.

The many positive comments and encouraging statements that I have heard from you over the past three days are indeed heartening. You clearly have confidence in the Department as it strives to tell the UN story to the peoples of the world.

I would now like to try and respond to some of the specific questions and comments that have been raised over the course of the Committee's general debate. Of course, if, at the conclusion of my remarks, you feel that your questions and concerns have not been fully addressed, please feel free to contact me or my staff, and my senior colleagues in the Department at any time.

As the representative of India eloquently pointed out, "the most important issue we need to focus on is how to make the work of the DPI as relevant and accessible as possible to the largest number of users". And I agree with the delegate of China, who said that DPI is a "window" on the UN. We must open that window to the outside world, as widely as possible.

The delegations of China and Bangladesh, among many others, welcomed the strategic approach that the Department has adopted in its work, the closer integration of its field offices with Headquarters, and the improvements in the coordinated delivery of information on priority issues that has been achieved with the help of the UN Communications Group. This strategic approach is a way to ensure greater efficiency in DPI, as the delegate of China noted.

Allow me to make clear to you that the priority themes that I identified at the beginning of this meeting are "umbrella" themes — themes under which a wide range of issues can be raised and discussed, including the question of African development, as the representative of Morocco suggested; these and the other issues she mentioned will be addressed within our priority themes.

In the field, the important contribution that UN Information Centres make in this respect has been highlighted by many, with the distinguished delegate from Nepal referring to UNICs as the "lifeline" between the UN system and the public.

Several delegates have suggested that UNICs should be provided increased resources, both in terms of funding and posts. Indeed, the financial constraints facing the Department limit our ability to strengthen the work of existing Centres, as was mentioned by the representative of Nepal, or extend coverage to countries not currently included within the scope of our field offices — a concern cited by the representative of the Republic of Korea.

Regarding the establishment of an "enhanced information component in the UNDP office in Kingston", suggested by the Permanent Representative of Jamaica, the Department is simply unable at this stage to provide the staff for such an office. However we will be very happy to work creatively with the Government of Jamaica to see if we can find a solution to this.

In response to a request from the Representative from Yemen to appoint a Director of the Centre in Sana'a, allow me to assure you that the Department is currently working to reinstate this post.

Concerning the establishment of an Information Centre in Luanda — a request reiterated by the distinguished delegate from Angola and his colleague from Cape Verde — I must emphasize that the Department recognizes the importance of serving the needs of the five lusophone developing countries in Africa. The financial situation facing the Department, where UNICs are concerned, has not improved in many years and operating within our existing resources the funds and posts are simply not available to establish and maintain such an office. We will however, continue to be guided by the Committee on Information on this matter.

Several delegations, including Germany, Switzerland and the United States, have stressed the importance of evaluating the performance of UN Information Centres, a matter that I shall personally pursue. In this connection, I should note that the Department is, in fact, planning to conduct a survey later this year to assess the role of UNICs within UN Country Teams and to gauge how our UN-system partners view the activities they undertake and the services they provide.

Of course, the contributions from host governments to the work of UNICs remain vitally important. I would like to express our special appreciation to those host governments that provide voluntary contributions to support our work.

Monsieur le Président,

Je prends note des commentaires faits par de nombreuses délégations, et comprend aujourd'hui Sénégal, Tanzanie, Égypte, Union du Comores et Maroc concernant les efforts du Département en vue d'améliorer le multilinguisme sur le site Web, ainsi que de l'importance que vous attachez au Centre des nouvelles et à la Radio de l'ONU, en particulier. Je voudrais vous assurer que nous sommes engagés à améliorer davantage encore nos efforts en faveur de la parité entre toutes les langues officielles sur le Web, et que nous sommes tout aussi engagés à maintenir la qualité de production et de diffusion du Centre des nouvelles et de la Radio. Grâce à ces médias — et grâce également à la vidéo, bien sûr —, nous continuerons à relater l'information des Nations Unies non seulement objectivement, de façon précise et

équilibrée, mais aussi de manière concrète et humaine, montrant simplement ainsi comment l'Organisation rend service aux gens ordinaires dans leur vie de tous les jours.

De délégations ont souligné la nécessité d'utiliser les médias traditionnels afin de délivrer les messages des Nations Unies au public dans toutes les régions du monde. Dans nos efforts en vue d'élargir notre portée afin que davantage de personnes à travers le monde puissent entendre les messages de l'ONU dans des langues qu'elles peuvent comprendre, la Section de la Radio du Département de l'information diffuse des programmes non seulement dans les six langues officielles, mais aussi dans sept autres langues non officielles, à savoir le bangla, le français/créole, l'hindi, l'indonésien, le kiswahili, le portugais et l'urdu.

J'aimerais également souligner que la Bibliothèque et Centre de partage des connaissances Dag Hammarskjöld s'attache à rendre ses services disponibles dans toutes les langues officielles grâce, entre autres, à un site Web spécialisé disponible dans l'ensemble des six langues officielles. En maintenant et en développant le Système d'information bibliographique de l'ONU Thesaurus, la Bibliothèque et Centre de partage des connaissances Dag Hammarskjöld (DHLink) contribue à garantir la recherche multilingue par sujet dans le Système de diffusion électronique des documents. La Bibliothèque et le Centre de partage des connaissances Dag Hammarskjöld a également élargi son programme de formation dans le but d'englober d'autres langues, y compris un programme de formation sur les ressources du site Web de l'ONU en espagnol et en français, proposé en coopération avec la Section du site Web de l'ONU. Des programmes ciblés et des exposés en espagnol et en russe ont également été fournis lorsque cela a été nécessaire. En outre, la Bibliothèque et le Centre de partage des connaissances Dag Hammarskjöld améliore son assistance aux pays en développement grâce à l'organisation d'ateliers afin d'appuyer le travail de bibliothèques dépositaires et de Centres d'information des Nations Unies, tels que le séminaire en espagnol, pour la région hispanophone des Caraïbes, organisé en février 2007 avec le soutien généreux du Gouvernement de la République dominicaine.

Mr. Chairman,

The distinguished delegate from the Dominican Republic, on behalf of the Rio Group, asked about the possibility of providing press releases in Spanish, and other delegates have made similar points in respect to other languages. As Member States may recall, when the General Assembly established the Department of Public Information more than sixty years ago, it decided that English and French were to be the working languages.

Ever since, we have been provided with sufficient resources in the biennium budgets to produce our press releases of intergovernmental meetings in those two working languages.

While the Department appreciates the desire for press releases in other official languages, without additional resources to enable the Department to recruit and employ additional staff who can cover the meetings in those languages, this is a service that we will not be able to provide.

In reply to the question raised by the representative of the Russian Federation and the delegate of Kazakhstan regarding the possibility of providing webcasts in the Russian language, we shall consult with our colleagues from the Departments providing technical and engineering services to determine what cabling and infrastructure would be required, and what the cost implications may be.

With reference to the remarks of the distinguished representative of Kazakhstan, DPI was privileged to co-chair a meeting on inter-regional dialogue and tolerance convened by the government of Kazakhstan at the United Nations. And a cover feature on the environmental problems of the Aral Sea region appeared in the UN Chronicle and continues to be cited in classrooms and reference resources.

The representative of the Dominican Republic, on behalf of the Rio Group, raised a question regarding access to iSeek. I would like to clarify that iSeek, the Organization's Intranet, is an internal tool which aims to build a sense of community for staff at UN Headquarters and in the field. Its goal is to help staff carry out their work more quickly and efficiently through better access to administrative tools and knowledge sharing. It is the unique system that management and staff can use to communicate on a variety of issues of direct concern to staff.

The representative from the Russian Federation and the representative from Angola touched on the geographic and linguistic diversity within the Department with the need for Russian mother-tongue speakers in key offices and more staff from the Portuguese speaking community, respectively. I can assure all delegations that DPI will take these concerns, as well as the guidelines outlined by the General Assembly regarding gender and geographical balance, into account in making its staffing decisions.

In response to the suggestion by the distinguished delegate from Tunisia regarding World Information Society Day on 17 May, I would like to assure you that DPI is indeed contributing actively to the observance of this important annual event. We are creating a special web page in the six official languages on the day, and we will distribute the Secretary-General's message to UNICs for further dissemination, as well as provide the kind of reports on the Day on our News Centre site that are often picked up by other media. We are also hoping to organize participation by selected UNICs in the special events being held in Geneva and New York — through webcasting and the Internet.

Distinguished delegates,

I noted with satisfaction the positive statements from several representatives on the active cooperation between the Department of Public Information and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. This partnership has grown more productive and effective in recent years. We now jointly run training programmes for UN peacekeeping mission staff, we hold regular working level meetings across the departments and we jointly coordinate strategies to increase awareness of the complexity, cost-effectiveness and achievements of UN peacekeeping.

One of our chief goals in this endeavour, as the representative of Croatia and the representative of Bangladesh suggested, is to raise awareness of the significant contribution to global peace and security made by UN peacekeepers. The communications strategy implemented by DPI at Headquarters and with the peace operations has resulted in increased coverage of peacekeeping in troop-contributing countries.

Most recently, we have encouraged peacekeeping missions to help us encourage TCC media to run feature stories on individual peacekeepers, in light of the upcoming International Day of UN Peacekeepers on 29 May. DPI will help disseminate these stories globally and will also illustrate some of these individuals in a DPI-DPKO exhibition to be held at UN Headquarters. We are looking at ways to expand these efforts, by focusing on countries that are new to peacekeeping, and by targeting major troop contributors with the help of the UN Information Centres located in those countries.

DPI produces and disseminates news stories on peacekeepers and peacekeeping, filmed by video producers on our peacekeeping missions, to hundreds of broadcasters via UN TV's UNIFEED system. Likewise, text stories are disseminated to the media and other audiences through the UN News Centre. UN Radio has also increased its use of programming about, and for, peacekeeping operations, taking advantage of improvements in electronic transfer of audio files. And galleries of photographs from peacekeeping missions are now downloadable directly from the website.

In terms of crisis communications, an issue raised by the representative of the Republic of Korea, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, with the support of DPI, has developed a standard operating procedure on crisis communications which has been issued to all missions. In addition, DPI has provided guidance and training on crisis communications to leaders of peacekeeping missions and to their public information staff.

I note with particular interest, however, the representative's concern with the regional dimensions of crises, and I agree that DPI and DPKO should continue to take into account the need to gain support within the wider region where peacekeeping missions operate. We have been making efforts in this regard, with the assistance of UN Information Centres located within the regions of key peace operations.

With respect to the points made by the distinguished delegate of Bangladesh this afternoon, DPI would be pleased to provide the mission of Bangladesh with a compilation of stories produced on peacekeeping activities and shown on UNifeed.

On the question related to the criteria for producing radio programmes in non-official languages, the two Bengali programmes were consolidated into one for reasons of efficiency. There was considerable overlap between the two programmes. Feedback from our client stations has indicated that they are satisfied with the change.

With respect to the point made by the distinguished delegate of Comoros on Swahili radio programmes, as always, it is a matter of resources. As a matter of fact, the amount of time devoted to radio programmes in Swahili exceeds the time of programmes in other non-official

languages. Also, UNIC Nairobi produces daily radio programmes in Swahili, which reaches 9 million listeners.

As regards the point made by the distinguished delegate of Egypt, information is posted on the UN website as quickly as possible. Public information materials are sometimes not available to us in all official languages simultaneously. We have brought this matter to the attention of the content-producing offices and the office managing ODS.

In the response to the point raised by the delegate of Libya on the guided tours offered by DPI, I would like to point out that our guides do make remarks about the question of Palestine, particularly during the week in which the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people falls. The guides are briefed on a regular basis about developments related to the question of Palestine, and respond to any questions on this issue from visitors.

Mr. Chairman,

We are grateful for the positive references made by many delegations to the Reham Al-Farra Memorial Fellowship Programme for journalists from developing countries. The General Assembly has been generous in providing resources to this programme. However, even this has to be supplemented by the willingness of outside institutions to host our participants at no cost to the UN, and of outside speakers to address them free of charge. Particularly notable has been the hosting of the Fellows for a few days each year by the citizens of Rochester in New York State.

I am pleased to inform the Committee that if all the people we invited this year are able to attend, we will have succeeded in ensuring that each Member State eligible for consideration will have participated at least once

There is a good case for expanding the programme, and we shall certainly endeavour to do what is possible within the budget and the capacities of the programme.

Regarding the comment by the distinguished delegate from Switzerland that partnerships between DPI and civil society entities not be "one off" events, I could not agree more. One recent instance is our initiative on tuberculosis, which saw one partnership expand to include the preparation of a critically acclaimed exhibition, a briefing to affiliated non-governmental organizations, media outreach to United Nations correspondents and health writers and a cover story for the UN Chronicle.

We thank the representative of Tanzania for her recognition of the Department's work in support of NEPAD — the new partnership for African Development. We wish to assure her that DPI will continue its efforts to promote, explain and generate support for NEPAD, both within Africa and among the donor countries — its development partners in both the North and the South.

Among our other existing partnerships, we have one with a major university through which we have already arranged several video-conferences with global sites, an exhibition, and a project to promote UN programmes on campus radio stations.

A number of delegations have referred to DPI's role in promoting dialogue and understanding. Our "Unlearning Intolerance" seminar series was instituted less than three years ago, but has already left its imprint in the civil society and academic worlds, and was the focus of a recent op-ed piece in a leading daily in Bahrain. The most recent seminar, on "Cartooning for Peace" has been followed by events on the role and responsibilities of political cartoonists, in Geneva, Brussels and Moscow.

In the context of next week's thematic General Assembly debate on "Civilisations and the Challenge for Peace", DPI has helped set the stage by cooperating in the creation of a globally televised discussion on inter-faith dialogue which brought together various experts from around the world and participation at UN Headquarters.

With respect to the points made by the distinguished delegate of Israel on our Holocaust programmes, DPI intends to continue the programme on the Holocaust and the UN as mandated by the General Assembly to the best of our abilities, and within the limits of our financial resources,

Distinguished delegates,

Many of you have called for the Department to be given the resources it needs in order to more effectively fulfil its mandates. Your statements of support are an indication of the value that the Committee accords to the work that we do, and we are appreciative of your comments.

At the interactive session on Monday, we began with a video presenting the ways that DPI tells the UN story. Over the past few days, many delegations, among them Croatia, Thailand and Romania, have reinforced the importance of ensuring the UN story is told through the stories of real people on the ground and the impact the UN has on their lives on the ground. We agree completely with this assessment, and whether it is in an exhibit, a radio programme, a documentary or a feature on the web that we are producing, we strive to put a human face to the work of the Organization and to show how it is working for ordinary people everywhere in the world.

Even though the formal debate has now come to a close, our dialogue with the members of this Committee, through its Bureau, shall continue. I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations over the coming days and to the strategic direction and guidance that the Committee will provide through its recommendations to the General Assembly at its sixty-second session.

Thank you.