

STATEMENT BY MR. KIYO AKASAKA
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FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION
AT THE OPENING OF THE THIRTY-THIRD SESSION
OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION
WEDNESDAY, 27 APRIL 2011, 10:00 A.M.
Conference Room 1, North Lawn Building

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Delegates,

Allow me to congratulate you on your election as Chairman of the Committee on Information. Costa Rica, a founding member of the United Nations, has a remarkable and rich history of participation in, and contributions to, the work and values of the United Nations. We welcome you as a diplomat and negotiator, and we salute you as a life-long defender of the freedom of the press and expression.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation for the leadership provided to this Committee by Ambassador Antonio Pedro Monteiro Lima over the past two years. Last year, Ambassador Lima stated that the overarching objective of this Committee is “to collectively provide...the best possible policy guidance to the Department of Public Information (DPI) so that our Organization continues to benefit from the strong voice given to it by DPI.” Indeed, the strength of our voice depends in no small measure on the strength of this Committee’s support, guidance and encouragement – for which we are grateful.

The General Assembly, in its resolutions 65/107 A-B, requested the Secretary-General to report to the 33rd session of the Committee on Information on the activities of the Department and on the implementation of its recommendations on questions relating to public information. Through consultations with the Bureau of the Committee, it was decided that the information requested in the above resolution would be grouped into the three reports listed in your agenda.

These reports, organized according to our sub-programmes, provide an overview of the work and results of the Department.

I would like to take this opportunity to update the substantial information contained in the reports. While focusing on new initiatives, I will also address current and future challenges. At the interactive dialogue with Member States later today, in this conference room at 3:00 p.m., you will have a further opportunity to discuss and review various aspects of our work. I encourage all of you, especially those attending the Committee for the first time, to join me and my colleagues in this dialogue. I look forward to using this opportunity to introduce you to the new senior management team in the Department and to inviting our three new Directors to speak, and listen, to you.

Mr. Chairman,

At a global level, we are in financial and economic terms quite clearly in an emergency situation. For the United Nations to meet the growing demands and expectations of the peoples of the world, it needs to be robust, flexible and creative. It cannot abandon mandates or curtail the effective and efficient delivery of programmes, and, clearly, it cannot continue to conduct business as usual. Effectiveness requires us to do the right things. Efficiency requires us to do more with less.

The inter-linked challenges that we face today have occurred even as expectations of the United Nations are at a new high. The relentless pace of popular expression and assertion of popular will have inevitably heightened popular expectations. These are expectations not only of national governments but of the United Nations itself.

Natural disasters have challenged local authorities, national governments and international agencies in terms of relief, rehabilitation and energy security. And just last September, world leaders affirmed the vital role of the United Nations in the promotion of international cooperation for development, and in supporting the acceleration of the implementation of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals.

We stand in the very heart of the planned and the unplanned. And this demands of the Department of Public Information a new agility. We cannot compromise on our responsibilities, but we can better address them with creative partnerships and the enlargement of areas of collaboration, with Member States, with a broad spectrum of civil society, and within the Organization itself.

With Member States, this means taking you at your word when you state - as you have in successive resolutions - that the United Nations remains the indispensable foundation of a peaceful and just world, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all are protected, and that its voice must be heard in a clear and effective manner. You have also emphasized the essential role of the Department of Public Information in this context. For these statements to have meaning, we look to you, the Member States, to equip the Department and fashion your mandates in the most effective way - to allow DPI to help to fulfil the substantive purposes of the United Nations.

Mr. Chairman,

I need to bring a pressing matter to your attention. Member States have repeatedly noted the valuable role that the United Nations information centres (UNICs) play in building understanding and support for the work of the Organization in your countries. They do this through their engagement with stakeholders on a national, and, in some cases, regional level, and through their ability to convey information about the United Nations to local audiences in local languages.

We are particularly grateful to the Member States that continue to provide support to United Nations information centres. This support takes several forms, including rent and maintenance-free or subsidized premises, the provision of staff, and funding for travel. Unfortunately, while the cost of operating in the field has continued to rise, owing largely to security and costs related to premises and other factors, monetary contributions of assistance have declined by as much as 20 percent since 2008.

For the past two years, I have appealed to those Member States that host a UN information centre to consider either providing the UNIC with rent-free premises or subsidizing its rent. This year, my appeal is more acute than ever, given the pressures on the UN budget and the increasing demands on the Department. I would ask you to consider offsetting these pressures by offering other forms of support, such as providing DPI field offices with access to facilities to translate and print United Nations publications in national and regional languages at no cost; facilitating tax/VAT exemptions for UNICs; and, where needed, strengthening security for UN premises. For our part, we are examining ways to reduce set expenditures by changing the ways UNICs operate, and by reducing the size of our premises in some cases. We will continue to look for creative ways to ensure the effectiveness of our field offices.

In the light of the current situation, and with your general understanding, DPI will begin the process of reviewing the number and locations of UNICs from a strategic point of view, and will discuss this matter further with concerned Member States, with the aim of rationalizing and strengthening communications support to Member States and regions.

I know how important it is for Member States to maintain UN information centres; I have heard your strong statements. I have told you that while my predecessor made enormous changes with regard to UNICs, including for their regionalization and phasing out, I did not make further changes. I kept the UNICs as they are. But, over the years, I have asked you to provide rent-free premises and support to UNICs. Some Member States have, but others have not. I know that the budget situation around the United Nations is dire. In the months ahead, you will be addressing the UN budget, and you will see that the DPI budget will be cut, in line with that of other departments, as instructed by the Secretary-General. I appeal to you to provide support for UNICs, including rent-free premises.

We have 63 UN information centres and services. Excluding those in Geneva and Vienna, and the information components of UN Offices, we currently have 52 independent, operating centres. Out of these, 35 are provided with rent-free premises, or receive some other kind of support by Governments towards the cost of the premises. That leaves 17 information centres for which we are paying various levels of rent. Some Governments told us that they are looking into providing support, or committed to providing rent-free premises years ago. I urge

all those Member States who are not providing rent-free premises for UNICs to look into this matter. Our Department will start reviewing UN information centres, numbers and locations. I am asking for your support, to make the work of UNICs more effective and efficient.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department remains committed to promoting multilingualism at the United Nations. To date, the United Nations information centres have produced information material on the United Nations in more than 150 languages. At present, they have the capacity to work in 48 languages, including in five official languages, 37 non-official national languages and five indigenous languages. They maintain their websites in 29 languages. Meanwhile, new technologies present new opportunities for enhancing our multilingual presence in the world, and we are determined to make the most of them, through the use of traditional and new media. A separate report of the Secretary-General on multilingualism provides information on activities undertaken by the Department on this issue.

The Department of Public Information is grateful for the many expressions of tangible collaboration and partnership with Member States on the varied priorities of the Organization. Allow me to mention some of these collaborations by way of example:

- In March, the fourth annual commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, under the theme “The transatlantic slave trade: The living legacy of 30 million untold stories,” brought us particular support from CARICOM and the African Union. The commemoration also raised awareness of the plans for the construction of the Permanent Memorial in Honour of the Memory of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade at UN Headquarters.
- Earlier this month, we marked World Autism Awareness Day with a series of activities that raised awareness about the disorder that were supported by the Governments of Bangladesh, Israel, Mongolia and the United States.

- The Government of Rwanda continues to provide support to our outreach efforts on the Rwanda genocide and the lessons drawn from that tragedy. The support and cooperation extended by the African Union for our commemorative activities and outreach programme are also greatly appreciated.
- On 2 May, the Government of the United Kingdom and DPI will screen “The Relief of Belsen” as part of the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme. The film and subsequent panel discussion will examine the massive humanitarian relief effort by the British army in liberating the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in April 1945. We will continue to strengthen and broaden our outreach programme throughout the year.
- We are grateful to the Government of Turkey for its support for our coverage of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in Istanbul, later next month.
- In July, the Government of Hungary will host this year’s International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East in Budapest. The seminar will examine the current status of the peace process, including against the backdrop of the changing political landscape in the region. We appreciate the continued strong support from the Observer Mission of Palestine and Member States for our special information programme on the question of Palestine, which is now in its 20th year.
- In August, the Department’s third annual Global Model UN conference will be held in partnership with the Metropolitan City of Incheon and the United Nations Association of the Republic of Korea. The theme chosen for this year’s conference is “Sustainable Development: Advancing human progress in harmony with nature” in order to engage young people in the issues related to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or “Rio+20,” in 2012.
- And looking ahead to September, the 64th UN DPI/NGO Conference, with the theme “Sustainable Societies; Responsive Citizens,” will be held in partnership with the

Government of Germany and the City of Bonn, and will serve as a rallying point for civil society as we prepare for the UN conference in Rio.

Mr. Chairman,

In addition to our work with Member States, we continue to deepen our collaboration and improve our coordination with UN system partners.

Local UN Communications Groups – inter-agency bodies chaired by DPI – are providing UN Country Teams with strong communications support through joint communications strategies and coordinated media and public outreach activities. In June, when the principals of the UN Communications Group meet in Geneva for their 10th annual meeting, concrete steps to bolster UN system-wide communications are expected to be adopted.

As part of the overall strategic communications support the Department provides to UN peace and security activities, DPI works closely with the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations, Field Support and Political Affairs in shaping UN responses to crises and rapidly unfolding events, including most recently in North Africa and the Middle East. UN information centres across the region are monitoring local media to see how UN messages are affecting the changes under way, and have provided valuable guidance on how UN messages can be amplified coherently throughout the region and beyond most effectively. Our UNICs have also served as media focal points for UN missions in the region. Their language skills and knowledge of local media help to enhance the communication of the UN message. Meanwhile, UN social media accounts managed by DPI helped to explain the UN's role, the humanitarian situation, and the work of the Security Council on developments in the region.

The Department responded to the post-electoral turmoil in Côte d'Ivoire by providing communications support to the United Nations peacekeeping operation in that country, UNOCI, which itself became a target of direct attacks and a hostile media campaign. This support included the management and coordination of public messaging with the Department of Peacekeeping, the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, and UNOCI; and the creation of a dedicated UN Headquarters webpage to cover the unfolding developments. This

was especially important when the local UNOCI website was intermittently shut down or when it experienced technical difficulties.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department is also fully mobilized with our UN and external partners to provide communications support to a number of major UN conferences and high-level meetings, including for the Fourth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries. In addition to providing a Spokesperson for the conference and sending a multimedia coverage team to Istanbul, DPI is helping to implement the communications strategy in close cooperation with the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

To maximize the impact of the General Assembly High-level Meeting on HIV/AIDS in June, the Department is working with UNAIDS, both at the global and country level, on launching a series of reports, placing op-eds and public service announcements, and mobilizing celebrities. The next issue of the *UN Chronicle* will examine the history of HIV/AIDS and its social and development impact.

We are also working with WHO and major civil society partners to mobilize media interest in non-communicable diseases in the lead-up to the groundbreaking General Assembly High-level Meeting in September. And we have begun strategizing with UN and external partners for a system-wide communications campaign for Rio+20.

The Department has also made great gains in our new partnerships, including with the academic and creative communities.

Following the launch of the United Nations Academic Impact initiative last November, a global hub on sustainability has been created by the Black Sea Universities Network (BSUN), which hosted a conference on education, governance and sustainable development last month as an input to Rio+20. A similar conference is being hosted in August by the Handong Global University in the Republic of Korea. The United Nations Academic Impact now has ten global

hubs and its member institutions have, through an efficient process of e-discussions, contributed to the high level meeting of the Economic and Social Council which will take place tomorrow on the question of education. The Academic Impact will serve as a means for universities and other institutions of research to contribute to the Organization's awareness and thinking in critical areas.

Earlier this month, the third annual "*Envision*" MDG-inspired documentary film screening and discussion forum took place, with a focus on poverty and hunger. In February, the Secretary-General participated in the second Global Creative Forum in Los Angeles, which aims to increase the exposure of the United Nations to the American film and television industries. As a result of these efforts, the Department is collaborating with US film-makers on three new documentary projects focusing on the environment, climate change and energy issues, as well as with a television producer on a dramatized series featuring the work of UN staff in the field.

To inform and enlighten UN scholars and the general public alike, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has worked on several special retrospective digitization projects, including on the 60 years of the existence of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR; documents related to the 1948 Genocide Convention; as well as on the even earlier International Law Commission Reports.

The planned digitization of the Department's historic collection of audio and visual materials, which date back to the League of Nations, will take several years, and a great deal of investment. As funding for this enormous task of preserving a major part of world history cannot come from the regular UN budget, we have started the process of finding alternate sources of funding.

Mr. Chairman,

We have witnessed the power of the Internet and the role of social media tools in developments in North Africa and the Middle East. The logic and pace of communication in our times makes it essential that we increasingly use the Internet and social media to implement UN communications campaigns on a range of issues, including the MDGs, climate change, and

violence against women. We are using these tools to inform and update journalists about key events at the UN, and to build better informed and more inclusive online communities and coalitions for change.

To this end, our radio and television outreach activities have continued to expand, with encouraging results. The UNifeed distribution system, which makes short videos of UN activities at headquarters and in the field, nearly doubled the number of its daily pickups of news packages in 2010; and more than three million audio clips of meetings and UN Radio programmes were downloaded from the multimedia website in the same period. We have a strong showing on Youtube, where our videos have been viewed more than 2.5 million times, and on Flickr, where our photographs have recorded a million views since the page was launched two years ago.

The Department has also made further progress in leveraging existing technology to expand the availability of United Nations publications. United Nations e-books were included in an increasing number of mobile distribution services, including for the Kindle, the Apple iPad, and the Sony e-book Reader. And for the first time this year, the United Nations Yearbook is also available in a version for mobile devices.

I believe that our expanding partnerships and collaboration with Member States, civil society, and UN partners, as well as our effective use of traditional and new media, demonstrates our determination to use our available resources in the most strategic manner possible. We will do our best to comply and meet your and the public's growing expectations of the United Nations. And, as I stated at the outset, we look to you, our Member States, to provide us with the means and mandate to achieve our collective goals.

Mr. Chairman,

I should like to conclude with a word about this year's World Press Freedom Day, which will be observed at an event at the United Nations with the Secretary-General and the Director-General of UNESCO on 4 May. We believe that this Committee has a special responsibility to promote and defend the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression – in *all* media: print, broadcast, and on-line. This year, which marks the 20th anniversary of the Windhoek

Declaration, we have seen both old, and new, challenges to the freedom of expression. We look forward, with you, to using the occasion of the Day to draw attention to the need and responsibility of all States to defend these fundamental human rights as the basis for peace, development and democracy.

Thank you.