

Opening Statement by Mr. Maher Nasser, Acting Head, Department of Public Information (23 April 2012)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the annual session of the Committee on Information as you begin deliberations on "Questions relating to information," as the Acting Head of the Department of Public Information — DPI.

My task has been made easier by the fact that I am addressing a Committee with which the Department enjoys a close and collaborative relationship. Since its establishment in 1978, the Committee on Information has supported the Department of Public Information and helped to steer its work in directions responsive to the rapidly changing global information environment. Guided by your leadership over the past year, Mr. Chairman, and ably supported by the members of the Bureau, the Committee has demonstrated a clear commitment to help DPI become an increasingly effective public voice for the Organization.

On behalf of the Department and my colleagues, I should like to acknowledge the positive contribution of this Committee, and to express our appreciation for its continued support.

Mr. Chairman,

The General Assembly, in its resolutions A/RES/66/81, requested that the Secretary-General report to the 34th session of the Committee on Information on the activities of DPI 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 (A/AC.198/2012/1). These reports, organized according to our sub-programmes, provide an overview of the work and strategic directions of the Department.

Also available for your review is the proposed strategic framework for the period 2014 2015 (A/67/6), which provides the biennial programme plan for the three sub-programmes of the Department. As you know, the strategic framework of the Organization provides the basis for the preparation of the Secretary-General's proposed biennial programme budget, the programmatic aspects of which are required to be identical to the strategic framework as approved by the General Assembly.

I would like to take this opportunity to add to the substantial information contained in the reports. I will focus on new initiatives, as well as on current and future challenges. Later today, during the interactive dialogue with Member States, you will have an opportunity to discuss different aspects of our work with the Directors of our three Divisions, including myself in my other capacity as Director of the Outreach Division. I encourage all of you, especially those attending the Committee for the first time, to join my colleagues and me in this dialogue.

Mr. Chairman,

In Arabic we say, "A promise is a cloud; fulfilment is rain."

Last year, when we met at the 33rd session of the Commission on Information, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information assured you of DPI's commitment to complement our effective use of traditional media through an embrace of new information and communications technologies, including new media, to maximize our outreach, and to inform and engage new audiences around the world. We are pleased to inform you that much of that promise has been fulfilled, and much more should be expected.

In 2012, the Department continued to strengthen its digital media presence and bolster knowledge-sharing on social media platforms across the UN system. Social media is now woven into all communications campaigns — and has the additional benefit of driving audiences to the UN's long-standing radio, television and print resources.

The most notable current example is "The Future We Want" global conversation on sustainable development, which so far has reached more than six million social media users, setting the stage for June's Rio+20 conference in Brazil. But it is not the only one. Leading up to the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, we reached more than three million people in less than a week through posts in all official UN languages. Earlier this month, DPI facilitated the successful Google+ Hangout event, which allowed youth from around the world to pose questions directly to the Secretary-General.

One of the most exciting social media developments in the United Nations' outreach is our channel on Sina Weibo, the popular microblogging platform in Chinese. UN Weibo now has more than 1.9 million followers. These followers were galvanized in the September 2011 "live conversation" on social media with the Secretary-General, submitting close to 5,000 questions. According to independent statistics, UN Weibo ranks first on frequency, influence and overall ranking among all official Weibo accounts of governments and organizations.

DPI is not only building audiences through social media; its materials — whether originating from new or traditional media platforms — are increasingly being used by our many UN partners.

For example, while the UN News Centre received close to 3.2 million page views during February and March alone (in the six languages), News Centre stories are also being used on a daily basis to provide content for website home pages and social media accounts across the UN — including the departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs — as well as the online platforms of news aggregators, independent foundations and civil society organizations.

The Department has also been increasingly finding creative approaches to tell the UN story, from the priority issues of the General Assembly to the life-saving actions of UN staff on the frontlines of conflicts and crises. We are showcasing features and interviews in new ways, with stories from the field and presentations on the UN "behind the scenes" — all designed to

add a human face to the Organization and its work. The most recent example of this is the public service announcement earlier this month, when UN staff members whose families are directly affected by autism read out the Secretary-General's message on Autism Awareness Day.

The Department has also been building partnerships that enable us to bring UN information materials to new audiences. For example, All Nippon Airways (ANA) is now carrying UN Television programmes as part of its in-flight video offerings. Through a co-production partnership with TV5 Monde, UN TV's flagship television programme 21st Century is now available in French and will be aired on TV5. The national broadcaster of Turkey, TRT, has started broadcasting 21st Century, dubbed in Turkish. Deutsche Welle has begun distributing DPI-produced news content in Arabic, English and French on its global network.

While establishing partnerships with media outlets and using new media platforms remain a central focus of DPI, our commitment to diversifying our coverage in UN official languages remains unwavering. The Department, on a daily basis, provides a wealth of accurate, timely and balanced news coverage in the six official UN languages, as well as in Portuguese and Kiswahili. Its regular news products are increasingly being used as a source by print, radio and broadcast journalists, civil society partners, UN system bodies and field operations.

The Department's emphasis on multilingualism extends well beyond UN Headquarters. Addressing national audiences in local languages, 63 UN Information Centres, Offices and Information Services continue to support the Organization's work globally and to find innovative ways to do so. Ahead of Rio+20, UNIC Rio de Janeiro is working on a national campaign for "O futuro que queremos" in cooperation with the Government of Brazil. A contest launched by the UN Regional Information Centre in Brussels on water conservation has received 3,500 submissions from 45 countries. UNIC New Delhi is holding a contest for animated films about sustainable development. UNIC Ankara, meanwhile, has organized the showing of an exhibition about the Transatlantic Slave Trade at a metro station in the Turkish capital.

The Department is also taking concrete steps to ensure that the Organization is both boosting its environmental sustainability and diminishing its operational costs. Nearly 70 per cent of UNICs use computers recycled from UN Headquarters. They are also reaching local audiences with cost-effective PaperSmart information activities, such as UNRIC Brussels' e-Library Backgrounders on UN issues and topics.

The Department's Sales and Marketing Section continues to leverage the digital revolution to maximize the availability and impact of the Organization's publications, while helping to "green" the UN. In recent months, we used for the first time print-on-demand technology in India to supply titles to a local distributor. We also launched five new mobile apps, including the UN News Reader and UN CountryStats, which were downloaded by nearly 15,000 users in the first few weeks after its launch.

Another area where the digital revolution has significantly altered the way DPI provides services is the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. In response to the most frequent requests from

Member States and other clients, the digitization of older UN documents have been concentrated on the Supplements to the General Assembly Official Records. We expect that this will be completed for all sessions in English, French and Spanish by this summer. The Library is also developing electronic tools to enhance outreach to UN depository libraries and to other libraries and research institutions worldwide.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department of Public Information continues to strengthen international support for the role and activities of the Organization by engaging in an interactive dialogue with its global constituencies, including civil society and non-governmental organizations. In recent years, the Department has had tremendous success by taking the annual DPI/NGO Conference to various international locations. We appreciate the expressions of interest we have received from Member States to host future conferences. We look forward to confirming locations and invite other Member States interested in hosting the conference in the future to contact DPI. We also thank the Government of Germany for hosting the last DPI/NGO conference in Bonn. The joint declaration issued by the participants at the conclusion of that conference is now available as an official document in all languages. The outcome represented a major statement by civil society on the goals for Rio+20.

In addition to its traditional audiences among Member States, civil society and the general public, DPI has steadily expanded its partnership with both the academic community and with youth. More than 800 institutions of higher learning from 110 countries have joined hands with the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) to support the UN's agenda. We are very grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, and the members of the Bureau, for convening a UNAI programme on "Unlearning Intolerance" under the auspices of this session of the Committee. Co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of India, it will be in observance of the International Day of Jazz on 30 April, and will feature a film screening and a discussion on the role of jazz and music as a means of furthering understanding and helping to "unlearn" ingrained intolerance. We hope to see all the distinguished members of the Committee at that event.

One of the keys to UNAI's success has been the strong support extended by Member States, particularly by members of this Committee, and their national institutions. For instance, this year's observance of the International Day of Human Space Flight on 12 April was actively supported by the governments, space agencies, academia and writers from the Russian Federation, the United States and the Republic of Korea, and witnessed live through UN webcast around the world.

Another interactive session that will involve experts from Member States, academia, and students will be a UNAI conference on "Creating a Sustainable Future: Empowering Youth with Better Job Opportunities." It will be held on 4 May in association with the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Member States, especially those from the African Union and CARICOM, were also instrumental in the successful observance of the fifth International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Under the theme "Honouring the

Heroes, Resisters and Survivors," the commemorative week of activities paid tribute to the men and women who fought valiantly against the inhumane practices of slavery.

We also continue to work with Member States to further understanding of the universal lessons of the Holocaust. On 15 March, we screened a film on the rescue of children with the Permanent Missions of the Czech Republic and of Slovakia. Earlier, following the week of Holocaust remembrance activities in January, DPI's Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach programme observed International Women's Day on 8 March with a round-table discussion on women and mass violence.

And tonight, I invite you to a round-table discussion that will be held in partnership with the Government of Israel to mark the 50th anniversary of the trial of the notorious Nazi Adolf Eichmann. The event will take place in the ECOSOC chamber at 6:30 p.m. I encourage you all to come, and to visit the exhibition on the trial that we opened last week in the Visitors' Lobby.

The Department has also continued its efforts to shine a spotlight on the dangers faced by journalists around the world as they try to perform their work every day. Last year, more than 60 journalists were killed in action. This is unacceptable. Next week, on 3 May, the UN will honour freedom of expression by celebrating World Press Freedom Day, and I invite all of you to take part in the activities organized by DPI, including a high-level panel and briefing at UN Headquarters, to mark the Day.

Looking ahead to June, we are also very grateful for our partnership with the Government of Switzerland, which is hosting this year's International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East in Geneva. This year's seminar presents an important opportunity to refocus attention on the question of Palestine, against the backdrop of continuing change in the region.

Mr. Chairman,

Our effort to further engage the creative community has also met with some notable successes. Just last week, we organized in New York the fourth annual Envision documentary film screening and discussion forum, in cooperation with the Independent Filmmaker Project and the Ford Foundation. The event connected UN experts and NGO advocates with filmmakers.

Staying on partnerships with Member States, I would like to reaffirm that DPI is determined to make the most strategic use of our available resources. The distinguished members of this Committee will be first to realise that new and additional mandates, when unmatched by accompanying additional resources, cannot be met without diminishing our work on existing mandates. The resource crunch has particularly hit hard the network of UNICs. To successfully serve Member States, UNICs need your support. Rent-free or subsidized premises and resources for staff, travel and outreach are vital. Thank you to those who have provided support so we can better meet the challenges ahead. We encourage others to consider similar measures.

Operating under a challenging economic environment, DPI has been looking to enhance its partnerships with UN system organizations. The United Nations Communications Group (UNCG), now in its 12th year, has emerged as a strong system-wide communications platform for coordinating and harmonizing UN messages on priority issues. Increasingly we see our field offices using the UNCG platform to coordinate media and public outreach activities.

In January, UNCG Pretoria organized a retreat where 12 UN agencies agreed to promote the UN Development Assistance Framework and partner on the commemoration of Nelson Mandela Day and UN Day. In February, UNIC Mexico hosted the UNCG for Latin America. Discussions encompassed communications challenges, including Rio+20, youth participation and violence against women.

UNCG at Headquarters meets weekly to share information among UN offices and agencies on topics such as humanitarian crises, peacekeeping and human rights. The annual global UNCG meeting, to be held this year in Geneva in June, will also examine ways of strengthening system-wide communications.

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished delegates,

"Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try," said Albert Einstein.

Our decision to embrace the digital revolution was a move borne out of necessity. DPI, like the United Nations, must adjust to changing realities. But the turn towards new media is not an either-or proposition: we remain equally committed to print, radio and television to tell the world about the work of the UN. From the political upheaval across the Middle East and North Africa and the multiple crises in the Sahel region to the campaign to end violence against women and girls and ongoing peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts worldwide, the Department is reaching out to audiences old and new to explain how the United Nations is making a difference.

Today, DPI's focus is sharper, its target audiences better defined, and the tools it needs are falling into place. In the months and years ahead, we need to remain flexible and keep our options open. The United Nations itself is an evolving story, always confronting new challenges and crafting new responses.

The Committee on Information has been a close partner in this process right from the beginning. We hope it will remain so, in the years to come, as Member States continue their efforts to strengthen this vital Organization.

Thank you.