

Opening Statement by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information (28 April 2003)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a special pleasure and a privilege for me to address this twenty-fifth session of the Committee on Information. In India, where I come from, and I know also in Bangladesh, your own country, h,ntowmome(e e (l)3.6 (l57.52 41 21.66 Tm P.5 (t)3he5 (n)0259 (,)3.rtact BMC 1e5 ()6r)-1vp TJEM

even comparing its fate to that of the League of Nations. Others were genuinely concerned about what they saw as the United Nations' failure to prevent the war and the consequent weakening of the Organization.

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The world is slowly coming to realize that neither of these negative analyses is true. The breadth and depth of the disappointment in so many countries at the failure of the Security Council to find a collective solution showed how much was expected of the United Nations. We should be encouraged by the conviction of people all over the world that the United Nations is the institution where decisions on matters of collective peace and security should be taken. In this respect, the Secretary-General has said it is his belief that the United Nations family "may come out of this difficult experience more relevant than ever before".

For us in the Department of Public Information, the greatest challenge has been finding ways and means to increase global awareness and understanding of the multiple roles of the United Nations in the Iraq crisis. The need to ensure that the immediacy and intensity of the situation in Iraq did not overwhelm communication of what the United Nations was doing in many other critical areas around the world was no less challenging. We did succeed in conveying the message that success or failure in any one area, however important, does not make or break the United Nations. At the same time, we learned once again that the general public, and even the mass media, rarely distinguish between the role of the United Nations as a "stage" on which Member States play their parts and may agree or disagree, and that of the United Nations as an "actor", intervening with its agencies and staff in various situations. Let me abandon the theatrical metaphor and simply state: when DPI speaks for the UN, it therefore represents the Organization as a whole — you, the Member States, included.

Since the beginning of the crisis at the end of 2002, the Department of Public Information has played a central coordinating role in conveying a consistent message on the United Nations role in the Iraq crisis. I chaired a system-wide Inter-Agency communications task force to ensure coordinated information-gathering and a rapid-response communications strategy, and we issued regular media guidance and talking points to UN officials around the world. Initially, our efforts focused on the need to seek a peaceful solution, and therefore concentrated on the role of the UN inspectors and the Security Council process. Once the conflict had begun, we concentrated on the need to ensure the protection of Iraqi civilians and meeting their humanitarian requirements, as well as the centrality of the issues of Iraqi

allocation of limited resources among the many mandated activities and identification of programmes that could be improved upon or eliminated.

The Secretary-General took the process further in September 2002 with his reform report "Strengthening of the United Nations: An agenda for further change" (A/57/387), which

But we have also now taken advantage of the revolution in global communication technology to reach out directly to the media in all world regions, and I am pleased to report on the rather dramatic progress we have made thus far. In radio, for example, the voice of the United

Many of you had feared that as a result of heightened interest in the Internet, the Department was abandoning the print media. Let me assure you that we are conscious that printed materials remain indispensable in many parts of the world. The Yearbook of the United Nations, now a part of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, is on target to release its 2001 edition this summer. I am pleased to announce that the Yearbook is now available on CD-ROM for electronically-minded scholars and I don't want to underestimate these efforts to eliminate the backlog which had built up in previous years.

In another development with regard to UN publications, the new Publications Board, which was set up under the Secretary-General's reform programme as a standard-setting body with representatives f()0.6 (d)6.1.003 Tw 5ju (v)4 (e6.5 (r)-1.4 (og)6.1 5 648.72 418.32he)6..2 g10.02 -0 0 10.02 90 60

available at the field level to accomplish this, using the existing structural arrangements, are simply insufficient.

The plan to close the nine existing national centres in Athens, Bonn, Brussels, Copenhagen, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome and replace them with one regional hub, is reflected in the Department's submission for the proposed programme budget for the next biennium. The intention is to benefit from the synergies within the European Union and take advantage of the high level of computer connectivity in the region. I should like to point out here that the United Nations information services in Geneva and Vienna will not be affected, as they perform functions essential to the work of major United Nations offices in those cities.

As envisaged, the hub would be staffed and resourced to work in all languages of the European Union, and its programmes in the European Union countries would be based on a common list of UN priorities. We would seek to concentrate our operations in fewer strategic locations around the world and to equip these regional hubs with a critical mass of staff, supported by sufficient operating resources, to project a more coordinated message in the regions concerned. The new operating concept would also allow us to redirect resources to other priorities, including to information centres in developing countries, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 57/130 B. In particular, the centres in Africa and the Middle East would see an increase in resources, enabling them to deliver more effective and targeted programmes at this crucial time. Consideration is also being given to the possibility of expanding the UN information centre at the UN Office at Nairobi into an Information Service, which could possibly become a regional hub. We are also considering a hub in a developing country to cater to the needs of the Lusophone community.

In addition, resources would be redirected to two areas that Member States have asked us to devote more attention to: multilingualism, which our outgoing Chairman already mentioned, the United Nations Web site, and the systematic evaluation of the impact of our activities.

None of us enjoys closing an office which is operating well. In implementing the regionalization process, the interests of our loyal and hardworking UNIC colleagues who will be affected by the closure of offices, will not be overlooked. DPI and the Office of Human Resources Management have formed a working group devoted to this question, and are providing guidance to the affected staff.

I look forward to hearing the Committee's views on the Secretary-General's proposal on regionalization and to receiving your guidance on our plans to adopt a more strategic and impact-oriented approach to our communications efforts in the field. In this connection, the Committee requested in paragraph 44 of resolution 57/130B more detailed guidelines and criteria for the regionalization of the information centres. These have been prepared by the Department and are attached in Annex I to the reorientation report. I look forward to the Committee's discussion on these nine proposed criteria and to their endorsement.

I apologize Mr. Chairman, for the length of my intervention this morning, which exceeds the length in previous years, but as you can see we have a great deal on our agenda this year.

Mr. Chairman,

The Department has made significant progress in the use of the six official languages, thanks in large part to the emphasis which you, and the Committee, have placed on this issue. Let me cite some examples.

The Secretary-General, in paragraph 8 of his report contained in document A/57/355, presented proposals for strengthening the Department to support and enhance the United Nations website in all official languages of the Organization. Recognizing that the current resource capacity of the Department was inadequate to sustain the rapid expansion in the use of the web site or to keep pace with the daily addition of new material in all the official languages, the Secretary-General recommended identifying additional resources in the total amount of \$1,297,500. The General Assembly, in its decision 57/579 of 20 December 2002, requested the Secretary-General to proceed with the implementation of his proposal through the redeployment of resources within the Department of Public Information, giving priority to the language posts required.

Accordingly, the Department is using innovative approaches to achieve the goal of multilingualism within its existing resources. As a first step, as I mentioned earlier, some of the savings to be released from the closure of UNICs in Western Europe will be redirected to website activities, both at Headquarters and in the field.

We are taking a number of measures to advance parity among official languages on the United Nations website. Since its launch three months ago, the Arabic News Centre has already established its value, and we are currently redeploying resources in order to have, by the end of this year, a News Centre in the three remaining official languages. Steps are also being taken to make available the databases operated by the Department in all official languages. Among the many

Another vital aspect of our work, and one which I know is of interest to Committee members, concerns performance management. In line with the Secretary-General's reform programme, the Department has taken steps to make performance management an integral part of everything we do. This includes training of all our programme managers in evaluation and audience research techniques, as we started doing in January 2002, the first Secretariat department to do so. We are introducing an annual programme impact review to ensure the alignment of the Department's activities with its priorities. An important part of the Department's broader reform effort to institutionalize a new culture of performance management and evaluation, this annual review aims to make evaluation a part of the daily

