

Opening Statement by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information (18 April 2005)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It has become an annual pleasure, but nonetheless a rare privilege, for me to address a session of the Committee on Information, and this year the occasion of your twenty-seventh session is particularly special. Taking place in this sixtieth year of the founding of the United Nations, when the Secretary-General has made renewal of the Organization a top priority, the twenty-seventh session of this Committee will act on issues which will have important long-term consequences for the overall work of the Department of Public Information.

I would like to take this opportunity to warmly welcome the newly-elected Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Mihnea Ioan Motoc, and the members of the Bureau. I have every confidence that under Ambassador Motoc's able guidance, this Committee will continue to make steady progress towards accomplishing the goals which the Department has set for itself and you have set for us. I am grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, for your kind and encouraging words addressed to me. I look forward to working closely with you and with other members of the Bureau, not only during this session, but in the months ahead.

I should also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the outgoing Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, and the other members of his Bureau, for the support and cooperation they extended to the Department over the past two years. Ambassador Chowdhury chaired the Committee at a time when the Organization faced unprecedented challenges, and the Department undertook a comprehensive reorientation of its work. He was a true friend, sometimes a philosopher and always a guide, he helped steer the Department in new directions. I salute his vigour and commitment, and I will miss his energy and his sense of humour.

Mr. Chairman,

Change, as we have often been told, does not necessarily assure progress, but progress implacably requires change. In the past three years, DPI has undergone structural changes

that have produced a new strategic orientation in its work — underpinned for the first time in its history by a clear and coherent mission statement. We know that this alone could not make an operation more effective. We therefore took a hard look at how and why we do what we do. We therefore took steps to devise a new operating model, and to organize ourselves accordingly to make better use of our resources, both human and financial; to set up new mechanisms to be more responsive to, and therefore better serve our clients, particularly you, the Member States. We also reached out proactively to the media and civil society, including through the use of new information and communications technologies, and, in the process, gained the support of "non-traditional" partners in spreading the UN message. We also became the first Department in the Secretariat to train our managers in results-based budgeting and to develop a capacity to measure our performance in a credible and consistent way. In the last few years, the cliché "the culture of communication" has become a widespread reality throughout the Secretariat.

So, while I refrain from referring to DPI's "accomplishments" over the last three years — since those are really for you to judge — let me say that I firmly believe DPI has made "measurable progress" as a result of its reorientation. I will explain later, why I say measurable. I will also present several examples of this progress across the range of the Department's work.

Mr. Chairman,

At a time when talk of UN reform is on the top of the UN agenda, it is useful to recall that a central element of the Secretary-General's 2002 reform proposals was to enhance public information. The United Nations has a compelling story to tell, he said, and proposed that this story be told in a manner that would bring to life the Organization's central role in working for a better world for all. In response to this challenge, and working in accordance with a subsequent General Assembly resolution, the Department undertook a comprehensive review of its work that resulted, as I just mentioned, in the introduction of a new mission statement, a new operating model and a new organizational structure. Quite appropriately, the principal annual report on the work of the Department that it submitted to the Committee 5 (a)3.5 (ed0.2 g10.02 -0 0 10.02 9

the Bureau of the Committee, it was decided that the information requested in the above resolution would be grouped into the five reports listed on your agenda (A/AC.198/2005/1), the most comprehensive of which would be the one dealing with the continuing reorientation of the Department of Public Information. Also, at the request of the Fifth Committee, the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the review of the operations and management of United Nations libraries (A/59/373) has also been included for the Committee's consideration at this session. We have made every effort to ensure the early availability of these documents for your review.

Having said that the reorientation process has concluded, you might ask: what has been achieved in the course of this process? Is DPI doing its work any better today than it was three years ago?

I would like to take the next few minutes to address this question. Of course, I will not be able to describe all, or even most aspects of the changes introduced and the progress made in the past three years. There will be an opportunity to review this in greater detail at the interactive dialogue scheduled for this afternoon, which will take place in this room from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. I would encourage all of you to attend and to raise whatever questions are on your mind.

DPI's task, simply put, is to tell the UN story. The public perception of the United Nations, like

However, there is also no denying that some people are unsure whether our 60-year old United Nations is capable of organizing and delivering collective action in support of peace and security for all. Sixty, after all, is the age at which we at the United Nations contemplate retirement. But instead, the Organization is poised for renewal. The Secretary-General, in his recent report, "In larger freedom: Towards development, security and human rights for all", has presented a clear blueprint for reforming and strengthening the Organization and has urged Member States to take crucial decisions at the September Summit this year.

Since the last session of this Committee, the Department has faced an unprecedented challenge in mobilizing resources to engage with public opinion on so many fronts. We were quick to strengthen our monitoring of the media around the world and to reinforce our media outreach capacity. No charge went unanswered: we unleashed a blizzard of public information initiatives to counter attacks in the media, and a crisis communications team was mobilized, which included senior staff from the Office of the Secretary-General, the Spokesman's Office and DPI. The team set a daily strategy, not only on how best to respond to particular media coverage, but also on proactive and preventive action. Guided by this strategy, arrangements were made daily for senior spokespersons to appear on major television outlets and to make our views known through opinion ("op-ed") articles, interviews and letters in high-impact print media. Similar media placements by supportive third-

- x UN system-wide coordination that promotes collective use of vital resources; and
- x Strengthened partnerships with civil society and public and private sectors that create a global outreach.

A fifth element which runs through each of the above is the institutionalization of a culture of evaluation into the work of the Department.

Let me illustrate how these new strategic choices have influenced DPI's work and produced positive results.

The new operating model that we established is based on a clear conception that content generation emanates from the other departments and offices of the Secretariat and organizations of the UN system, while DPI manages its promotion and distribution, the messaging, tools and tactics to tell the UN story to the world. Consequently, a new working relationship has been established between the Secretariat departments, who as clients

- x It collaborates with the Best Practices Unit on lessons learned, policy standards for public information and on communications aspects of a variety of other issues, including sexual abuse and AIDS; and
- x DPI also backstops the public information components of a dozen peacekeeping operations and provides advice and guidance to them on communications

- x Using the Internet, people in distant countries are now able to view live webcasts of meetings at the United Nations. Statements made by world leaders during the General Assembly debate or in the Security Council can be heard and seen while the meetings are in progress, as well as any time later;
- x More than 10,000 video clips are being viewed daily by visitors to the United Nations web site from all over the world, on topics as diverse as peace and security, development and environmental degradation;
- x Webcast technology has also allowed the Department to improve internal communications. The regular town hall meetings conducted with all staff of the Department are now webcast to DPI offices away from Headquarters, so that staff at UN information centres are able to take part in a dialogue with DPI management on issues of mutual interest;
- x A different example, the new Network Interactive Content Access (NICA) system has permitted the establishment of a central photo repository, electronically accessible, with wider selection, better management, protection of the original quality of the images, faster retrieval and distribution of high-resolution images with embedded captions to frequent users in news organizations. You can literally see the results in better photo coverage of UN activities;
- x UN Radio has further expanded its partnership with radio stations around the world. It is also experimenting with new and innovative ways to broaden its outreach. For example, with a one-year grant received from the UN Foundation, it

Despite making significant strides towards multilingualism, I will be the first to admit that DPI has some way to go to achieve linguistic parity on the web. English continues to be the

d

x In the two years following the 9/11 terror attack in New York City, DPI's guided tour operation faced a serious crisis. I am pleased to note today that it has made a

footage on current issues such as the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, the state of displaced persons in Colombia, and Chinese peacekeepers in Liberia;

- x Under an agreement reached with APTN, the world's largest television news agency, DPI and its UNCG partners have established UNIFEED, through which they now distribute video material daily to over 500 broadcasters worldwide. It is a totally new initiative;
- x Thanks to the coordinating efforts of the Communications Group, the United Nations is being showcased now at Expo 2005 in Aichi, Japan;
- x Through a unique collaboration with an international polling organization, the Group's partners spearheaded a public opinion survey related to the work of the United Nations and on the Millennium Development Goals. Based on the survey results, region-specific information programmes will be adopted;
- x Through increased presence at the premier international television market MIPTV in Cannes, France, some 2,500 hours of UN content was seen last year in 60 countries by nearly 600 million viewers. I am pleased to report that at this year's MIPTV, which took place just last week, DPI was joined by a dozen UN system partners, and held discussions on new distribution partnerships.

Mr. Chairman,

UN libraries, through the Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated

role as

independent repositories and are moving from building and maintaining book and periodical

In this connection, I would like to draw your attention to the Report of the Office of Internal

and they did this without having had access to training programmes in evaluation techniques, which, for the time being, are only available to staff at Headquarters. Therefore, an important priority for us is to provide UNIC staff with the necessary tools, for example through online training modules, to enable them to assess the results of their work.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me now turn to the question of the further rationalization of the network of UN information centres, the subject of a report of the Secretary-General now under your consideration (A/AC.198/2005/3). This report takes into account the new realities and presents some new thoughts. Let me give you a quick run-down.

Last November, at the Fourth Committee, I spoke candidly about the reality facing DPI's rationalization plan. It is one of insufficient resources and rising costs. The rationale behind regionalization was to consolidate our limited resources into a critical mass in a smaller number of locations, and thereby make a greater impact. But two developments have undermined our original proposals. First, our experience in closing the nine UNICs in Western Europe taught us that it is more costly, at least in the short term, to close centres than to keep them running. In fact, it has so far cost the Department about \$3 million to close the above centres, taking into account liquidation requirements and the payment of termination indemnities to staff. To make matters worse, the unexpected decision by the General Assembly to cut nearly 25 per cent of the operational budget of UNICs — \$2 million — two years ago, followed by increased expenditures for security in the field, coupled with the fall in the value of the US dollar, has resulted in a situation where the centres, after paying fixed costs for these premises and maintenance, have little money left for outreach and programmatic activities. As a result, consolidating them no longer generates enough funds to

create a c (r)-16 (o)JEMC n.3 (am)(t)3.6 (al)1.5 (onge)6.1 (r)-1.3

of OHRM to introduce the NIO "C" level, to provide them with career development opportunities and to bring the NIO scale in line with that of other UN system partners in the field.

Our hope is also that if Member States agree to provide rent-free premises, additional funds would be available to strengthen the outreach and programmatic activities of UNICs. There is already some movement in this regard. We have been encouraged by the decision of the Government of Australia to provide rent-free premises to the centre there, and by the generous financial support by the Government of Japan towards the cost of the premises of UNIC Tokyo.

As you will recall, the *raison d'être* behind the Secretary-General's rationalization plan for UNICs was to enhance their effectiveness, thereby strengthening the UN presence at the local and regional levels. Closing centres was never meant as an end in itself. We believe, through these measures to recalibrate these offices, those goals can be met within the constraints you have imposed upon us.

We also hope to learn from RUSIC Brussels how rationalization works and what — if any — adjustments to that model are needed. Although it is still early for a full assessment of its impact, some of the advantages are obvious. RUSIC Brussels has already emerged as a highly desirable launching pad for many UN reports and initiatives. The centre is also able to coordinate directly with regional organizations on a wide range of priority issues. However, the RUSIC experience also serves as a reminder that there is value to maintaining a presence on the ground, particularly where a centre can provide a variety of information

I really have transgressed on your patience and that of the Committee. I do want to conclude by quoting Confucius who over 2,500 years ago said, "To see what is right and not to do it, is want of courage." Our decision to embrace sweeping changes in DPI's structure and operational philosophy was not an act of courage. It was a deliberate move born out of necessity. Three years later, we can say with confidence, it was also the right move.

Today, DPI's focus is sharper, its target audiences are better defined, and the tools it needs are in place. However, this renewal does not automatically translate into a success story. In [REDACTED] efforts to a