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35th meeting  
held on  
Monday, 18 November 1985  
at 10.30 a.m.  
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 35th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KORHONEN (Finland)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.45 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 78: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued)

- (a) REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION (continued) (A/40/21)
- (b) REPORTS OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (continued) (A/40/617 and 841)
- (c) REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (continued) (A/40/667)

1. Mr. ERDENECHULUUN (Mongolia) said that the main task of the United Nations in the field of information and communications was to ensure that mass information media were used exclusively to strengthen peace and mutual understanding among peoples. The current state of affairs in that field was cause for serious concern. The enormous imbalance in the flow of information continued to grow. Reactionary imperialist circles were increasing their campaign of "psychological warfare" against the socialist and other peace-loving States. The imperialist forces were using the mass information media to justify their aggressive acts, disseminate disinformation and conduct false propaqanda about the so-called need for an "arms build-up" by the United States and NATO.
2. Those forces were expanding their efforts to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign States and undermine their social systems. The subversive activities of such radio stations as Radio Free Europe, Radio Martí and Voice of America were well known.
3. The ideological propaqanda against the socialist countries could not be viewed in isolation from the policy of the current United States Administration, which aimed at undermining trust and preparing for nuclear war. It was hoped that common sense would ultimately prevail and that the forthcoming Soviet-American summit conference would be successful.
4. Mongolia supported the efforts of the non-aligned States to establish a new world information and communication order, which could be a vital factor in normalizing the international political climate and strengthening trust between States. UNESCO, whose activities in that connection were supported by the overwhelming majority of States, played an important role. The positive results of the recent UNESCO General Conference showed that that organization was as vitally necessary as ever. In that connection, the policy of the United States and some of its allies with regard to UNESCO was a further attempt to impede the restructuring of the international exchange of information on a just and democratic basis.
5. The elaboration of basic norms and principles to govern the activities of States and their mass information media would be an important contribution to the establishment of a new world information and communication order. The provisions laid down in such international documents as the Charter of the United Nations, the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, the 1978 UNESCO

(Mr. Erdenechuluun, Mongolia)

Declaration on the Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War and the documents adopted at various meetings of the non-aligned States could serve as the basis for such principles. The Committee on Information had an important role to play in that regard. His delegation supported the recommendations adopted by that Committee at its last session. In that connection, the attempts of certain delegations to impede the work of the Committee on Information in that field were cause for legitimate concern.

6. He expressed the satisfaction at the work carried out by the Department of Public Information (DPI) and supported the further expansion of the activities of the Department in providing information on the efforts of the international community to support the struggle of the people of Namibia and the Palestinian peoples for self-determination. Lastly, he stressed the important need for strict observance in the Department's activities of the priorities set forth in General Assembly resolutions.

7. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) observed that recommendations of the Committee on Information in its report (A/40/21) had recently reaffirmed the collective commitment to the establishment of a new world information and communication order. As things stood, the flow of information was very unbalanced in favour of the developed countries, particularly those with large press agencies whose correspondents dealt with events in the developing countries according to their own criteria and in the light of their own culture and traditions.

8. The rapid technical progress in the field of information and communications and the difficulty the developing countries had in gaining access to the new technology only aggravated their dependence. The international community therefore had a responsibility to support the developing countries' efforts to strengthen their information services and train qualified media personnel. Morocco welcomed what had been done in that regard by UNESCO, DPI and the Committee on Information.

9. UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) had financed many information and communication projects in the developing countries, even though its limited resources prevented it from responding to all the requests it received. The other UNESCO activities relating to the establishment of a new world information and communication order should also be pursued and encouraged.

10. The United Nations, through its Department of Public Information, should act as a catalyst for the changes needed to bring about a new world information and communication order and should assist the developing countries both individually and collectively to redress the current imbalances. His delegation hoped that the Department of Public Information's annual training programme for journalists and broadcasters from developing countries would be extended to include as many as possible.

(Mr. Zahid, Morocco)

11. Another aspect of the new world order, the development and strengthening of the flow of information between the developing countries, should reverse the predominance of information flows from North to South. DPI should be commended for its constructive co-operation with the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies, and the entire international community should encourage and support the efforts of that and other regional and interregional press agencies in the developing countries.

12. The main objective of DPI was to inform the peoples of the world about the work and goals of the United Nations. In so doing, it had to work closely with the United Nations information centres, and their combined information activities, with objectivity, impartiality and balance as the touchstones, should favour no one sector or tendency over another. DPI must remain the focal point for United Nations information activities, and the proliferation of other information services within the Secretariat should be discouraged, as the Committee on Information had repeatedly recommended.

13. The Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) should be encouraged in its work, particularly by providing secure financing for its publications and by strengthening its co-ordinating role.

14. The Under-Secretary-General for Public Information was to be congratulated on the excellent use he had made of the very limited resources of DPI. However, rational utilization of resources was not enough: the Department must be given sufficient funds to do its important work, which would surely hasten the advent of a new world information and communication order.

15. Mr. MORENO-SALCEDO (Philippines) said that the Philippines had been championing the ideas embodied in the concept of a new world information and communication order for the past four decades. In recent years, both the United Nations and UNESCO had creatively addressed and resolved vital issues relating to information. The Philippines was pleased that 90 per cent of UNESCO's total communication funds for 1986/87 were to be devoted to operational activities for the development of infrastructures and human resources. Moreover, IPDC was an excellent example of mutually beneficial and constructive co-operation between developed and developing countries.

16. The work of the Committee on Information had deepened the international community's understanding that information and communications were both one of the world's key resources and an urgent socio-cultural problem.

17. As the focal point of the information programme of the United Nations, DPI should more effectively cover the manifold activities of the world body. Unfortunately, the Organization's image still suffered from mass media distortion arising from ignorance, bias and careless reporting. Consequently, there should be better co-ordination between DPI and the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies and the news agencies of other countries. The network of United Nations information centres must also be made more effective; in many parts of the globe they served as the key link between a host country and United Nations Headquarters.

(Mr. Moreno-Salcedo, Philippines)

18. Few were under any illusion that the envisaged new world order would come into being overnight, since that required coming to terms with the tremendous gap dividing rich and poor nations and with deep-seated resistance to change. With a view to gradually building upon a common ground, the Philippines had consistently focused on areas of agreement rather than areas of potential conflict.

19. A particularly noticeable development of late had been the manner in which the mass media relentlessly scrutinized, censured and even abused Governments and institutions with which they disagreed. Their rationale for doing so was that they were only telling the truth. But what if what they said was not true? The public could not discriminate between true and false when only the views of those who possessed all the means of dissemination were presented to them. If the United Nations was truly interested in freedom of expression and communication, it should ensure the right of everyone to be heard. The true mission of the media was to present both sides of an issue.

20. Given the tremendous power of the mass media to influence events for good or evil, the developing countries were extremely vulnerable to the lopsided flow of information which favoured powerful and rich nations. The problem of information revolved around one central principle: the right to communicate; and communication must be based on diversity of sources and freedom of circulation. A corollary was the principle of responsibility, which should temper freedom of information and prevent it from becoming a dangerous instrument in the service of biased interests. By transforming the developing countries from passive consumers into viable producers of information, the gap between rich and poor nations would be narrowed and communication throughout the world enhanced.

21. Mr. KOUASSI (Togo) said that the question of information was quite rightly one of the most important before the Committee, since information was a force for freedom.

22. The Committee on Information was to be commended on its work, despite the frustratingly slow pace of progress in the balanced dissemination of information and a more equitable distribution of global means of communication.

23. The Special Political Committee had been assigned three essential tasks in General Assembly resolutions 33/115 and 34/182: to examine United Nations public information policies and activities, to evaluate and follow-up on the information and communications activities of the United Nations system, and to promote the establishment of a new world information and communication order.

24. Very little that was concrete had been done with regard to the latter mandate in the past 11 years. The concept had originally been formulated by the third world countries as a way of attenuating the control over the media by a group of Northern countries whose formidable power of dissemination had begun to take on the proportions of a cultural invasion. Underdevelopment would never be overcome unless the people of the third world became aware of their own values, potential and creative imagination. Yet even now the mass media were contributing rather to accentuate the acculturation that had followed upon colonization. The objective

(Mr. Kouassi, Togo)

therefore remained the same: North-South relations had to be reformed and a framework established for balanced information flows that would give a voice to those who currently had none. In the face of hostile resistance to their legitimate demand by the Northern countries, the third world countries had no choice but to explain their real intentions patiently. The new world information order would not restrict freedom of the press nor supplant the large international media services. The new order desired by the developing world was intended as a solution to a common problem and not as a way of replacing one hegemony by another. It sought a frank dialogue with the rest of the world. If those who were now passive consumers were not yet in a position to become producers of information, they had to be encouraged and helped to do so. World information would be the richer for it.

25. With regard to the Special Political Committee's second mandate, it had to help the United Nations to make its work better known and to rally world opinion to its objectives and achievements, through DPI and the United Nations information centres. The Special Political Committee must continue to evaluate the performance of DPI and determine whether it was not perhaps necessary to impose an order of priorities on its many activities in order to prevent them from obscuring its main goal, which was to make the work and the goals of the United Nations better known throughout the world.

26. Regarding the Special Political Committee's first mandate, DPI should see to it that the mass media served the concerns of the people of the third world, most of whom could neither read nor write, by emphasizing audio-visual media such as radio, television and cinema as vehicles for reaching them and helping them to advance.

27. Ms. GERVAIS (Canada) said that a huge country such as her own which had been an amalgam of two great cultures since its creation could never lose sight of the importance of the communication media as a linking force. Canada was responsive to the appeal of the developing countries for a new world information and communication order and believed that the new order should be developed gradually under the terms set by UNESCO, which was the main forum for consideration of the question. Canada was therefore alarmed at the confrontational tone and direction taken by the Committee on Information at its last session.

28. As part of its sizeable technical assistance programme, Canada was helping to improve the communications infrastructure of many developing countries and had made large contributions to IPDC and other UNESCO activities in the field. Happily, IPDC had avoided polemics and devoted itself to concrete programmes in various developing countries, particularly in rural areas. It merited greater assistance. Canada supported the particular suggestion that IPDC should more systematically study the role of the media in the advancement of women and include more women as participants in its training and consultancy programmes. For many years her Government had been helping to train journalists from developing countries through a programme offering them contacts in Canada with the Canadian media.

(Ms. Gervais, Canada)

29. Her delegation reiterated its firm support for freedom of expression and the free circulation of information. Canada's cultural identity flourished in a national context in which the continual flow of information from foreign countries was an everyday reality. Furthermore, in addition to other radio and television stations, Radio Canada, a private company subsidized by the Government, broadcast uncensored information to all areas of the country. At the provincial level, there were also public television companies which operated independently of the provincial governments. The Canadian system demonstrated the possibility that States could permit the development of national media without preventing the free flow of information from abroad.

30. The activities of DPI were of crucial importance for the Organization. Her delegation encouraged DPI to continue its praiseworthy efforts to rationalize and enhance the effectiveness of its activities. In that connection, Canada was concerned at the growing number of requests submitted to the Department, which must carry out its activities within the limits of the existing resources, and stressed the need to establish priorities and criteria in selecting programmes and ensuring their effectiveness. The Department should continue its co-operation with the non-governmental organizations, which could play an important role in increasing the dissemination of information on the United Nations and its activities.

31. In view of the great success of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women, her delegation reaffirmed its commitment to the advancement of women and commended DPI for its important contribution in that field. Lastly, she stressed the importance of returning to consensus decision-making on questions relating to information. The positive results of the UNESCO General Conference at Sofia clearly demonstrated that with the necessary good will much could be achieved on the basis of general agreement.

32. Mr. DAMIAN (Romania) stressed that the mass communication media must be used to solve the major problems confronting mankind and ensure international peace and security. The mass media must increase public awareness of the dangers posed by the further deterioration of the international situation, particularly the nuclear-arms race. He reiterated his country's position concerning the need to establish a new world information and communication order as an important part of the process of establishing a new international economic and political order.

33. All efforts to establish a new order in the field of information would have to be based on effective measures to eliminate the gap between the developed and developing countries in that field. The efforts of developing countries to strengthen international peace and security, make sacrifices to mitigate the effects of underdevelopment and cope with the consequences of the economic crisis and external debts were constantly ignored or distorted. Many of the leading mass media in the world preferred to give attention to minor aspects of life in developing countries and concentrate on sensationalist stories. In view of the common interest of all peoples for better information and greater mutual understanding, information on the major events in developing countries and the aspirations of their peoples could best be disseminated through authorized national sources.

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(Mr. Damian, Romania)

34. The United Nations should take into account the role played by the mass information media in international relations and should support national and international efforts to promote mass information aimed at increasing friendship among peoples, combating racism and war propaganda, and strengthening respect for the traditions and the national culture of all peoples.

35. He stressed the need to improve the United Nations information activities concerning the problems of young people. The specific recommendations adopted by the United Nations Advisory Committee for the International Youth Year and contained in document A/40/256 were particularly relevant in that regard. Paragraph 90 of that document referred to suggested information activities of the Department of Public Information. He hoped that that document would be adopted by consensus by the General Assembly and would become the basis for all future DPI activities relating to youth. That view should also be adequately reflected in the Special Political Committee's draft resolution on public information.

36. The specific measures to support the efforts of developing countries should occupy a central place in the general policy of the United Nations and its specialized agencies in the field of information. His delegation noted with satisfaction that the Committee on Information had considered that approach at its last session. He stressed the important role played by the United Nations information centres in providing world-wide information on the activities of the Organization. The United Nations information activities should aim at specific objectives and inform the international community of the major concerns of the United Nations in all the spheres of its activities.

37. Mr. TEO KAH BENG (Singapore) reiterated his delegation's support for the role of DPI in providing in-service training for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries. It was hoped that both the developed countries and developing countries with advanced communication facilities would also offer such opportunities. In view of the great interest in the programme, the Department should consider the possibility of expanding its scope and size.

38. His delegation welcomed the growing co-operation between the Department and the media organizations of the developing world and the intention of DPI to promote closer and more co-operative relations with the media in various countries by developing specific projects with the national, regional and private media organizations. As the focal point for the information activities of the United Nations, the Department was aware of the need to provide, within the limits of its resources, a balanced and comprehensive coverage of the major political and economic issues facing the world.

39. It was gratifying to note that DPI was aware of the importance of continually improving its methodology and had embarked on a computerization programme to facilitate the analysis and retrieval of information. The Department should periodically evaluate and review the effectiveness of its programmes in order to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.



(Mr. Teo Kah Beng, Singapore)

40. The call for a new world information and communication order had resulted from the concern of the developing countries about the imbalance in the global flow of information. It had been obvious from the very beginning that that issue would be controversial because it involved substantial economic, financial and political interests as well as philosophical and conceptual differences. In the 13 years since the start of the debate on that question, the developed and the developing countries continued to hold diametrically opposed views on the definition of such an order. For the developing countries, the issue involved the whole question of dependency and domination and their frustration at the fact that events in developing countries were often distorted and misrepresented by the Western media.

41. His delegation stressed the need for a clear and precise definition of the new world information and communication order. Developing countries must become self-reliant by improving their information and communication infrastructures. Changing the dependent status of the developing countries could be greatly facilitated by assistance from the developed countries and the relevant international organizations. In that regard, it was gratifying to note that the Japanese Government was actively participating in bilateral financial and technical co-operation with developing countries. At the same time, Singapore was aware of the important role played by the developed countries in the IPDC. It was clear, therefore, that mutually beneficial co-operation between the developed and developing countries was necessary in order to make progress towards the establishment of a new world information and communication order.

42. His delegation did not accept the view expressed by certain Western countries that there was no need for a clear definition of such a concept. On the contrary, there were many conceptual and philosophical differences to be resolved. Unless there was a clear understanding of what was meant by a new world information and communication order, no progress would be made towards its establishment. The first step, therefore, was to resolve the differences over the definition of the concept. In that connection, it might be useful for the Committee on Information to consider that question as an informal open-ended working group where the entire issue could be discussed freely. The discussion should concentrate on areas of agreement and should take a practical approach, avoiding polemics and ideology.

43. It was in the interest of the Western media as well as the Western countries to find acceptable ways of dealing with the legitimate grievances of the developing countries and to help the developing countries which upheld the principle of freedom of information to expand their communications infrastructures in order to bring about a better balance in the exchange of information and ideas between the developed countries and the third world.

44. Mr. Lewis (Canada) recalled that every other year his country, in co-operation with UNESCO, awarded the McLuhan Teleglobe Canada Award to honour a great innovator in the field of communications, Marshall McLuhan, and his legacy. Many applications had been reviewed by his country and UNESCO for the current year's award, and he was pleased to announce that the winner was Umberto Eco of Italy, a great communications philosopher in the McLuhan tradition.

45. Mr. HANNAN (Bangladesh) noted that little progress had been achieved either in the Special Political Committee or in the Committee on Information towards the establishment of a new world information and communication order because of disputes over such matters as the definition of the proposed new order, alleged politicization in connection with the question of Palestine and the unjust claim by the developed countries that the rightful insistence of the developing countries on a two-way flow of information instead of the current one-way flow from traditional sources constituted an attempt to control, restrict and stifle information. The developing countries wanted a plurality of sources of information, a diversity of views and freedom of expression; but they also wanted their hopes, aspirations and points of view to be heard and therefore wanted the means to have their messages transmitted correctly and on time. They did not wish to blame anybody for the existing imbalance in the distribution of information; they merely wished to correct it. The recent clamp-down on foreign media coverage in South Africa, the television coverage of hostage crises and international concern for the victims of recent natural disasters showed how much power the media had, and the developing countries wanted to share that power in order to improve their lives by informing the world about their deep yearning for a more equitable international economic order and their struggle to achieve self-determination and the implementation of their human rights wherever they were threatened, as in the case of the Palestinians, reference to whom could therefore not constitute politicization.

46. The developing countries wanted a new world information and communication order in order to overcome through better communication the barriers of geography, language, colour and creed, so as to create a world marked by greater justice and prosperity and free of confrontation.

47. His delegation strongly commended DPI for its remarkable success, as judged by the volume and intensity of media coverage during the commemorative session of the United Nations and the stimulation of media interest in the activities of the United Nations despite the competing demands on its resources. It also appreciated the Department's projects for expanding and strengthening facilities for the dissemination of information about the United Nations in political, social and economic fields as well as the facilities it provided for the training of journalists and broadcasters from the developing countries. It noted with interest the proposal to restructure the Radio and Visual Services Division into two divisions in order to help promote more effective management and further improve the capacity of programme delivery without any additional budget appropriation. It greatly appreciated the activities of IPDC and those of UNESCO in the expansion of communication technology and infrastructure in the developing countries, especially those in Bangladesh. Lastly, it appreciated the regular operation of the Bengali programme by the Asian Unit of the United Nations Radio Service and was pleased that the second round table on the new world information and communication order would be convened early in 1986 in collaboration with DPI and UNESCO.

48. Mr. RUIZ-CABAÑAS (Mexico) said that his delegation commended DPI for its efforts to improve the image of the United Nations during the Organization's fortieth anniversary year by helping the international media to provide world public opinion with extensive information regarding its goals and principles. Those efforts had been assisted by Governments and non-governmental organizations,

(Mr. Ruiz-Cabafias, Mexico)

and they highlighted the importance of information, particularly as a way to stress the value of multilateralism in international relations and the role of the United Nations as the only forum for resolving world problems.

49. The principle of freedom of information had long been enshrined in international law, and international developments in recent years had confirmed the urgent need to correct the imbalances between the developing and developed countries in that area as in all others in order to establish the more equitable relations that would promote development. Just as every country's national development plans and policies must respect the cultural identity of the people involved, a new international communication order must avoid concentrating the power of the media in a narrow group of countries, thereby allowing the dependent relationship of the developing countries in the information area to result in the imposition of a uniform cultural model. Modern technology had further increased that dependence, which had to be eliminated. The communications infrastructure of the developing countries must be developed as quickly as possible in order to break the information monopoly which undermined the fundamental human right of freedom of information.

50. His delegation accordingly joined the developing countries in supporting the establishment of a new world information and communication order and supported the efforts of UNESCO in that area.

51. His delegation also regretted the fact that the obduracy of certain countries had made it impossible for the Committee on Information to reach an agreement satisfactory to all, despite the flexibility of the Group of 77. His delegation disagreed in particular with those delegations that had warned against politicization of the topic, because information was certainly a political matter on which the Special Political Committee should adopt clear positions.

52. Mr. RIDER (New Zealand) said that in a world saturated with information, DPI faced an uphill battle to compete for the public's attention as it fulfilled its responsibility to disseminate information about the United Nations, without which the Organization's efforts to promote peace, economic growth and social development had little chance of success. DPI must maintain a network of links with the widest possible range of information agencies, and its product must be first class. United Nations information material must be carefully evaluated in terms of its probable use; its language and format must ensure maximum accessibility; it must avoid duplication with material already available; and it must be objective and factual in order to be accepted. In order to maintain such standards despite the increasing demands placed upon it, the Department must be strict in its ordering of priorities, and his delegation was pleased that several of the recommendations of the Committee on Information referred to the need for its activities to be funded from existing resources. His delegation also fully supported recommendations 52 and 53 contained in the Committee's report (A/40/21).

53. Turning to the establishment of a world information and communication order, his delegation regretted the tendency to treat it as an issue between developing and developed countries, because such an ideological approach oversimplified the

(Mr. Rider, New Zealand)

problem and was inaccurate. Grievances about the international media were not only a function of development but also of size, geographical location, language and resources. Even his own country, despite its relatively well-developed communications infrastructure, shared many of the problems of the developing countries. It had trouble keeping pace with technological developments and maintaining correspondents overseas. It was dependent on established international agencies for its news, and many of its entertainment programmes came from abroad. It too was often not well covered by the international media, in part because of its very remoteness.

54. Hence, a more productive approach towards problems which cut across ideological lines would be to focus on the improvement of communication systems through closer technical co-operation. His own country had assisted a number of regional communications development projects and supported the infrastructural development of information services being carried out by IPDC through training programmes and technological assistance.

55. The much vaunted need for free dissemination of information at the international level was meaningless without the free dissemination of information at the national level. Any actions by the State to determine directly or indirectly what news was published ran counter to the free circulation and wider and better-balanced dissemination of information that was being sought under the agenda item under consideration.

56. Greater co-operation to ensure more equitable sharing of information technology was essential if a new world information and communications order was to meet changing demands and he urged the Committee to seek consensus in order to achieve that goal.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.