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SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE
7th meeting
held on
Friday, 16 October 1981
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 7th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

OBSERVANCE OF WORLD FOOD DAY

1. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to recommendation 29 adopted by the Committee on Information which read as follows:

"Recalling General Assembly resolution 35/70 of 5 December 1980, Governments and national, regional and international organizations should contribute to the maximum extent possible to the commemoration of World Food Day on 16 October 1981, in particular through widespread information and other appropriate activities" (A/36/27, p. 42).

2. A special ceremony in observance of World Food Day had been held in the General Assembly Hall that morning. He was sure that all members of the Committee welcomed FAO's initiative aimed at drawing the attention of world public opinion to the tragic problem of hunger throughout the world. In the course of the Committee's consideration of item 67, representatives might wish to keep in mind the pertinent recommendation of the Committee on Information.

AGENDA ITEM 67: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/35/21, A/36/504, A/36/530)

(a) REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION

(b) REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

(c) REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

3. Mrs. NOWOTNY (Austria) observed that, throughout history, mankind's need and ability to communicate had been the mainstay of intellectual and social life. The enormous technological advances of recent years had, however, added a new dimension to that basic human attribute, not only increasing the amount of information available but also the possibility for people to observe and participate in events far removed from them. With the technical possibility of universal communication systems, a new era in communication had dawned.

4. Since information and communication played a significant role in the relations among States and in promoting understanding between peoples with different political, economic, social and cultural backgrounds, the United Nations bore a special responsibility in that field. Not only did it inform the public about its work and objectives but it also promoted the awareness that global problems could be solved only through increased international co-operation. The United Nations also disseminated information about Member States themselves and their attitudes to major problems on a much broader basis than could be achieved through bilateral contacts.

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(Mrs. Nowotny, Austria)

5. The importance of information and communication in the context of economic development in general could not be over-emphasized, and their potential warranted the formulation of comprehensive communication policies. Her delegation welcomed the fact that a number of important steps had been taken in that direction and that the new awareness was reflected in the Declarations of Yaounde, Kuala Lumpur and San Jose. It also appreciated the setting-up through UNESCO of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), which provided an effective means of tackling the information and communication problem by strengthening the possibilities of developing countries within a multilateral framework.

6. In the course of the Committee's debates, the prevailing system for the distribution of information had been the subject of growing criticism. Distrust had been expressed of the Doctrine of the free flow of information on the grounds that that concept had simply enabled the major news agencies to impose their political beliefs and patterns of thinking on developing societies, and increasing attention had been directed towards imbalances in the flow of information between developed and developing countries. Her country recognized the need to exchange the dependence of the developing countries in the field of information and communication for relationships based on interdependence and co-operation. Adjustments in those countries' share in the production and transmission of news could be made through increased co-operation at the regional and interregional levels and through transfers of appropriate technology. Further attention would also have to be given to training journalists from developing countries, for instance by creating or improving educational facilities and by providing scholarships for the training of journalists and broadcasters.

7. In that connexion, her delegation appreciated the continuing United Nations Programme for Journalists and Broadcasters from Developing Countries. Austria, for its part, had always endeavoured to increase co-operation among news agencies from different regions. The Austrian Press Agency had helped to establish co-operation between European and Arab news agencies and also bilateral co-operation between national news agencies. Austria had participated in the school for the training of journalists at Nairobi since its foundation, and had also trained journalists from developing countries at the Austrian Press Agency and in the Austrian Broadcasting and Television System.

8. In many cases, well-founded criticism of the existing information order had been combined with an attack on the principles of freedom of information, freedom of opinion and freedom of expression. Such attacks were as short-sighted as they were dangerous, and must be opposed in the strongest possible terms. Those freedoms were basic rights which included the freedom of the media in all their dimensions. That concept had evolved out of an intellectual historical process and had been fought for in revolutions and reforms against State and church censorship and the concept of a purely vertical flow of information. In Austria, the enjoyment of those rights formed part of the fundamental principles of the Constitution, and they were scrupulously implemented. Those rights presupposed free access to all sources of information and the free and uninhibited flow and distribution of information; and there should be no attempt to change that concept. Instead, countries should

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(Mrs. Nowotny, Austria)

bear in mind the extraordinary role which freedom of information and freedom of the media had played in forming the societies of the pluralistic democracies, and should strive to guarantee freedom of information as one of democracy's most precious acquisitions and at the same time as a vital safeguard of democracy.

9. With regard to the information activities of the United Nations itself, her delegation wished to commend the Under-Secretary-General and staff of the Department of Public Information for their work, and to express appreciation for the changes and improvements being undertaken in the Department.

10. Her delegation had participated in the sessions of the Committee on Information as an observer and considered its work to be useful and constructive. Of the recommendations which the Committee had prepared for submission to the General Assembly, some were ready for implementation while others had considerable technical and financial implications which would require further study. Such major steps as the creation of a United Nations communications satellite system were not to be undertaken lightly. Her delegation associated itself with the recommendations concerning the Joint United Nations Information Committee, since efficient inter-agency co-ordination was vital in order to avoid overlapping and to project a unified image of the United Nations system and its common goals. Over the past 35 years, the functions of the United Nations had changed, requiring also changes in the concepts governing the dissemination of public information and in the methods used to that end. There was much work to be done by the Committee on Information in that connexion.

11. Mr. NISIBORI (Japan) expressed the hope that the Committee on Information would continue its useful discussions on various questions relating to the United Nations system of public information, and particularly on ways of making it more effective in mobilizing public understanding and support of United Nations activities.

12. He felt compelled to observe, however, that in the course of the discussions in the Committee on Information, particularly on such issues as the promotion of a new world information and communication order, the geographical distribution of personnel and the review of the regional structure of the Radio and Visual Services Division of DPI, remarks had frequently been made which seemed to reflect divergent views between North and South or East and West. If such a trend were allowed to continue, it could raise obstacles to meaningful discussions in the Committee and could change it into a forum of confrontation rather than one of fruitful dialogue. Differences of opinion and conflicting interests among the various regional groups had almost threatened the Committee's tradition of decision-making by consensus; and it was thanks to the diligent efforts of the Working Group that the Committee had finally succeeded in unifying its draft recommendations. He hoped that that constructive approach would continue to be followed; and he regretted that, in the course of drafting the recommendations, there had been attempts to include points that had not been discussed at all or had not been discussed fully in the Committee.

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(Mr. Nisibori, Japan)

13. At its most recent session, the Committee on Information had taken out for the first time the proposed programme budget for 1982-1983 and the draft medium-term plan for 1984-1989. On that occasion, there had been many criticisms of specific activities carried out by DPI. The criticism stemmed perhaps from the fact that the Department had been asked to perform activities in accordance with various resolutions and decisions which had been adopted by a variety of United Nations organs, but which some Member States had voted against or had abstained from voting on at the time. However, the purpose of the Committee's consideration of the proposed budget and draft medium-term plan was not to put constraints on DPI's activities but rather to study the details of those activities in order to set priorities and offer guidelines. He feared that there might be a tendency to turn the Committee into a kind of watchdog or censoring organ of United Nations public information policies and activities, a tendency which could result in the curtailment of such activities.

14. He also regretted that there had been demands for further decentralization of United Nations public information activities, including those of DPI. Such a move would reduce the Department's effectiveness and the volume of United Nations public information activities, and he hoped that every effort would be made to prevent such a development so that public information activities could be carried out effectively and independently of any difference of views between North and South or East and West.

15. There was wide recognition that there was a disparity in the flow of information between developed and developing countries, and that that disparity must be redressed. His delegation believed that that should be done not by imposing State or international controls on the flow of information, but rather by gradually enhancing the capabilities of developing countries to disseminate information. Bilateral and multilateral co-operation for the purpose of strengthening the information and communication infrastructures of developing countries was the most effective means of correcting the disparity; and, in that connexion, his delegation wished to emphasize the importance of the independence of the mass media in accordance with the principles of freedom and expression and freedom of the Press.

16. His Government understood that United Nations public information policies and the activities of DPI were to be examined from two standpoints: first, how to strengthen public information activities and, secondly, how to contribute to a new world information and communication order. The primary task of DPI, however, was to strengthen the public information activities of the United Nations. Recent demands for the expansion of those activities had been accompanied by demands for additional financial resources. In his view, such expansion should be pursued by making the most effective use of the limited resources available. It must be borne in mind that the ultimate objective of public information activities was not only the widest possible distribution of information on United Nations activities but also a deeper understanding of the Organization by people throughout the world.

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(Mr. Nisibori, Japan)

17. His delegation greatly appreciated the efforts of the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) to establish system-wide co-ordination of information policies and activities. Although JUNIC's task was formidable, he hoped that it would step up its efforts to avoid as far as possible a wasteful duplication of activities, to ensure efficient utilization of financial resources and to encourage the undertaking of joint programmes.

18. With regard to the participation and co-operation of various organizations within the United Nations system--particularly UNESCO--in fulfilling the mandate of the Committee on Information, his delegation believed that the Committee must for the time being oversee UNESCO's ongoing work with regard to a new world information and communication order.

19. With respect to assistance to developing countries in the field of information and communication, he was pleased to note that the first session of the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) had decided to identify areas of need among developing countries in the field of communications development, methods of determining priorities, criteria governing the submission and selection of projects for inclusion in the International Programme and the system of financing required for its implementation.

20. In conclusion, his delegation believed that United Nations public information activities must be a mirror reflecting the expectations, frustrations and problems which States the world over brought to the Organization. Thus, the proper role of public information activities was neither to exaggerate the United Nations achievements nor to minimize its failures, but rather to present to the world public the Organization's activities and objectives. His delegation believed that DPI had been successful in its efforts to enhance public understanding and mobilize support of the United Nations.

21. Mr. ROMUALDEZ (Philippines) noted from the report of the Committee on Information that, with regard to United Nations public information policies and activities, there was obviously a need to further upgrade the activities of the various United Nations Information Centres, which essentially provided the link between the United Nations in New York and the people who were in the last analysis supposed to benefit from United Nations activities. Current United Nations information activities should be re-evaluated to ensure that information material reached the people who were intended to benefit from it. In other words, the guidelines for measuring the success of information programmes should be further refined, taking into particular consideration the level of awareness of United Nations activities among the people to whom information activities were directed. His delegation would support any measures to broaden the scope of the activities of DPI so that more people would be made aware of what the United Nations was doing, and so that it would be possible to measure that awareness.

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(Mr. Romualdez, Philippines)

22. There appeared to be a polarization in the efforts to establish a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order. His delegation thought that that concept had perhaps been seriously misunderstood, to the point that the creation of a new world information order was seen as a threat to the universally-accepted principles of freedom of information and expression.

23. He begged to disagree with that perception. His delegation had long hoped that the international community would recognize the importance of achieving a new world information and communication order, since such an order would help to achieve the legitimate aspirations of developing countries for effective international co-operation and assistance in improving their mass communication systems for social progress and development, and would at the same time strengthen efforts for the free circulation and wider and better balanced dissemination of information.

24. Prior to the furore that had greeted the suggestion of such a new order, media monopolies had engaged in activities which tended to denigrate the Governments of third world countries, exaggerating their faults and glossing over or ignoring their achievements. He noted that those monopolies were now at least attempting to put their house in order. Some sectors of the mass media monopolies had come to terms with the fact that they could not and should not impose their values and standards on other peoples and that they must not view events and personalities in other countries in the light of their own values. Those changes in perceptions did not, however, constitute a lasting solution since, if a new information order was to be possible, the glaring inadequacies in the corresponding professional and technological expertise in many developing countries must be remedied.

25. One indication that intensive discussion of the subject had changed the perceptions of those who objected to the new information order was the fact that the latter had offered to create a fund for the upgrading and training of professionals from developing countries--an idea which his delegation welcomed warmly. His country also welcomed the creation by UNESCO of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and hoped that the Programme would help the developing countries to set up adequate communication facilities in order to strengthen their own domestic programmes and help establish the new information order which was an integral part of the international development process and the new international economic order.

26. His delegation urged all Member States to provide the necessary financial and technical assistance to bring the IPDC to the take-off stage. It also supported any initiative to increase the number of fellowships made available to professional journalists from developing countries and urged regional organizations to encourage further exchanges among them.

27. His delegation strongly supported the renewal of the mandate of the Committee on Information, the recommendations of which reflected the value of its work. He wished to express appreciation of the statement made by the Assistant Director-General for Culture and Communication of UNESCO, and was pleased to note that a number of Western countries had recently funded some of UNESCO's ongoing projects.

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(Mr. Romualdez, Philippines)

28. The iniquities of the present information and communication order were becoming increasingly obvious, as was the urgent need for the early establishment of a new international information and communication order. It had been said that such an order would enable Governments to utilize the media for their development efforts; and his Government believed that, because of their unique role and status, the media must bear a good share of the responsibility for ensuring that the right to information was used for the good of the greatest number. The media knew only too well that they would find it difficult to survive in an atmosphere of instability and upheaval. That was precisely why developing countries, which were seeking the stability to be able to pursue development, programmes, would not see in the new information and communication order an infringement of the right of free expression.

The meeting rose at 3.55 p.m.