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SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE
6th meeting
held on
Thursday, 15 October 1981
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 6th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda)

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The meeting was called to order 3.25 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 67: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION

- (a) REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION (A/36/21)
- (b) REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (A/36/504)
- (c) REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (A/36/530)

1. The CHAIRMAN drew the attention of the Members of the Committee to two further documents relating to the item under discussion, namely document A/36/116 containing the documents of the Conference of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Non-Aligned Countries, held in New Delhi from 9 to 13 February 1981, and document A/36/218 containing the report of the Joint Inspection Unit and entitled "Co-ordination in the Field of Public Information Activities Among the Members of the United Nations System."

2. Mr. AKASHI (Under Secretary-General for Public Information) said that at a time of disquiet and growing political tensions, effective communication and the reliable exchange of information were more essential than ever to clearer understanding among peoples and Governments. They were crucial not only in preventing a potentially catastrophic deterioration in international relations, but also in fulfilling the aspirations of the developing world, where the establishment of a new world information and communication order was considered to be inseparable from wider efforts to achieve the new international economic order. It was universally appreciated that to attain that goal, a change must be brought about in the status quo by incremental stages in a process of agreement. As was clear from resolutions 34/182 and 35/201, the pursuit of a new information order was linked with global efforts for bridging the gap between North and South and thus formed an integral part of international development.

3. Although no exact definition had yet been established for the new world information and communication order and divergences persisted among Member States as to the emphasis to be placed on its various components such as the free circulation of and free access to information, a better balanced dissemination of information and a change in the dependent status of the developing countries as far as information and communication were concerned, broad agreement had already been reached on the assistance to be provided to developing countries in strengthening their information and communication infrastructures and on co-operation in the training of staff engaged in information activities. The fact that a consensus had been arrived at in the Committee on Information augured well for the proceedings of the Special Political Committee.

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(Mr. Akashi)

4. In the context of the United Nations, communication and information were indispensable instruments in improving the public image of the United Nations inasmuch as not only official public information programmes but also the media, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and other influential bodies could serve as vehicles in reaching out to the ultimate constituency of the United Nations, i.e., the world community, in promoting broad public understanding of the work of the Organization, and in obtaining the fullest possible mandate needed for the success of inter-governmental and multilateral consultations, negotiations and adjustments. Public opinion on the major issues of political, social and economic development affected the work of the United Nations in formulating effective policies and ensuring their effective implementation.

5. The task of educating world-wide opinion on the laborious but vital workings of multilateral diplomacy was a formidable one, given the global magnitude and deep complexity of the issues at stake and the unavoidable fact that neither procedures nor results could be termed gripping or dramatic. Since the early years when the expectations vested in the United Nations as a supra-national government designed to prevent another world war were high, public opinion had gradually become disillusioned, particularly in the developed Western countries, as the growing diversity of its membership progressively became superimposed on traditional East-West and North-South differences. That evolution had been compounded over the past two decades by changes in patterns of group voting, with the result that where the West had once been influential, a wide range of common interests were now shared by the developing countries, and public perceptions of the United Nations system had become kaleidoscopic. However, the existence of a "world public opinion" formed by a small but influential group of countries under the existing structure of global communications was not to be dismissed. It was thus paradoxically against a background of erosion of support for the United Nations that the Organization's information programmes must be both planned and implemented. The significant advances already made in establishing rapport with the grass-roots stemmed from the recognition of public information as a serious task of public education on vital issues rather than a mere exercise in public relations.

6. In 1980, the Special Political Committee had met shortly after the twenty-first General Conference of UNESCO and had devoted special attention to its work, in particular to the decision to establish the International Programme for the Development of Communication, the launching of which would constitute a very important step in enhancing the information and the communication capacities of developing countries. Collaboration with UNESCO, which had a vital role to play in the issues under discussion, was however but one facet of wider co-operation in a vast and complex field involving many United Nations organizations and programmes. The complementarity of their activities and the need to strengthen co-operation and co-ordination had in fact been recognized by the General Assembly in resolution 35/201.

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(Mr. Akashi)

7. To turn to the main subjects discussed in the report of the Committee on Information, the highest priority must be given to achieving equitable geographical distribution of staff in the Department of Public Information. Although significant progress had been made, the Department of Public Information could implement such changes only in co-ordination with the Office of Personnel Services, which came within the competence Fifth Committee. The concerns of delegations and the recommendations of the Committee on Information in that respect would doubtless be taken into account by the Assistant Secretary-General for Personnel Services when establishing the necessary policies.

8. Distinct progress was also to be reported with respect to the balanced use of official languages in the Department of Public Information, particularly in publications, as a result of the establishment of the Adaptation Unit in 1980. The Committee might wish to put forward proposals for the expansion of the African Unit and the new Caribbean Unit in the Radio Service. As to the regionalization of the Visual Service in the Department of Public Information, the Committee on Information, following a lengthy debate, had recommended that a plan to regionalize the Service should be launched as a matter of urgency in accordance with resolution 35/201 and the suggestions made in the course of the discussion. Under the first phase of the plan, existing resources would be redeployed over the next few months in order to establish two regional units in the Visual Service, prior to the establishment of two further regional units in early 1982 through the redeployment of existing posts and the creation of new posts. The plan would subsequently be refined into a progressive plan of action at the next substantive session of the Committee on Information.

9. Another area of priority in the Department of Public Information was the development of closer ties with the developing countries through co-operation with their news agencies. The Department had already established closer links with the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies and the Inter-Press Service in particular, and would now be taking steps to establish closer links with various regional news agencies in developing countries. Moreover, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 35/201, the Department had initiated training programmes for journalists and broadcasters from developing countries and had continued to organize Editors' Round Tables to promote the exchange of senior media representatives between developed and developing countries. A successful experiment had also been conducted with extrabudgetary funds, consisting of a series of regional Mass Media Round Tables in various parts of the world attended by prominent personalities from both media and governments.

10. The Committee on Information had also devoted considerable attention to the important role of the United Nations Information Centres and recommended that they should be strengthened, particularly in terms of their operational funds. Since current financial constraints precluded a meaningful increase in their budgets, the Department proposed to upgrade a limited number of posts of Directors of Information Centres in order to allow for a regional balance in favour of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where posts were often lacking for senior staff with extensive expertise and experience.

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(Mr. Akashi)

11. In addition, the attention of the Committee on Information had been focused on the use of advanced technology in the gathering and dissemination of information. The task of acquiring such technology, including access to satellites and the possible acquisition of a satellite for the United Nations, was of such magnitude and complexity as to warrant the most careful scrutiny. The Department was therefore proceeding cautiously with the preparation of studies on the various facets of proposals for technological innovation and would ultimately report to the Committee on Information for further guidance.

12. As to the relationship between the services requested and the resources available, the sharp increase not only in the recommendations he had just alluded to but also in demands made by the General Assembly and substantive committees for greater coverage, more publications, wider public information programmes and international essay and poster competitions, added substantially to the strain on the capabilities of the Department at a time of zero growth in its budget. While such a state of affairs was naturally conducive either to a fall in standards or inability to meet demands, the Department's first response was to attempt to absorb additional responsibilities through greater staff discipline and productivity and by setting a clearer order of priorities, i.e. by eliminating obsolete or marginal activities. The Department was being assisted in that endeavour by the Planning, Programming and Evaluation Unit established in 1980 which had nearly completed the formulation of evaluation methodologies. Clear policy guidance would still be required however in that respect from the Special Political Committee, with the assistance of the Committee on Information.

13. The General Assembly had stressed that the Department of Public Information should remain the focal point for the co-ordination and implementation of the public information activities of the United Nations. While the challenge of co-ordinating wide-ranging and competing information activities on a multiplicity of issues promoted by the various units of the Secretariat would be met squarely by the Department, only the representatives themselves could prevent the adoption of contradictory resolutions on the subject in the various Committees of the Assembly and could adopt concrete measures to avoid any overlapping. With regard to interagency co-operation, the machinery for developing common policies, co-ordinating actions and minimizing duplication was provided by the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC), a basically autonomous body which had had the difficult task of co-ordinating the numerous components of a wide-ranging system. It had made considerable headway in achieving better and more concrete co-operation, but needed strengthening in order to function effectively, a concern which was reflected in the recommendation of the Committee on Information.

14. In establishing the Committee on Information, the General Assembly had recognized the cardinal importance of information in the accomplishment of its purposes and compliance with its principles. The consensus achieved on the recommendations of the Committee, due in a large measure to the efforts of its Chairman and its Rapporteur, could be broadened and strengthened both at the United Nations and in UNESCO and other United Nations bodies. In parallel with the

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(Mr. Akashi)

pragmatic implementation of those recommendations, new areas and avenues of possible agreement must be explored in order to bring about tangible progress towards the common goal of achieving a free and balanced flow of information between all parts of an increasingly interdependent world.

15. Mr. MAKAGIANSAR (Assistant Director-General for Culture and Communication, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) said that 1981 had been a particularly busy year for the UNESCO Secretariat for, in addition to its regular activities, it had had to prepare for the drafting of Organization's Second Medium-Term Plan for the years 1984 to 1989. Member States and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations had submitted many suggestions with regard to the Plan and those had now been synthesized and analysed. The Director-General had submitted the first draft of the proposed Plan to the Executive Board at its 113th session.

16. With regard to communication, in his report to the Executive Board the Director-General had observed that Member States' suggestions might be grouped under three main headings: (1) communication as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon in contemporary society which contributed to the solution of world problems; (2) world-wide inequalities and disparities in the field of communication and the promotion of a free and balanced flow of information at the international and regional levels; (3) the promotion of national action to develop communication in ways responsive to the needs of individuals and society and with a view to guaranteeing freedom of access to information for all.

17. According to the directives of the 31st session of the UNESCO General Conference, the broad principles guiding preparation of the Medium-Term Plan were that: an analysis of global problems as they related to UNESCO's competence was fundamental; should include, in particular, consideration of the regional aspects of such problems and their interrelationship and interaction; and should be forward-looking, multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary. The main forms that UNESCO's action might take would be: to encourage research and intellectual and scientific co-operation; to familiarize the general public with the nature of the problems identified in order to foster international awareness of their importance and urgency; to promote the dissemination of knowledge and exchanges of experience; to help frame policies and strategies with a view to finding practical solutions to those problems; and to implement action-oriented programmes in favour of development, for the special benefit of the developing countries.

18. Another major activity in which UNESCO had been involved in the past year was the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). In response to General Assembly resolution 35/201, the Director-General had prepared a report (A/36/530) on the implementation of that Programme. Since preparation of that report, the Bureau of the Intergovernmental Council of the IPDC had met in Paris in September 1981 and had decided to hold its second session in the later part of January 1982 in Mexico. It had also approved the proposals put forward by the UNESCO Secretariat for the documentation to be prepared for the Council, taken note of

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(Mr. Makagiansar)

responses to the Director-General's appeal for contributions to the IPDC Special Fund and made recommendations to him on the provisional agenda for the second session. The establishment of the IPDC had been welcomed by many intergovernmental and professional organizations and, most recently, by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) at its June 1981 summit meeting, which had also adopted a resolution on the new world information and communication order.

19. Concurrently with the launching of the IPDC, UNESCO was continuing its regular activities in the field of communication. The programme approved by the General Conference at its 21st session included provisions for co-operation in integrated communication planning and the determination of national and regional priorities, the development of national production capacity and the training of communications specialists. Activities also continued to be supported by extra-budgetary resources. A number of such activities were being funded by UNDP, for instance, the development of broadcasting services in Bangladesh and the training in Zambia of radio producers, technicians and engineers from Namibia. Others, financed under funds-in-trust arrangements by a variety of Western European countries, were also under way or in the process of preparation or negotiation.

20. With regard to news agencies, UNESCO programmes aimed at promoting regional co-operation in the area of news exchanges seemed to be gathering considerable momentum, thanks to the efforts made by national news agencies themselves. UNESCO had completed the groundwork for the creation of the Latin American Features Agency and continued to support the Pan African News Agency which was soon to start operations. It was also assisting the African Broadcasting Union. In Asia, the Organization of Asian News Agencies, originally set up on the basis of a UNESCO initiative, was hoping to launch the Asia-Pacific News Network, a mechanism for exchanges among the region's news agencies, for which it had been given the necessary impetus by the Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Asia and Oceania organized by UNESCO in 1979. Finally, as a follow-up to the various inter-governmental conferences on communication policies and their recommendations, monitoring groups had been set up in each region and were meeting regularly.

21. In order to expand and speed up the establishment of such regional and international mechanisms for the exchange and dissemination of news and information, UNESCO was organizing a major symposium at its headquarters in Paris in late October 1981 so that representatives of such projects and programmes could exchange experiences and discuss questions of mutual interest. UNESCO hoped that more of such co-operative mechanisms would become a reality and begin to increase and improve the flow of information, especially from developing to developed countries.

22. In that connection, the Working Group on Tariffs, set up in 1979 to study questions related to existing anomalies in telecommunication tariffs and to elaborate proposals for lower rates for the transmission of news and television programmes, had now been enlarged to represent all media of communication and would meet later in 1981.

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(Mr. Makagiansar)

23. In all the communication activities outlined above, UNESCO had consistently sought the involvement and co-operation of professional non-governmental organizations, which had provided it with invaluable assistance and advice. The forthcoming Paris symposium and the recent meeting to investigate the relationship between the right to communicate and the concept of the new world information and communication order were just two examples of activities carried out in consultation with such organizations. The active co-operation of non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations was essential in any effort to bring about a new world information and communication order and the support and encouragement which UNESCO had received had given it the strength and determination to continue to pursue that goal. There had been differences of opinion among the professionals and policy-makers it had brought together in that connection, but that was a healthy sign. The fact that more often than not consensus had been achieved on all major issues and projects was proof that the political and professional will was present and only needed to be tapped and oriented for the good of all mankind.

24. Mr. ALBORNOZ (Chairman of the Committee on Information) said that the report of the Committee on Information contained in document A/C.6/21 demonstrated the opportunity offered by the United Nations to representatives from different countries and groups to find common denominators and agree on positions in favour of the new world information order. The very existence of the Committee on Information was a recognition of the fundamental importance of the information media in forming public opinion and promoting the creative activity of individuals, countries and organizations. The United Nations and the Committee on Information, therefore, should ensure that that powerful force was in keeping with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and in international law. It was a matter of recognizing that that powerful force was at work within contemporary society and stressing the importance of the aspirations of all peoples throughout the world.

25. The Committee on Information had not made any recommendations which might affect the principles of freedom of opinion and expression or freedom to impart information enshrined in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Countries such as his own, Ecuador, could not accept any restriction of those freedoms and believed that freedom of information was essential to the democratic system. The report stressed the concern of developing countries at the fact that the world information media were unaware of the efforts of those countries to promote their own economic, social and cultural development and the fact that certain people could arbitrarily decide to withhold such information. The desire to bring about a new and more just world information order arose out of that situation. In that regard, the Committee on Information also sought to co-ordinate the work of all United Nations bodies as well as the information activities of the specialized agencies and operational programmes of that system to increase the success of development programmes throughout the world. The Committee supported non-governmental organizations and urged them to persevere in efforts to overcome the barriers of indifference and prejudice and promote world public opinion favourable to the work of the United Nations.

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(Mr. Albornoz)

26. The Committee on Information supported the activities of the Department of Public Information in the task of encouraging countries and information media to disseminate information about the United Nations and the efforts of the international community to achieve social justice, economic development, and international peace and security. The Committee viewed with satisfaction the work undertaken by UNESCO in the field of information and took care not to interfere with or duplicate that work. He expressed satisfaction at the training activities undertaken by UNESCO in favour of developing countries and the growing use of the new information agencies of third world countries to promote the new world information order and carry out the International Programme for the Development of Communication.

27. Much remained to be done. There were important areas of priority for the information activities of the United Nations, such as international peace and security, human rights, disarmament, decolonization, the struggle against discrimination and apartheid, integration of women in development and, in general, activities in the economic and social field, which represented 80 per cent of the work of the United Nations, but had not been given a proportional amount of coverage by the current information systems.

28. Mr. NEVREKAR (India), speaking in his capacity as Rapporteur of the Committee on Information, introduced the report of that Committee contained in document A/36/21 and briefly outlined its contents. At the Committee's substantive session held on 30 May 1981, it had been decided that the draft recommendations tabled by the various groups of countries would be annexed to the Committee's report with a view to their finalization at the Committee's August 1981 session. The report had been adopted on 30 May 1981 and the recommendations had been adopted by consensus on 26 August.

29. Mr. RAHMAN (Bangladesh) expressed satisfaction at the statement by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information. His delegation had taken note of his suggestions and intended to give them full consideration. The Department of Public Information could count on the full co-operation of his country in its work. In an increasingly independent world, the free flow of information between nations was of particular importance to both developed and developing countries. The climate of international relations and the degree of mutual trust between States depended to a large extent on the content of the information disseminated. The UNESCO declaration on fundamental principles concerning the contribution of the mass media to the strengthening of peace and international understanding, to the promotion of human rights and to combating racism, apartheid and incitement to war had presented for the first time a clear set of principles governing the use of the communication media.

30. For the past several years the General Assembly had been conducting a comprehensive debate on questions relating to information. That should be viewed in the over-all perspective of the evolving dialogue between the developed and the developing countries. In that context, information and communication were seen to be closely linked with the international development process, particularly with the

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(Mr. Rahman, Bangladesh)

evolution of modern media technology. The economic gap between developed and developing countries was evident also in the field of information and communication. The establishment of a new international information and communication order, therefore, was essential to the efforts to establish the new international economic order. Those objectives should be achieved in an atmosphere of co-operation and understanding. His country was constantly engaged in seeking to encourage international co-operation in the field of information. An open and sincere dialogue was necessary in order to eliminate ambiguities and suspicion and promote understanding by transforming existing attitudes and creating an awareness of the legitimate concerns of all nations. As a member of the Committee on Information and the Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication, Bangladesh had been trying to contribute to that process by working towards the elimination of existing imbalances in the global flow of information in order to change the dependent status of developing countries in that field and guarantee them free access to various sources of information.

31. The field of information and communication was so vast and complex that the participation and support of all the interested agencies and programmes in the United Nations system were needed to ensure that Member States, particularly the developing countries, could benefit fully from the experience and skill available in those agencies and programmes. His delegation fully supported the proposals and suggestions designed to improve the efficiency of the public information machinery of the United Nations system. He expressed satisfaction at the growing interest of Member States in the activities of the Department of Public Information and favoured the allocation of increased resources to the Department to improve its effectiveness. The Committee on Information should continue to co-operate with the Department in establishing priorities and providing guidance to its activities. It would be wasteful and unnecessary to duplicate the efforts of UNESCO, which possessed the experience and structure necessary to study and undertake activities relating to the establishment of the new international information and communication order. At the same time, he stressed the fundamental role of the General Assembly in that regard and the vital need for close co-operation between the various institutions of the United Nations system. He welcomed the fact that the Secretary-General had rendered active support and encouragement to UNESCO and the International Programme for the Development for Communication.

32. His delegation supported the recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Information. The Department of Public Information should develop close working links with other international and regional news organizations in order to encourage more media coverage of United Nations activities and should also expand its co-operation with the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies. It was also necessary to maintain linguistic balance in the dissemination of information and observe the principle of equitable geographical distribution, particularly in filling the posts at the senior and decision-making levels of the Department. DPI should also take immediate steps to determine the methodologies needed to evaluate the prevailing image of the United Nations and knowledge of its objectives and activities. His delegation looked forward to the report to be prepared by the Secretary-General

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(Mr. Rahman, Bangladesh)

exploring the possibility of the United Nations acquiring its own communication satellite as a first step towards the creation of its own communication satellite system, and it strongly supported continued publication of the Development Forum supported by the United Nations budget. Necessary and additional support should also be sought on a voluntary basis for the world newspaper supplements in order to provide information on international economic matters. His delegation was particularly interested in closer co-operation between the Department and the non-governmental organizations and educational institutions. He noted with interest that a new initiative was being undertaken that year, the publication of a collection of teaching units about the United Nations in collaboration with UNESCO to be used by classes on various subjects and at all levels.

33. His delegation strongly believed that there was a clear need to strengthen the network of United Nations Information Centres around the world. In that connection he informed the Committee that the agreement establishing a United Nations Centre in Dacca had been concluded in August of that year. His Government appreciated the expeditious manner in which the Department had completed the necessary work to establish the Centre and assured its full co-operation in that regard. During the consideration of that item the previous year, Bangladesh had strongly supported the proposal that DPI should provide on-the-job training for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries. The 1981 programme for journalist and broadcasters had started with 19 participants, including a number nominated by the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies and the Pan African News Agency. The outline of the eight-week programme in document A/36/504 was most useful.

34. He reiterated his delegation's request that due consideration should be given to the inclusion of Bengali, which was spoken by nearly 130 million people in South-east Asia, as a language of the Asian Unit of the United Nations radio service. On behalf of Bangladesh and 30 other least developed countries, he expressed satisfaction at the very efficient manner in which the Department had organized the public information activities before and during the United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries. Lastly, he stressed the importance of taking advantage of the enormous power of the media to contribute to the strengthening of international peace and understanding and the establishment of a new world order based on equity and justice.

35. Mr. ADHAMI (Syrian Arab Republic) proposed that, in view of their importance, the statements made by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information, the Assistant Director-General for Culture and Communication of UNESCO and the Chairman of the Committee on Information should be reproduced in extenso.

36. The CHAIRMAN recalled that the General Assembly had authorized the Special Political Committee to obtain, on its express request, the transcription of all or part of its debates.

37. It was decided that the statements by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information, the Assistant Director-General of UNESCO and the Chairman of the Committee on Information should be reproduced in extenso.

The meeting rose at 5.05 p.m.