



C O N T E N T S

	Page
Agenda item 28:	
Freedom of information: report of the Economic and Social Council (<i>continued</i>).....	321

Chairman: Mr. Jiří NOSEK (Czechoslovakia).

In the absence of the Chairman, Mr. Núñez (Costa Rica), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

AGENDA ITEM 28

Freedom of information: report of the Economic and Social Council (A/2705, A/2686, chapter V, section VI, A/C.3/L.447, A/C.3/L.448 and Add.1, A/C.3/L.449, A/C.3/L.450, A/C.3/L.451) (*continued*)

GENERAL DEBATE (*continued*)

1. Mrs. HARMAN (Israel) said that the problem of freedom of information could not be isolated from the multiple factors which determined economic, social and political conditions at any given time. Complete freedom of expression for every point of view was the surest path to truth, which regulation or restriction could only stifle.

2. The Rapporteur on Freedom of Information had rendered invaluable service by his cogent analysis of the problem and his practical proposals (E/2426 and Add.1 to 5).¹ While his impatience at delay was understandable, the nature of the problem demanded a progressive approach. There could be no easy solution. Those areas should be sought which offered the best prospects for agreement. There was ample evidence of wide divergence of views. For the time being, that would not exclude a concentrated frontal attack against the misuse of information media. A convention on freedom of information would be desirable only after agreement had been reached on the meaning of its provisions, basic definitions and principles. The distinctions between information and propaganda, between restrictions for national or international considerations and interference with liberty and between freedom and licence were still very controversial matters. The existing lack of mutual international confidence also contributed to an atmosphere in which a legally binding convention that would command wide acceptance would be difficult to prepare. Her delegation did not believe that that meant abandoning the attempt to achieve a formula; it meant rather pursuing it with patience and realism.

¹ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Sixteenth Session, Supplements Nos. 12 and 12A.

3. The Philippine proposal (A/C.3/L.450) for a commission of three to continue the survey of the field of information would be valuable, provided that the Commission concentrated in the first instance on finding areas of agreement and eschewed the mere enunciation of broad general principles.

4. A steady, more inductive approach would be fruitful. Accordingly, the Economic and Social Council's resolutions (522 (XVII)) could not be regarded as negligible. They had dealt with the practical aspects, such as Press rates, newsprint, the independence of information personnel, copyright and the transmission of outgoing news dispatches. The efficient regulation of such matters was a prerequisite for efficient basic services. Technical assistance, too, was important, since irresponsible and inaccurate reporting was often due rather to incompetence than to malice. The importance of training programmes, of competent schools of journalism and of opportunities for travel abroad could not be over-estimated. Foreign language instruction should be stressed in all curricula for correspondents, even in those for journalists from the more advanced countries.

5. Standards had ultimately to be decided by the common man everywhere, who would reject falsehood, prejudice and irresponsibility. The problems of freedom of information depended therefore for their solution largely on long-term mass education in an atmosphere of true democracy, which outlawed restriction of free expression. The work done by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization towards eradicating illiteracy and ignorance was playing a vital part in furthering freedom of information.

6. In Israel there was full freedom of expression, save for censorship in relation to military security. Two hundred and twenty-one periodicals were published in Hebrew and 120 in other languages, representing all points of view. Efforts had been made to solve the newsprint problem, with the help of the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration. Full use was being made of the facilities for importing literature from different parts of the world.

7. Mr. MENESES PALLARES (Ecuador) said that the three fundamental aspects of freedom of information were: first, freedom of thought; secondly, freedom of speech; and thirdly, freedom of expression and the right to a free exchange of opinion and information. In order for such an exchange to be possible, the free dissemination of information should not be obstructed and the information itself had to be the truth, the whole truth, and not intended for propaganda.

8. Within the United Nations it had unfortunately been assumed that, because the dissemination of news and comment satisfied a fundamental need, the free dissemination of information had to be safeguarded and no obstacles put in its way. For such a principle to be valid, information media had to be really free, and information ethics had to be above suspicion; but

it was well known that the dissemination of information had become a money-making concern or a propaganda weapon, with the result that freedom was much restricted. It was inconceivable that the United Nations should seek the co-operation of certain information enterprises in its fight for freedom of information, since any attempt to restrict their licence in the interest of public order and international peace only brought forth violent protests from them. That remark applied only to information enterprises that were guilty of such conduct: fortunately there were others whose ethics were above suspicion. In Ecuador there was full freedom of information, without censorship of any kind. The opposition had its own newspapers, in which it criticized the Government freely.

9. Information agencies and journalists had duties as well as rights. They were under a strong ethical obligation, because of their influence on public opinion and their defence of fundamental rights and freedoms. They should not claim special privileges or immunities beyond the guarantees provided by law; conversely, they were entitled to the protection of the constitution and the laws of the land.

10. At its seventeenth session, the Economic and Social Council had endorsed a fine programme with regard to freedom of information and it could not therefore be accused of negligence or lack of interest. Good results could be expected from the co-operation of the United Nations Secretariat, but they could not be expected immediately.

11. Mr. ABDEL GHANI (Egypt) announced the Egyptian Government's decision to sign the United Nations Convention on the International Right of Correction (General Assembly resolution 630 (VII), annex). Egypt would be the eighth State to sign the Convention and hoped that it would be signed and ratified by all Member States, especially by those with highly-developed information media, on which education in international relations largely depended. It was also to be hoped that the accession of all Member States would be expedited, especially since the right of correction was already embodied in the legislation of many countries.

12. The Egyptian Government had recently enacted a law consistent with the purposes and principles of the Universal Copyright Convention.² Owing to its situation at the crossroads of the world, Egypt enriched its own culture from cosmopolitan sources and governmental and private efforts were constantly being made to translate foreign works. Nevertheless, it considered itself bound, as a member of the international community, to respect the principle of copyright as defined in article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

13. With reference to the Rapporteur's report (E/2426 and Add.1 to 5), it should be reaffirmed that all outgoing dispatches from Egypt were absolutely free from censorship. It was especially important to make that clear at a time when events in Egypt were attracting more news personnel than ever before. The Egyptian authorities tried to enable that personnel to see all the aspects of the situation and to report not only the achievements of the Government, but also its difficulties and shortcomings. Internal censorship was a provisional measure prescribed by the necessity of pro-

tecting the nation from subversive attempts to exploit freedom of information. Article 12 of the draft covenant on civil and political rights (E/2573, annex I) stipulated that reasonable restrictions might be necessary to protect national security.

14. The Egyptian delegation wished to make some suggestions which the Secretary-General might take into consideration when preparing his report to the nineteenth session of the Economic and Social Council on a programme of action to promote a wider knowledge of the work of the United Nations, of foreign countries and of international relations among news personnel. Although the work of the United Nations occupied considerable space in the newspapers and magazines of many countries, there were two principal difficulties in the reporting of it. In the first place, the political aspects were stressed to the detriment of economic and social aspects; that was understandable in view of the impact of politics on the lives of human beings. Secondly, newspapers and broadcasting stations which had no connexion in the United States of America were not in a position to have enough correspondents to cover all United Nations activities at Headquarters. To meet those two difficulties, the Egyptian delegation suggested that a group of news personnel, with a background of international affairs, might be given fellowships to enable them to study the work of the United Nations at Headquarters and another group at the European Office at Geneva. The Secretary-General might envisage the possibility of establishing such fellowships in conjunction with educational institutions, newspapers and broadcasting stations. His work in that respect would undoubtedly be co-ordinated with that of UNESCO, which allocated part of its annual budget to fellowships in the field of information. At the UNESCO General Conference, currently meeting at Montevideo, a programme of mass communication services over a two-year period had been adopted and experts were to be sent every year to localities where they were required, for work with news agencies, radio and television. Fellowships had been established and an annual budget of \$102,000 had been approved.

15. If the General Assembly were to establish another organ to deal with freedom of information, it should be entrusted with work which the Secretary-General could not properly perform and its terms of reference should be as wide as possible. The Egyptian delegation would support the establishment of such an organ, provided that its work would not be confined to reports and surveys which could well be entrusted to the Secretariat.

16. The Egyptian delegation considered that technical assistance in the field of freedom of information was essential and could not agree with the view that such assistance was less urgent than that related to economic development. Economic development could not be separated from social reform and no economic development could be effected without the full and earnest backing of the people concerned. It was necessary therefore for the people to be informed and to understand fully their Government's intentions. Where the percentage of illiterates was high, such information could be propagated by visual and aural media. He therefore welcomed the United States representative's suggestion that technical assistance in extending freedom of information might be provided under the Expanded Programme.

² See *UNESCO Copyright Bulletin*, vol. V, Nos. 3-4, Paris, 1952, p. 30.

17. The Egyptian delegation agreed with the Indian representative that work on freedom of information should be regarded as a supplement to, and not as a substitute for, the proposed convention on freedom of information. If, as the Rapporteur had suggested, the convention were to be replaced by a declaration, a dangerous precedent would be set with regard to the draft covenants on human rights. A declaration would therefore be acceptable only on condition that it was complementary to the convention.

18. A further effort should be made to reach a compromise on article 2 of the draft convention.³ If it were successful, the responsibilities of information media could be defined and their rights protected by international law.

The meeting rose at 4.15 p.m.

³ See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Seventh Session, Annexes*, agenda item 29, document A/AC.42/7 and Corr.1, annex. See also *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Sixteenth Session, Supplement No. 12*, chap. VI, section A.