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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 11th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KARUKUBIRO-KAMUNANWIRE (Uganda)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 77: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/45/21, A/45/533: A/SPC/45/L.8 and L.9)

1. Mr. ADUGNA (Ethiopia) said that a new spirit of understanding and co-operation had created a favourable climate for the United Nations, enabling Member States to reach consensus more easily. One area in which progress could be observed and which was of paramount interest to his country and the developing countries in general was information. Ethiopia, which had been a member of the Committee on Information since its creation, supported the establishment of a new world information and communication order to help correct the current imbalance in that field. In connection with that objective, his delegation supported the new UNESCO strategy, "Communication in the service of humanity", which had been adopted by consensus. Similarly, the activities of the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries demonstrated that concerted efforts were being made to eliminate the information gap between the developed and developing countries. For a new stable international order to emerge, information must flow smoothly and the developed countries must help the developing countries to strengthen their information media.

2. The importance of the role of the Department of Public Information, particularly its work in promoting the achievements of the United Nations, could not be overstated. There was extensive coverage of the activities of the major organs of the United Nations in the international media, and he hoped that the Department would continue to highlight the plight of the developing countries and the problems of mankind as a whole. Attention should also be paid to activities and future programmes relating to decolonization and the situation in Non-Self-Governing Territories. The Department must help to ensure that the 1990s marked the final eradication of colonialism.

3. Mr. SMERAL (Czechoslovakia) said that, with the fall of the dictatorships of Central and Eastern Europe, censorship had been abolished and freedom of expression guaranteed in the new democracies. The free flow of information was of immense importance for better understanding among peoples. Following the November revolution, Czechoslovakia had opened itself up to the international exchange of information and had made foreign news material available to its citizens with a view to ending the monopoly of information, attaining a pluralism of views and establishing free and independent mass media.

4. Czechoslovakia supported all initiatives designed to reinforce the technical and professional infrastructures of the media in the developing countries and ensure more effective co-operation in that field. One such measure was the elimination of all restrictions on trade in up-to-date communication technologies between democratic countries. The UNESCO "Communication in the service of humanity" strategy, adopted by consensus, and the creation in Warsaw of a Centre for Communications for Eastern and Central Europe would also contribute to the development of the communication capabilities of the developing countries.

(Mr. Poernomo, Indonesia)

10. His delegation welcomed the spirit of compromise evident at the twelfth session of the Committee on Information and the adoption by consensus, at the twenty-fifth General Conference of UNESCO, held at Paris in November 1989, of its strategy for "Communication in the service of humanity", the aim of which was to achieve better and more balanced information within the framework of the UNESCO International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).

11. The development of training and assistance programmes, the establishment of the necessary infrastructures and the guaranteeing of compatibility between different communication systems were only some of the developments which must take place for the masses in Africa, Asia and Latin America to be able to make their voices heard and interact equitably in the international exchange of information.

12. DPI should focus increased attention on areas of special concern to Member States, especially the developing countries, such as international peace, disarmament, the environment, the status of women, economic and social development and external debt. His delegation was encouraged by the conduct of opinion polls rating the image of the United Nations favourably. Co-ordination between information centres and local, regional and international communication facilities should be intensified. Within the framework of the Conference of the Ministers of Information of Non-Aligned Countries, a working group of regional representatives would meet in 1991 in Indonesia to examine new technological options for modernizing communications in the non-aligned countries.

13. Mr. HANNAN (Bangladesh) said that, thanks to the improvement in international relations and the relaxation of political tension, consensus had been reached on the new world information and communication order. The General Assembly, at its thirty-third session, had decided to include an agenda item entitled "Questions relating to information", since the imbalance existing in the field of information between the developed and the developing countries has already been a cause of concern. The objective conditions of that imbalance remained and the consensus attained must be utilized to change them.

14. DPI must redouble its efforts to carry out the substantive work entrusted to it. It did not suffice to give details of interviews with senior officials and issue press releases, or to brief and accredit journalists. The Department must act as a catalyst for change and problem-solving by mobilizing public opinion on certain issues. Exhibitions of photographs and journalists' encounters were not enough to convey information on the questions of Palestine and apartheid. The major information media must be approached and emphasis laid on the massive human rights violations in Palestine and South Africa and the economic difficulties of the least developed countries, which were not only the result of debt but were also linked to the transfer of resources to rich countries, protectionist trade barriers, the fall in the prices of raw materials and the high social cost of adjustment.

(Mr. Hannan, Bangladesh)

15. The Second United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, held in Paris in September, provided for the establishment of focal points on the least developed countries in every organ of the United Nations system for the purpose of implementing the programme of action for the 1990s. His delegation hoped that the Department of Public Information (DPI) would fulfil its mission as the focal point for information.

16. In her statement, the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information had omitted any mention of the Yearbook of the United Nations in her statement. That publication was the Achilles' heel of DPI and had not appeared since 1986. His delegation would be interested to know the results of the survey that DPI had conducted among the Missions on the usefulness of the Yearbook.

17. His delegation had been surprised by the statement that DPI would have no difficulty in meeting the requests of Member States to open United Nations information centres in their capitals. That offer ran counter to the actual experience of centres such as the one at Dhaka, which was slowly withering away for lack of staff, despite repeated requests.

18. It was inappropriate to promote the United Nations as if it were a commercial product or a tourist attraction instead of highlighting its many important activities. The popularity of the United Nations depended on its effectiveness. The work of the Secretary-General and the recent achievements of the United Nations spoke for themselves and did not need opinion polls to confirm their importance. DPI could do much for the United Nations by disseminating in a professional manner information on the work of the Organization and the efforts of the international community, in accordance with the resolutions and decisions adopted.

19. Mr. EHLERS (Uruguay) said that his country was one of the staunchest defenders of a free press and free speech. Its Constitution guaranteed those fundamental rights, which had been respected even in the most difficult moments of the nation's history.

20. The problem of information was no longer a question of the means of communication, but of unbalanced information flows between the developed and developing countries. The United Nations could contribute enormously to alleviating that situation through the work of DPI, whose informational and educational material reflected the close interdependence of all the countries of the world. The effectiveness of the United Nations depended on the support it received from all Member States. That support depended in turn on the knowledge peoples and Governments had of the activities of the Organization. In order to assist in that task, his country had applied for and obtained membership in the Committee on Information. DPI needed additional funding, which might come from the reallocation of budget items or from contributions received from non-traditional external sources.

(Mr. Ehlers, Uruguay)

21. It was necessary to treat the most commonly used languages equally, to prepare videotapes for secondary students and to explore the possibility of incorporating them into the public and private school curricula of countries that requested them. While there were many worthy projects, it might always be a good idea to evaluate in advance the results expected of them in order to avoid excessive costs or foreseeable disappointments. For example, it would be most useful if the various delegations could have easy and immediate access, in some section of the Library, to all the television and radio material that was produced daily.

22. The idea that each Member State should have a United Nations information centre - or at least a specially appointed official to carry out the work associated with an information centre - and that all those countries that wished to have such a centre would provide the necessary funds was not very realistic.

23. Mrs. TAHIR-KHELI (United States of America) said that media interest in the United Nations had increased substantially in the past two years, especially during the past three months, as the Organization had responded to the act of aggression against Kuwait. The potential of the United Nations as a force for peace and stability had rarely been clearer.

24. Mr. TALT (Iraq), speaking on a point of order, asked the representative of the United States to confine her comments to agenda item 77.

25. The CHAIRMAN asked all delegations to bear in mind that the Committee was discussing questions relating to information.

26. Mrs. TAHIR-KHELI (United States of America) said that the media constantly reaffirmed the position of President Bush and President Gorbachev, stated jointly and firmly at Helsinki, that international peace was not compatible with allowing larger States to devour their smaller neighbours. Her delegation commended DPI on the energy and resourcefulness that it had brought to the task of disseminating information on the crisis.

27. However, DPI had not been able to do enough owing to a number of restrictions that limited its flexibility to respond fully and quickly. DPI should develop a strategy for supporting the United Nations goal of settling the Gulf crisis. It was of paramount importance that all elements of DPI should be mobilized to emphasize the historical role that the United Nations was playing in that regard. Her delegation supported efforts to ensure that DPI was effective and efficient, that it had the financial and material resources necessary to carry out its mandate, and that it continued to focus on the task of promoting an informed understanding of the work of the United Nations.

28. Her delegation welcomed the spirit of co-operation and flexibility that had guided the members of the Committee on Information in achieving consensus on two draft resolutions. It was to be hoped that, in the same spirit, the Special Political Committee and the General Assembly would be able to reach a consensus on both resolutions. That would allow the Committee on Information to fulfil its mandate of providing assistance and guidance to increase the effectiveness of DPI.

(Mrs. Tahir-Kheli, United States)

29. With respect to draft resolution I, entitled "Information in service of humanity" (A/45/21, p. 17), the Government and the private sector of her country believed that reliable, free and independent news and information services and a well-informed public were fundamental not only to political freedom, but also to economic development. They were committed to assisting the development of independent media, both public and private, in other countries and to broadening the free flow of information and news the world over. In that connection, she referred to the wide-ranging efforts of the United States Agency for International Development in various spheres. Moreover, government and private institutions and non-profit organizations in the United States were training journalists from developing countries in various information and communications fields.

30. The information revolution was by its very nature global and democratizing, and it had a tendency to spread. However, it flourished best where there were open frontiers and an open attitude to all kinds of information. It was undeniable that, in the past few years, there had been a general call for free speech, a free press and freely elected Governments. That new openness was not only a result of the information revolution; it would also provide an impetus for its globalization.

31. Mr. FAWZY (Egypt) said that the fact that the Committee on Information had reached a consensus on the draft resolutions did not mean that the problems had been resolved, since the flow of information remained unbalanced. To achieve a new world information and communication order that was free and just, it was necessary to restructure the present order to include all nations with a view to promoting understanding and enriching the cultural and national identities of all countries.

32. The restructuring of DPI should be supported, as long as it did not affect the efficiency of priority programmes. In that connection, it was necessary to implement fully the resolutions of the General Assembly and to continue to emphasize the activities relating to the struggle against apartheid, the question of Palestine, the Palestinian intifadah and questions relating to economic and social development.

33. In spite of the efforts made, it was clear from the Secretary-General's report on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 44/50 that many United Nations information centres were facing difficulties because of a lack of resources and manpower; the centre in Cairo was an example. The Department of Public Information should prepare a comprehensive global plan to assess the work of the United Nations information centres with a view to enhancing their effectiveness.

34. After commending the efforts of UNESCO to assist the communication media in Eastern Europe and calling upon it to extend that aid to other regions, he expressed his delegation's support of the new seminar planned by UNESCO and the Department of Public Information on possible modes of developing an independent and pluralistic press in Africa. He also requested UNESCO and the Department of Public Information to consider the possibility of co-operating with the Institute for Training of African Broadcasters in Cairo.

35. Mr. GARDEZI (Pakistan) said that the General Assembly's adoption by consensus of the draft resolutions on questions relating to information would be a milestone in the work concerning that important subject. That result had been made possible by the dedication of the Committee on Information. The consensus would demonstrate that the world community was more resolved than ever to eliminate barriers in the pursuit of common goals in all areas, including information.

36. A spirit of goodwill was necessary to correct existing imbalances between developed and developing countries. The budget and infrastructure of a single Western news agency greatly surpassed those of all the agencies in the developing world, which represented more than 80 per cent of the human race. The new world information and communication order would facilitate the transfer of technology from developed to developing countries, the sharing of professional expertise and the establishment of a real and balanced exchange of information to check the abuses being perpetrated within the current structure. In order to promote mutual respect and understanding, it was imperative that due regard should be shown to the socio-cultural and religious values and traditions of all countries. In an interdependent world, equitable economic development and social progress could not be achieved without a new, just and balanced world information and communication order that would strengthen peace and international understanding.

37. The first task of the new popular Government of Pakistan had been to lift the state of emergency and to restore fundamental rights and freedoms, and the Prime Minister had shown his determination to further strengthen freedom of the press in Pakistan. His delegation attached great importance to the use of radio broadcasts to disseminate information on United Nations activities, and he mentioned the success of the Urdu-language programmes, which served more than 100 million people in Asia and the Pacific. The Department of Public Information should strengthen its work in the region.

38. Of special interest to Pakistan was the co-operation with the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries and with UNESCO. He noted the activities of UNESCO concerning its International Programme for the Development of Communication, particularly those activities designed to foster co-operation among the communication media in developing countries in the area of information. He called upon UNESCO to intensify its efforts but noted that the funds allocated for the activities of its Programme were insufficient and needed to be supplemented.

39. Since Pakistan and other developing countries were not adequately represented in the Department of Public Information, the principle of geographical representation should be observed in recruiting, especially at the senior level. The United Nations Correspondents Association had carried out useful work in disseminating information about United Nations activities around the world, and the Department of Public Information should extend all necessary facilities to it. His delegation fully supported the requests of Czechoslovakia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jamaica and Uruguay for membership in the Committee on Information.

40. Mrs. RYDLE (Sweden), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said that those countries regretted that freedom of information, an indispensable component of democracy and development which was proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was too often subject to violations; they paid tribute to the journalists who had been imprisoned, abused or killed while carrying out their duty.

41. The Nordic countries were concerned about existing imbalances among nations in access to the means of information and recognized the need to expand the communication capacity of developing countries, as indicated by their long-standing support of the International Programme for the Development of Communication established by UNESCO.

42. The Nordic countries welcomed the consensus reached in the Committee on Information, which opened up new possibilities for progress in the field of information, as well as the constructive results of the twenty-fifth General Conference of UNESCO. There was every indication that the current far-reaching changes in international relations would require the Department of Public Information to assume increased responsibilities. The Nordic countries would welcome the development of their dialogue with the Department and were interested in the possibility of helping to strengthen the Organization's capacity to promote peace and understanding on the one hand, and world-wide awareness of the Organization's role and activities on the other.

43. Mr. NIKULIN (Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) said that the growing interdependence of countries and regions was creating a new human community. Information played an increasingly important role in that community, to the point where it was legitimate to assume that an interruption of the flow of information would quickly result in a situation whose seriousness would equal that of an economic collapse. In a world of such interdependence, progress could only be made on the basis of a free flow of information with open channels of communication at both the national and international levels, which meant that humanity could no longer do without a global information infrastructure.

44. His delegation was convinced that the success achieved thus far in international activities illustrated the future direction which information must take, i.e., towards greater democratization of information. There was also a need to see that the increasing convergence of formerly opposed ideologies was reflected in co-operation in the exchange of information.

45. Those developments implied new tasks for the United Nations. Therefore, as the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information had explained, the scope of activity of the Organization's information organs had been broadened. In consequence, the traditional activities of those organs relating to such issues as peace, Namibia, apartheid, Palestine and economic development were being supplemented by a series of activities relating to the environment, which occupied a prominent place in the programme of activities for the coming decade. The Department was also strengthening its co-operation with various United Nations organs and with information agencies.

(Mr. Nikulin, Byelorussian SSR)

46. The reports before the Committee confirmed the international community's concern about the environment and about the effects of atomic radiation, particularly from the Chernobyl accident. It was necessary to launch international campaigns to aid the victims of that accident. His delegation hoped that the Department of Public Information would increase its participation in that area of international co-operation, which should focus on the long-term consequences of the accident. In the short term, the Department could assume responsibility for broadcasting an appeal for help for the victims, which the General Assembly would address to the international community.

47. Mr. BEN LAMINE (Tunisia) endorsed the opinions which the representative of Algeria had expressed on behalf of the five countries of the Maghreb and added that for the first time, the North and the South were in agreement on the delicate subject under consideration and that their agreement reflected a more appropriate conception of international relations.

48. The question of information was of the highest importance, since it was closely linked to a fundamental human right: the right to a wealth of information, disseminated by free institutions, that promoted the full development of the human being. The developing countries understood the importance which the developed countries attached to information oriented towards fundamental freedoms but felt that that focus should be improved upon so that information could also lend itself to the satisfaction of basic necessities. Moreover, the international community could not resolve global problems without a balanced flow of information. It was therefore inadmissible for one part of that community to try to impose its point of view on the others.

49. His delegation congratulated DPI on its work, but expressed the opinion that more emphasis should be placed on questions relating to international peace and security, the situation in the Middle East, the environment and the role of women. He was satisfied with the work done by the Information Centre in Tunis, although he was sure that it could be further improved. The productive meeting of Directors of Information Centres based in Arabic-speaking countries, held in Tunis from 21 to 23 March 1990, was an example of the type of activity which should be promoted. Co-operation in the field between DPI and UNDP should also be strengthened. Finally, he noted that the principle of equitable geographical distribution must be applied strictly in DPI.

50. Mr. MAHMOUD (Lebanon) said that information was a core element of modern development and reflected the complexity and interrelation of national interests. In a changing world, in which the United Nations was regaining its central role, DPI, besides administering the communications network, would become a catalyst for intellectual activity.

51. The disparity existing between developed and developing countries in the field of information affected the capability of the developing countries to disseminate their ideas and values. Lebanon supported the free flow of information and genuine objectivity in covering international and regional issues. The frequent attempts

(Mr. Mahmoud, Lebanon)

to marginalize the influence of the United Nations and its resolutions, and the systematic attacks by some developed countries whose interests often contradicted United Nations principles should be rejected.

52. Lebanon had played a leading role in the field of the dissemination of information in the Middle East and, despite the agony of the past 15 years, remained the publishing capital of the Arab world. With the restoration of constitutional institutions and the tendency to expand the authority of the Government under a united army, it was expected that the mass media would contribute to the reunification of the country in the service of justice, peace and development in the region. He expressed his Government's gratitude for the uninterrupted activities of the United Nations Information Centre in Lebanon in the difficult circumstances of the past 15 years, and its commitment to co-operate with DPI to enhance the Centre's regional role.

53. Mr. GARAD (Somalia) said that, with the end of the cold war and confrontation between the super-Powers, a spirit of co-operation and compromise in relations between States reigned in many parts of the world. Earlier in the year, Namibia had taken its rightful place in the community of free and independent nations and Nelson Mandela had been released, raising the hopes of the black majority in South Africa that soon they would be able to participate in the democratic life of their country. The aspirations of the German people and the Yemeni people had been fulfilled with the peaceful reunification of their countries. Somalia had recently joined the other countries of the Horn of Africa, under the aegis of the Intergovernmental Authority for Drought and Development, in working for socio-economic development and the restoration of peace and harmony in the area.

54. His delegation welcomed the positive results achieved by UNESCC and considered the adoption by consensus of the strategy for "Communication in the service of humanity" very important. That strategy was based on freedom of information and the need for the international community to encourage the free and more balanced flow of information at the national and global levels. He welcomed the progress that had been made in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 44/50, in co-operation between DPI and the News Agencies Pool of Non-aligned Countries, and in activities regarding African recovery and development and the struggle against the policy of apartheid. Nevertheless, since the scarcity of resources limited the participation of the news agencies of many developing and least-developed countries in the Pool, it was imperative that such agencies should receive the necessary financial assistance.

55. His delegation commended DPI for disseminating information on Africa through its publication Africa Recovery. Given the tendency of the Western media to highlight the negative side of events in developing countries, however, that publication should give greater coverage to the positive developments taking place in many African countries. DPI should also emphasize the problems that still had to be resolved: the eradication of apartheid, the situation in the Middle East, the question of Palestine and the Palestinian intifadah, and problems of social and economic development.

56. Mr. ZANELS (Argentina) said he hoped that the General Assembly would confirm the consensus achieved at the twelfth session of the Committee on Information. That consensus had not been a coincidence or a mere reaction to external change, but the fruit of a long process of reflection and analysis.

57. Freedom of the press and freedom of information had been recognized in the Constitution of Argentina of 1853. More than 130 years earlier, the Argentine thinker, Juan Bautista Alberdi, speaking of freedom of the press, had said that it was "a natural right and an inherent attribute of man".

58. That freedom, which allowed a choice among various information sources, was directly related to the level of development of the peoples. The activities of DPI were directed towards those peoples, as part of the growing United Nations involvement in the life of all the inhabitants of Earth, especially in matters relating to peace and security.

59. The enormous task of DPI also required the allocation of greater resources. DPI should be given greater budgetary financing and should be allowed to explore the possibilities of co-operation with the private sector in various countries.

60. There was a United Nations Information Centre in Argentina, which also had subregional jurisdiction and which should seek imaginative formulae to broaden its field of action and increase its efficiency.

61. After stating that greater use should be made of audio-visual communications media, he commended the work of the Secretary-General and welcomed the delegations of Czechoslovakia, Jamaica, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Uruguay, to membership in the Committee on Information.

The meeting rose at 12.50 p.m.