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Chairman:

Mr. PIBULSONGRAM

(Thailand)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 75: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (A/46/21, 336, 449)

1. Mrs. SEVIGNY (Under-Secretary-General for Public Information) said that events over the past year had propelled the United Nations to the forefront of the international scene and spurred a revival of public and media interest. Her Department had spared no effort to meet the increased demand for information, particularly on the role of the Organization and on actions taken by the Security Council and the Secretary-General. DPI was the focal point within the United Nations for information on the latest developments; as such it made available to the press topical and background documents, updates and summaries of coming documents, and had organized press conferences. It had given national and international coverage to the Secretary-General's diplomacy on the hostage question, El Salvador, Cyprus, Afghanistan, the emergency in the Horn of Africa, and the United Nations operation in Western Sahara. DPI staff had also acted as press spokesmen for many United Nations missions in the field.

2. The Department had continued to survey public opinion and awareness in Member States about the United Nations. Thus far, with the release of 29 public opinion surveys since 1989, about one quarter of the world's population had been covered. The polls had provided very useful data on priority issues of interest to the public as well as on sources of information about the Organization and its agencies, enabling DPI to monitor the trends and adjust its activities accordingly. The polls had consistently shown that most people had little specific knowledge about the agencies and programmes of the United Nations system, and that the issues of major concern were the environment, peace and security, human rights, drug abuse, disarmament, children's issues and global food programmes. Thus, besides explaining how the United Nations system was constituted, the Department's major task would be to explain to the public how the Organization's work was related to the issues that concerned them and how it was relevant to their lives. That called for new strategies, an example of which was the award by DPI of certificates of recognition to any pro bono campaigns by members of the International Advertising Association or the International Public Relations Association that supported the programmes and goals of the United Nations.

3. The Department had continued to produce factual media profiles of Member States, which gave a good picture of the various countries and would be included in the second, expanded edition of the World Media Handbook to be published early in 1992.

4. The Department was still striving to stimulate public interest in the United Nations in order to attract more support for its objectives. Several media round tables had been organized both at Headquarters and in the field, bringing senior media representatives from different regions of the world together with top United Nations officials to discuss topics including

(Mrs. Sevigny)

disarmament, human rights and the question of Palestine. DPI had organized briefing programmes for nearly 700 public groups and had arranged for Secretariat officials to speak on issues of interest to the United Nations to many audiences in North America and in different parts of the world. As part of the outreach to media professionals, the Department's 1991 training programme for broadcasters and journalists had since September been briefing and giving in-service training to 14 participants from developing countries.

5. As a follow-up to the thorough review by the Committee on Information of the Yearbook of the United Nations, the Department had arranged for the publication of three backlog editions of the Yearbook, those of 1988, 1989 and 1990. The 1987 Yearbook would be ready for publication by the end of the year, and work had already begun on the 1991 edition, to be completed in late 1992. All editions would be produced in accordance with the new guidelines set after the review, and it was expected that those changes would restore the regular and timely production of the Yearbook, while maintaining its usual high standards as a reference book on the work of the Organization.

6. Using a variety of media tailored to different audiences, the Department had sought to draw global public attention to and support for priority issues such as peace-keeping, disarmament, decolonization, human rights, the struggle against apartheid, and economic and social development.

7. On the subject of peace-making and peace-keeping, in which interest was higher than ever, the Department had produced television news items that were regularly broadcast, for example on the Cable News Network "World Report", as well as press kits and other information on ongoing United Nations peace-keeping operations. In March, the Department had co-sponsored a symposium held in Singapore on the changing role of the United Nations in conflict resolution and peace-keeping, in cooperation with the Institute of Policy Studies of Singapore and the Government of Japan.

8. The Department had also organized several non-governmental-organization (NGO) briefings on issues relating to disarmament and to international peace and security. The theme of the annual NGO Conference sponsored by DPI in September and attended by some 1,200 representatives from 60 Member States, had been peace, justice and development as ingredients for an emerging world order.

9. As coordinator of the public information activities of the World Public Information Campaign on Human Rights, the Department had proposed to the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) the establishment of an inter-agency working group on human rights. An ad hoc working group had been set up to prepare for the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights and for the observance of 1993 as the International Year for the World's Indigenous People.

(Mrs. Seigny)

10. The Department had also worked with the secretariat of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and with other United Nations agencies on preparations for the Conference, to be held in June 1992 in Brazil. All the United Nations information centres were working to increase local awareness of sustainable development, using a variety of print, radio and television items produced by the Department in official languages.

11. The Department was also producing regular television coverage of events at Headquarters and, as perhaps the most efficient method of publicizing the United Nations message, it sent daily video highlights of the United Nations coverage to the international television syndicators, Visnews and Worldwide Television News, which in turn distributed the material in their daily satellite newsfeeds to over 1,000 television stations in nearly 100 countries.

12. In a number of publications and broadcasts, the Department continued to cover economic and social development issues, including natural disaster reduction, international efforts to combat illicit drugs, the aftermath of Chernobyl, and the external debt problem.

13. The Department had continued to call attention to the issue of African recovery and development. Its journal, Africa Recovery, targeted at foreign policy-makers, the media and NGOs, was widely recognized as a major publication in that area. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Department had organized a tour of Togo and the United Republic of Tanzania for 31 senior journalists from prominent world newspapers to allow them to experience first-hand some of the economic and social challenges confronting African countries.

14. As part of the new approach to information and communications questions pursuant to General Assembly resolution 45/76, DPI and the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in cooperation with UNDP and several national agencies for international development, had in the spring of 1991 organized a seminar in Namibia on the promotion of an independent and pluralistic press in Africa, with participants from 38 African countries. The Department had just published and circulated worldwide the final document of the seminar, the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, and was in the process of estimating the financial implications of the projects proposed therein. The Department, working closely with UNESCO, was now considering similar seminars for media professionals - including experts in marketing, distribution and banking - from Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Such seminars could help forge the democratic culture and the entrepreneurial spirit that were essential for both development and democracy. Indeed, a free, pluralistic and independent press was the sine qua non of any democratization process, and democracy and economic development went hand in hand.

(Mrs. Sevigny)

15. The struggle against apartheid remained a major concern. The travelling photo exhibit organized jointly with the Centre against Apartheid was constantly being updated to reflect the rapidly changing situation in South Africa, and the Department had continued to produce anti-apartheid radio programmes for broadcast to South Africa from neighbouring States.

16. The Department had also maintained its multi-media programme on the question of Palestine: national journalists' encounters had been held in Belgium and Germany, and a regional encounter for European journalists had been held in Finland.

17. The network of 67 United Nations information centres had continued to promote public interest in and understanding of the goals and activities of the Organization, through extensive contacts with the press, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and other bodies in the countries concerned. In close collaboration particularly with UNDP, DPI was seeking to project a consistent image of the United Nations. In recent months, it had, inter alia, organized two regional meetings of directors of information centres in Africa and in Europe, and a regional meeting in Latin America focusing on reference service training at the information centres. In order to ensure more rapid distribution of information to the information centres, DPI was giving special attention to introducing new electronic techniques and equipment, and training staff to use them. By the end of the year, some 30 centres would be linked to Headquarters by electronic mail. In compliance with General Assembly resolution 45/76, DPI had taken steps to establish an information centre in Namibia; it was also discussing the budgetary implications of opening centres in Poland and Yemen, and preparing estimates of funds needed for operations in other existing centres. All the information centres were working valiantly to respond to the renewed interest in the United Nations and to meet the rising demand in Member States for information on topical subjects but, paradoxically, they were being asked to do so within unrealistically small budgets and even with reduced staff. She appealed to all Governments to increase their financial assistance to the information centres in their countries.

18. Her ambition for DPI was to instil a dynamism that would carry it forward to the year 2000, rather than having a system that could do no more than react piecemeal to events. A solid and vital communication programme that would reach the greatest number of people was the best way to promote multilateralism and arouse a ground-swell of support for the Organization's whole range of activities throughout the world.

19. Mr. LAGORIO (Argentina), speaking as Chairman of the Committee on Information and introducing the Committee's report (A/46/21), said that the Committee had decided by consensus to recommend to the General Assembly the adoption of the two draft resolutions contained in section IV of the report, concerning information in service of humanity and United Nations public information policies and activities. It had been left to the Special

(Mr. Lagorio, Argentina)

Political Committee to agree on the preambular paragraphs that might be added to the draft resolutions.

20. As a result of discussions held on strengthening the capabilities of the network of United Nations information centres and services, reports from the centres would be submitted to the Committee on Information for its 1992 substantive session. Furthermore, the Committee had decided to recommend to the General Assembly the establishment of an information centre in Yemen, as well as the strengthening of four existing centres in Tehran, Dar es Salaam, Dhaka and Bujumbura.

21. He drew attention to the draft decision recommending the increase of the membership of the Committee by one and the appointment of Burkina Faso to fill the position, and expressed the hope that the Committee would endorse the consensus recommendation.

22. Seminars such as that held at Windhoek, Namibia, from 29 April to 3 May 1991, were very important and constructive; accordingly, the Committee on Information wished to encourage the Department of Public Information and UNESCO to continue their efforts to organize such seminars in other regions of the world.

23. Mr. ISAKSSON (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) said that, in accordance with its Constitution, UNESCO had made promoting the free flow of information one of its top priorities. Its new strategy for the development of communications and the free flow of information called upon the Organization to strive for the development of free, independent and pluralistic media in both public and private sectors.

24. Examples of activities conducted under the auspices of the new strategy included the Windhoek Seminar, which had stated in its Declaration that a similar seminar should be convened for journalists and managers of radio and television services in Africa.

25. In the field of East-West cooperation, UNESCO had helped to establish a regional media centre in Warsaw, which would respond to the urgent needs existing in Eastern European countries to train journalists, exchange information and documentation and introduce the principles and practices of independent and pluralistic media.

26. As where technical cooperation among developing countries was concerned, UNESCO had assisted in the organization of a Tricontinental Meeting on South-South Cooperation and Communication, which had been held in March/April 1991.

27. Finally, the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) had continued to support projects aimed at meeting the needs of the developing countries in the field of communications, information

(Mr. Isaksson, UNESCO)

and mass media infrastructures. However, the programme was in great need of more generous contributions from donors.

28. Mr. HIENSCH (Netherlands), speaking on behalf of the European Community and its 12 member States, said that freedom of information was the basic tenet of any democratic society and should not be subject to any restriction, limitation or control. The Community wished to pay particular tribute to the journalists who had died over the previous year in the performance of their duty.

29. The Community considered that in order to reduce disparities between developed and developing countries, the developing countries' capacity to disseminate information should be enlarged and reinforced. To that end, cooperation should be carried out primarily through UNESCO and its programmes, such as the International Programme for the Development of Communication. The Windhoek Seminar and Declaration provided an excellent example of such cooperation.

30. The consensus existing in the Committee on Information should enable it to concentrate on the elaboration of guidelines for the Department of Public Information. The Committee should take care not to draft a long list of recommendations which DPI would not have the resources to implement. The operative parts of the draft resolution on United Nations information policies and activities should be streamlined in order to enable the Department to draw up an order of priorities. The Community welcomed the Committee on Information's decision to set up regular meetings between the members of the Bureau and representatives of regional groups.

31. The Twelve had always maintained that an information component should where necessary be an integral part of plans for United Nations conferences and peace-keeping operations and should not be subject to ad hoc arrangements at a later stage. They supported efforts to make DPI more professional and effective, and suggested that at its next session the Committee on Information should discuss the consolidation of public information activities in the Department.

32. United Nations information centres were an important tool for the Department in disseminating information on the United Nations. The Community welcomed the regional meetings of Directors of Information Centres since they provided an excellent opportunity to share and exchange experience and information.

33. Mr. MA MOOD (Pakistan) said that his delegation deemed it imperative to promote cooperation with UNESCO, strengthen the United Nations information centres and services, and enhance training programmes for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries. He therefore urged the Department of Public Information to intensify its activities accordingly.

(Mr. Mahmood, Pakistan)

34. Referring to resolution 45/76 A, he expressed the hope that the Secretary-General would devote special attention to the issue of a new world information and communication order and report to the General Assembly on the measures adopted to carry out such a mandate. The current structure of information lacked balance, objectivity and fairness, since the enormous resources and technological superiority of a small group of countries, representing only 15 per cent of the world population, had enabled them to monopolize the flow of information to the world. The structure should therefore be democratized to provide a forum which allowed the participation of all nations in human development and international progress, thus evolving a broader and more balanced presentation of information. Current conditions in the world were particularly conducive to such a change.

35. Under the envisaged new information order, the developing countries should receive help to improve their overall media capacities, thus enabling them to participate freely in the global pursuit of information and communication and play a more substantive role in advocating freedom of information and expression, a concept which Pakistan was committed to upholding.

36. Experience in Pakistan had demonstrated the useful purpose served by United Nations radio broadcasts in projecting and disseminating information on the activities of the United Nations and its agencies. His country therefore reiterated the call by the Committee on Information to strengthen the Asian and Pacific Radio Unit, and called upon DPI to produce Urdu programmes through a regular unit at the Headquarters. His delegation also supported a strengthening of the Information Centres Division, given its potential for enhancing the image of the United Nations in the countries where the Centres were accredited.

37. While commending the work of the Information Products Division, his delegation believed that a strengthening of the Photo Unit would help improve its productivity. It also strongly supported the activities of the United Nations Correspondents' Association. Pakistan and other developing countries were inadequately represented on the staff of DPI, particularly at senior level; that situation should be redressed in keeping with the principle of geographical representation.

38. The activities of UNESCO, notably the International Programme for the Development of Communication and its efforts in relation to South-South cooperation, were instrumental to the creation of a new world information and communication order.

39. The role of those employed in the media must be appropriately recognized in order to encourage their professional performance with the ultimate aim of creating a more congenial climate for a better world. Finally, he stressed the importance of the free flow of information between States was vital, and access to information was a fundamental human right in the quest for global progress and prosperity.

40. Mr. POSSO (Ecuador) said that public information was an instrument for strengthening democracy, but measures were needed to protect the system from manipulation and disinformation at the hands of transnational media interests with their superior technical resources. In the interests of improving and asserting the independence of its information system, Ecuador had backed subregional and regional efforts to integrate information facilities and had played an active role in the Pool of News Agencies of the Non-Aligned Countries.

41. He recalled his delegation's support for the new world information and communication order and the consensus which had been achieved with regard to general guidelines and the tasks to be assigned to the Department of Public Information. In fulfilling those tasks, account must be taken of the vital need to rectify the imbalance between developing and developed countries with regard to access to and control of information sources, while seeking to combat commercial exploitation in the form of the self-interested dissemination of information by those countries with sophisticated technological resources.

42. With regard to technology transfer, the less advanced countries should combine to share advanced facilities and products in order break the monopoly of multinationals and improve individual countries' infrastructures, thereby enabling them to develop their own technology and output so as to counteract the imposition of programmes foreign to their cultures and traditions.

43. Efforts should also be made to devise a genuine code of conduct, based on individual rights but stressing the advantages of international cooperation and solidarity and the role of public communication as an instrument for the global development of peoples.

44. The United Nations public information system also needed to be improved; in planning its work, DPI should take account of areas warranting greater emphasis as a result of regional or international developments; and that would obviate the need for it to improvise special information measures at particular times, and might even enable it to influence world public opinion in specific fields.

45. The guidelines for United Nations public information merited special consideration, in that they covered such vital topics as environmental protection, measures to combat drugs trafficking, decolonization, elimination of inhuman and degrading practices and the promotion of human rights.

46. In addition to reflecting the day-to-day work of the Organization, the Department of Public Information should also be ready to concentrate its efforts in individual countries and regions when circumstances so warranted.

47. His delegation attached particular importance to the United Nations information centres, and was puzzled by the inconsistencies in their geographical location and the disparities in the material and human resources

(Mr. Posso, Ecuador)

available to different centres. Public information was a matter for professionals and specialists, and should not be left to United Nations technical cooperation agencies. His delegation had proposed in the Committee on Information that the Secretariat or a group of independent experts should study the location, structure and costs of existing information centres and put forward general conclusions which reflected the public information needs of the United Nations and the actual conditions prevailing in the countries it served, with the aim of establishing a network of rationally located information centres with broadly similar capacities and facilities.

48. In conclusion, his delegation believed that the Special Political Committee should support the work of the Committee on Information by giving it a specific mandate to continue defining the new world information order and determining its basic content. It also commended the willingness shown in the report of the Secretary-General (A/46/449) to meet the expectations of world public opinion in the face of the radical changes now occurring in the world.

49. Mr. EHLERS (Uruguay) said that debates in the Committee on Information had been constructive. The subject which had attracted most attention had undoubtedly been that of the information centres, a fact adequately reflected in the relevant paragraphs of the Committee's report and of draft resolution II. Discussion of that subject should continue with a view to determining guidelines for the opening of such centres; the guidelines contained in the document on the subject submitted by the Secretariat needed to be further considered and extended if they were to secure the support and approval of Member States.

50. The periodic assessments of the centres by the Secretariat would enable the Committee on Information to produce a more incisive analysis, while coordination with UNDP and its offices was vital in ensuring adequate diffusion of information in countries without information centres.

51. Given that the resources of DPI could not be increased in real terms, all expenditure incurred by information centres on behalf of other organizations in the system should be reimbursed.

52. His Government was investigating possible ways of cooperating with the Department and neighbouring countries with a view to opening an information office in Montevideo, making full use of the limited resources available and in cooperation with the Buenos Aires Information Centre and possibly the UNDP office in Montevideo, an experiment which, if successful, could serve as a model for further initiatives. He welcomed the readiness of both the Department and the Argentine Government to cooperate on the matter, as reflected in paragraph 87 of the report of the Committee on Information.

53. His delegation supported the work programme aimed at bringing publication of the Yearbook of the United Nations up to date, and welcomed the progress in that respect detailed in part XIV of the report of the Secretary-General (A/46/449). It also attached considerable importance to the recommendation,

(Mr. Ehlers, Uruguay)

contained in paragraph 1 (s) of draft resolution II, that informal contacts between the Committee on Information and the Department of Public Information should be mentioned between sessions.

54. To help them in monitoring the work of DPI, Committee members needed to have more information concerning the action taken on the general guidelines laid down in the draft resolutions; in that respect, it would be useful for meetings to be held with regional representatives so as to ascertain what products were being produced and sent to individual regions. His delegation would like to have access to the radio, television and video programmes produced in Spanish for the Latin American region and was willing to respond to the request for cooperation in securing access to the mass media in its country and in disseminating information about the services offered by the United Nations. Greater knowledge of the products directed specifically at his delegation's region would help produce fruitful collaboration.

55. Mr. BACKSTROM (Sweden), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said it was important to maintain the consensus reached the previous year on the topic of information in the service of humanity and the mandate for the United Nations public information policies and activities.

56. Within its present financial constraints, the Department of Public Information should be encouraged to be flexible to the new demands arising from the new momentum for political change in the world. Increased coordination between the specialized agencies of the United Nations should likewise be encouraged, and UNESCO had an important role to play in that respect. The role of the United Nations information centres had expanded world wide, and the Nordic countries therefore advocated further discussions on the establishment of new centres.

57. The Nordic countries supported the promotion of an independent and pluralistic press world wide, in view of the fundamental importance of the freedom of speech and information to the development of international relations. Accordingly, they were concerned over the existing imbalances in access to information, and would continue to help developing countries expand their communication capacity in order to improve the free flow of information to benefit the world as a whole.

58. Mr. SOUTELLO-ALVES (Brazil) said that the goal of promoting a new democratic world order would be undermined if the capacity to receive and impart information remained limited to a few segments of the international community. Policies should therefore be devised to enhance the communications infrastructures, capabilities and technical expertise of the developing countries on as equitable a basis as possible, thus furthering the principle that freedom of information and the press should act as the principal safeguard of a world order based on the free flow of ideas, people and goods. His delegation had been pleased to note that the draft resolution contained in document A/46/21 acknowledged that fact. It also welcomed the invitation to

(Mr. Soutello-Alves, Brazil)

Member States to submit observations and proposals on the means of furthering such policies.

59. The Department of Public Information should be capable of responding to the growing need for information about United Nations activities, notably by demonstrating flexibility in choosing priority areas for the dissemination of such information. Increased flexibility should however not detract from the collective responsibility of Member States for guiding and supervising the Department's work, and in that context his delegation welcomed the recommendation made in draft resolution II regarding periodic consultations between the Bureau of the Committee of Information and DPI. Within that framework, a useful discussion could be conducted on improving the daily briefings to delegations, which were entitled to comprehensive coverage of daily events at the United Nations.

60. Finally, regarding DPI coverage of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, to which his delegation attached great significance, he said that DPI should further discuss implementing a system-wide information programme, particularly since the environment was now deemed to be the highest priority issue suitable for inter-agency cooperation.

61. Mr. LAGORIO (Argentina) stressed the importance of the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, and welcomed the Windhoek seminar's recommendation that the General Assembly should include in its agenda the question of censorship as a serious human rights violation; that proposal was in keeping with the spirit of resolution 59 (I) of 14 December 1946, which declared that freedom of information was a fundamental human right. The Department of Public Information should hold further seminars of the same kind in other regions, particularly Latin America. He also supported the proposal to institute a freedom of information day as a vital step in consolidating the principle of the freedom of information and communication.

62. It would be very useful for private institutions and non-governmental organizations to take part in the work of the Committee on Information, and to give it the benefit of their experience. One of the main challenges facing that Committee was the vital need to initiate a serious and comprehensive study of the system of United Nations information centres and, in that connection, the reports to be considered by the Committee at its fourteenth session were of vital importance. He also supported the proposal put forward by Ecuador that a group of experts should be set up to study the whole question and propose possible courses of action. The informal consultation mechanism established during the Committee on Information's last session should provide a useful channel for discussing matters of interest in the intervals between sessions.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.