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Substantive questions

Reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 53/59 B of 3 December 1998, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General “to develop further his proposals for the reorientation of United Nations activities in the area of public information and communications, taking into account the views of Member States” and further requested him “to submit his detailed plan thereon to the Committee on Information for consideration at its twenty-first session in 1999”.

2. The General Assembly further emphasized that, “through its reorientation, the Department of Public Information should maintain and improve its activities in the areas of specific interest to the developing countries and others with special needs, including countries in transition, and that such reorientation should contribute to bridging the existing gap between the developing and the developed countries in the crucial field of information and communications”.

3. In considering these matters, the Committee on Information should take into account all the information provided in the report of the Secretary-General on implementation of the measures regarding information and communications (A/AC.198/1998/2) and the report of the Secretary-General on questions relating to

information (A/53/509). Both reports taken together provide a substantial portion of the information requested by the General Assembly. In the present report, therefore, repetition of the information provided in the above-mentioned reports has been kept to a minimum and emphasis is placed on the new measures that have been adopted to further develop the conceptual framework that had been presented to the Committee at its twentieth session. Furthermore, the present report should be read along with the other reports on specific aspects of the Department’s work being submitted for the consideration of the Committee at its twenty-first session.

II. New orientation

4. The main elements of the new orientation of the activities of the Department of Public Information were summarized in paragraph 5 of the 1998 report of the Secretary-General on questions relating to information (A/53/509). The main thrust of reorientation measures is focused on the Organization’s response to the imperatives of what is described as the “age of information”. The Secretary-General has best described the genesis of a response to this imperative as the need for a “culture of communications” to permeate the United Nations. Every effort has to be made, therefore, to ensure that all parts of the Organization come

to recognize public information and communications as an integral part of their substantive programmes, a view that was strongly endorsed in the report of the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities (A/AC.198/1997/CRP.1). Indeed, in the light of discussions on these issues over the past two years, it is the widely shared view of Member States and of the Secretary-General that the information and communications function should be placed at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization.

5. The measures that have been adopted to reorient the activities of the Department of Public Information would seek to project the Organization as an open, transparent and public institution capable of meeting the principal objectives of the Charter of the United Nations, namely, peace and security, economic and social development and human rights, among others. This would entail the introduction and employment of the latest developments in the field of information technology to ensure that, despite the limited resource base, output and productivity are improved continuously to meet increasing demand from all parts of the world. In order for the United Nations to more effectively reach audiences around the globe, the capacity to communicate at the country and regional levels has to be enhanced progressively. The messages disseminated must be in accordance with the mandates given by relevant intergovernmental bodies, while taking into account regional and local needs.

6. The measures required for reorientation of the public information and communications policies and activities of the Department have consequences for both its structure and its methods of work. In addition to the structural changes made thus far, the present report will indicate where the reorientation is being achieved through greater emphasis on optimum use of available resources and on cooperative efforts with the substantive departments of the Secretariat.

III. New technology

7. The introduction of new technology in the field of communications is often taken to mean increasing the capacity to use the Internet. This rendering does not, however, provide a full picture of the impact of new technology on communications and public information in general and the work of the Department of Public Information in particular. The dramatic developments in information technology throughout this century have shown how new media have both revolutionized the dissemination of information at various junctures and opened ever widening horizons to new and increasing audiences while, at the same time, strengthening the role of the already established media. Just as radio and

television joined the print medium in widening their reach to newer and larger audiences, the advent of the Internet has introduced a fourth medium that is rapidly evolving into a significant communications tool for users around the world.

8. The Department of Public Information has to approach the issues that arise in this context with a view to ensuring progress on a broad front. While taking all necessary measures to stay abreast of the latest developments in the use of the Internet as a medium for public information, care has to be taken to maintain and expand the Department's capacity to use the "traditional" media for dissemination of information, especially in developing countries where access to the Internet is only at its initial stages.

9. To strengthen the Department's capacity to manage and coordinate the United Nations website and to underscore the importance that the Department attaches to its role, the Information Technology Section, which manages the Internet operation, has been placed in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information under the overall supervision of a staff member at the D-1 level and the policy direction of the Under-Secretary-General. In addition to its responsibilities regarding the United Nations website, the Department also coordinates and chairs the interdepartmental group on Internet matters, and thereby continues to enhance its assistance on Internet matters rendered to other parts of the Secretariat.

10. The unique power of the Internet has been harnessed by the Department to expand the reach of its information products and portray the wide range of activities of the Organization. The United Nations website today carries a great variety of material, including statements by the Secretary-General, reports to major intergovernmental bodies, daily news highlights, promotional products on the major themes and priorities of the Organization, information regarding major world conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly, to name a few. Taking advantage of the synergistic aspects of the Internet, the website also carries radio broadcasts and video footage developed by the Department.

11. A very significant recent development has been the introduction, despite severe resource constraints, of the web pages in all six official languages. The Department's objective is to bring all the web pages on a comparable footing in due course, as resources permit. Future plans also include continuous addition of audio and video elements, a larger volume of older documents and a continuing improvement in the presentation and design of the various parts of the United Nations website. A more detailed description of the latter aspect is provided in the report of the

Secretary-General on continuous development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations websites (A/AC.198/1999/6).

IV. Reaching the media

12. A more effective news gathering and delivery system, which the Secretary-General identified last year in his reorientation plan as one of the most immediate priorities of the Department of Public Information, is entering into operation. Such a news operation can help to meet the increased demand for information by new media organizations, which are proliferating at a great pace worldwide and seeking sources of interesting materials related to all the principal priorities of the Organization. To strengthen the current news operation, therefore, the Editorial Section has been moved to the Media Division, which has been renamed the News and Media Services Division as an indication of the Department's sharpened news focus.

13. The Department's immediate priority is the development of the United Nations News Service. With the assistance of the United Nations information centres, services and other field offices, the information available through this Service will be transmitted via electronic mail and facsimile directly to the news desks of key media organizations around the world, as well as to other important opinion-making constituencies. The centrepiece of the Service will be a brief "Headline News Alert" on breaking news from the United Nations, which will also be posted on the United Nations website on the Internet. Only headlines will be included, with indications as to where further details can be obtained from press releases, statements and other material posted on the United Nations website. The United Nations News Service will also contain an expanded news feature service. Earlier in 1999, the Department also began the placement, on a worldwide basis, of carefully planned and coordinated op-ed articles by senior United Nations officials. Finally, with the technology now in place, United Nations officials will be able to brief senior journalists via telephone at the national or subregional level on issues of pressing concern to them. This multifaceted news operation will therefore bring the United Nations right to news desks in otherwise distant countries. At the same time, it will provide journalists worldwide with a central communication point in the Department of Public Information. While media organizations in all countries will find these services useful, those news organizations that do not have their own correspondents at United Nations Headquarters will particularly benefit.

14. Another priority for the Department is the development of a daily news page on the United Nations website, building on the proven success of the daily highlights. When fully operational, the page will provide the media and others interested in the United Nations with a summary of breaking news on all the major events and activities of the day. It will also provide information on upcoming meetings and events. News headlines will be linked to full-length articles, press releases, documents, high-quality photographs, United Nations radio and video features and other source material available system-wide, and will provide direct links to other major news sites, such as the daily press briefing of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General.

15. The Department's press releases containing comprehensive, immediate information, in both English and French, on the proceedings of United Nations intergovernmental meetings, the activities of the Secretary-General, the work of the Organization's substantive departments and of other organizations of the United Nations system — until recently available only to a relatively restricted group of Headquarters-based journalists, delegations and Secretariat officials, and by diplomatic pouch to others away from Headquarters — are now disseminated worldwide, almost instantly, on the Internet. In the near future, topic-oriented press releases, daily highlights and other news-related materials will be sent by electronic mail directly to the newsrooms of journalists who express interest in receiving these materials.

V. Radio and television

16. The recommendation of the Secretary-General's Task Force calling for the modernization of the United Nations radio and television services came as a welcome impetus to the Department's development plans in this field. Efforts are therefore now under way to increase the provision of live feeds and other easy-to-assemble raw materials that can be quickly disseminated worldwide and that are more easily adaptable for use by the mass media. Progress in this area will help to bridge the existing information gap between the developed and the developing countries in this field, as mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/38 B of 9 December 1994.

17. Priority is being given, therefore, to establishing links with radio stations worldwide, which will enable instantaneous use of the Department's radio programmes, through the most effective delivery system available in each region or subregion, including short wave, satellite, digital audio, telephone feeds, electronic audio-file transfer and other

Internet-based mechanisms. An important breakthrough in this regard is the delivery of Chinese language programmes to major broadcasting stations in China, as well as in the United States of America, by electronic audio transfer. In addition, the Internet is being used for direct broadcast of United Nations programmes for regions where multimedia Internet use is available, through the Organization's first-ever audio-visual website, established in 1999. Efforts are also under way to deploy technology that will enable broadcasters to use programmes posted on this website. Finally, other important developments in this reporting period are the creation of the Organization's first audio-visual web page, and the posting of brief audio news clips on the United Nations Radio web page for immediate use by broadcasters. The net result of all these developments will be that United Nations outputs will have greater immediacy and resonance for broadcasters, making their use much more likely. As headway is made in speedy and timely dissemination of radio materials directly to broadcasters, a concomitant drop will take place in tape programme production.

18. Priority is also being given to the development of the news content of programme production. To this end, the production staff has taken part in professional training programmes featuring hands-on applications and refresher courses conducted by trainers from world-renowned broadcasting organizations. In addition, the Department has strengthened its cooperation with the programmes, funds and specialized agencies of the United Nations system for the generation of more diverse radio programme material. It is also working on setting up a network of field stringers, in cooperation with the network of United Nations information centres, to expand the spectrum of coverage and enrich programme content.

19. Similar changes are also under way in the visual area. The Department is closely following technical innovations available on the Internet that could enhance the use of television and video clips on the United Nations website. In addition, the Department has begun working closely with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and other substantive departments of the Secretariat to prepare raw visual materials for dissemination in connection with important upcoming meetings or events, as a means of generating greater mass media coverage for the Organization's views and concerns. Photographs of the Secretary-General travelling on important missions are now digitally transmitted worldwide, and arrangements are made with international broadcasters to offer television footage globally. The daily briefing by the Spokesman for the Secretary-General is already available in video format. Finished video products, such as "UN in Action", which

continues to be seen by millions of viewers through cooperative arrangements with the Cable News Network International and national broadcasters, "World Chronicle" and other video material, such as conference and meeting coverage, are also envisaged for posting as streaming video or digital files on the Internet as the cost and availability of this technology make it more viable.

20. The Department is planning for the change to digital television technology, which will completely replace analogue technology in the United States during the first decade of the new millennium. Appropriate equipment is being purchased and technical facilities are being upgraded to ensure that United Nations Television can function fully in this new technological environment.

21. The consolidation, in September 1998, of audio-visual promotion and dissemination will play a major role in ensuring a coherent technological approach to the Internet and the new media, especially as the convergence of these media gathers pace internationally. Audio-photo-video libraries are now jointly managed within the Multimedia Assets, Promotion and Distribution Unit. The Unit's multimedia technological expertise will facilitate the timely distribution of United Nations photographic, radio and television products and support the Division's newly established News Services and Editorial Section in the production of the United Nations News Service page of the United Nations website. As a result of skills upgrading in the field of electronic media file transfer, radio news updates in Chinese, English, French and Spanish are now posted, transmitted and downloaded through the Internet. Audio posting in other languages will follow soon.

VI. Information programmes

22. The arrival of the "age of information" has been embraced by commercial and business sectors in industrialized countries and also by the growing economies of developing countries. Governments have also taken far-reaching measures to stay abreast of the new developments. Therefore, international organizations must seek not only to absorb new information technologies but also, where appropriate, to play a role in drawing international attention to global issues that might arise in this context.

23. The role of the Department of Public Information in developing information and communications strategies for the thematic priorities established by the General Assembly and the continuing series of global conferences is well established and recognized both within the Secretariat and among Member States. In the context of the reorientation of the

information and communications activities of the Department, the strengthening of the existing close working relationship with the thematic departments has become a key priority. In each programme area, working arrangements have been developed to suit the specific needs of the thematic department concerned.

24. In the area of peace and security, an important challenge has been the introduction of information and communications priorities as part of the core activities of the Organization in the field. In addition to the need to underscore, for all concerned, the key role that the quality of public information and communications activities plays in the effectiveness and success of peacekeeping operations in the field, the Department has developed cooperative mechanisms, enabling it to provide the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and other concerned departments with all the programmatic support necessary to undertake appropriate information programmes. It is through such a process that the Department of Public Information, together with other departments concerned, now provides a responsibility centre for public information and communications activities in field operations. Through careful study and review of experience in peacekeeping operations, appropriate guidelines and manuals have been developed. The need to include information-related requirements in the earliest planning stages of field operations has been consistently emphasized.

25. A recent example of such cooperation has been the establishment of mobile FM and short-wave broadcasting facilities for use by the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic. Such a facility adds very substantially to the capacity of a peacekeeping mission to address audiences locally, in order to promote a clear understanding of the mandate and generate support for the United Nations presence and activities in the country concerned. These facilities have been made possible by the generous support of the Government of Denmark and, being mobile, can be used again in future missions, as appropriate.

26. Close working relations with the thematic departments have yielded very encouraging results both at Headquarters and in the field. The year 1998 marked the fiftieth anniversary of both United Nations peacekeeping and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Department of Public Information worked closely with the thematic departments and offices to ensure that both anniversaries were observed with the support of information activities, including effective and very informative exhibits, a number of publicity events organized in partnership with non-governmental organizations and educational institutions, press kits, posters and others.

27. Looking to the future, working arrangements with departments active in the economic and social fields have been reinforced through a process of consultation at the level of the heads of department. A series of major global conferences on economic and social issues are already on the calendar for the coming years. For instance, the Department is working closely with the United Nations Population Fund to ensure the maximum possible publicity for the five-year review of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994). Together with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Department is developing information strategies for similar reviews of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Barbados, 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995) and others. The task of reorienting the Department's work in these areas has not involved structural changes as much as reinforcement of cooperative activities to achieve more effective outreach and advocacy.

28. The effect of new technologies in the thematic areas has been particularly noticeable in the improvement in the capacity to produce better-quality information products more expeditiously, and in the effort to design information products in such a way that they can be issued in hard copy and on the Internet simultaneously. All the information products for the forthcoming global conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly, as well as for other activities, such as the ongoing International Year of Older Persons, are being disseminated in this manner.

29. The United Nations focus on development activities has received renewed impetus from the Economic and Social Council through the convening of high-level meetings that include participation by the representatives of Bretton Woods institutions. The Department has worked closely with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to ensure that the deliberations in such meetings secure the widest possible coverage by the media. In addition, through its development publication *Development Update*, the Department continues to improve the coverage of key issues on the United Nations agenda in the economic and social fields. Renewed emphasis on the quality of information products on development issues is a central feature of the new orientation.

30. Issues of gender equality continue to receive special emphasis in the Department's media strategies. Whether the activities concern crime prevention and criminal justice, drug abuse, youth, disabled persons, human rights, indigenous people, eradication of poverty, environment and development, or peace and security, gender issues are always factored into the Department's media strategies.

VII. Partnerships

31. The role of civil society in the redissemination of the message of the United Nations and as the Department's partner in this endeavour has taken on growing significance. Foremost are, of course, the partnerships with the media. Reinforcement of the Department's close working relations with the corps of resident correspondents at the United Nations, convening of annual television forums for the leadership of that medium, assistance to large media organizations, such as Cable News Network, and outreach to media editorial boards, among others, are all examples of a more dynamic and proactive approach to this important partner.

32. Non-governmental organizations continue to seek association with the Department of Public Information in large numbers. The annual conferences, weekly briefings, and a variety of joint activities are all part of the reinforcement of the services provided to non-governmental organizations. The number of non-governmental organizations associated with the Department of Public Information is now close to 1,600.

33. Key redisseminators for future generations are, of course, educational institutions and the Department has continued to expand its outreach to them. Workshops for teachers, "Students' days at the United Nations", students' conferences on various United Nations themes, teleconferences reaching some 5,000 schools throughout Canada, Mexico and the United States, improved guided tours and group programmes and user-friendly publications targeted at students are all examples of these proactive activities.

34. The United Nations is also fostering a stronger relationship with the business community. To that end, the Department is working closely with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General to help foster this new relationship and shape the messages delivered to this important segment of civil society. Businesses can relate to the United Nations as participants in global and regional policy-making forums and projects, as users of statistics and technical studies, as vendors of equipment and expertise and as beneficiaries of the international standards and agreements that make possible cross-border trade, investment, communication and transportation. As part of the Department's effort to reach out to the private sector, a new website www.un.org/partners, was launched in January 1999. This new virtual enterprise liaison service helps corporations to locate the United Nations services that they require. It is notable that, within 36 hours of its launch, the business part of this website had 10,000 accesses.

35. The Media Response Group continues to monitor media coverage of the United Nations and advise the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information on appropriate and timely responses to misinformation or criticism of the United Nations in the media. The fact sheet series "Setting the record straight" continues to be updated and new fact sheets are issued as required.

VIII. Publications

36. Publications constitute a key aspect of the Department's outreach effort. The Department is engaged in the revitalization of its programme to ensure the production of outputs that are demand-driven and that demonstrate effectively the relevance and centrality of the work of the entire United Nations family to people throughout the world.

37. The Department continues to respond to the valuable data generated by the 1997 readership survey and other feedback in order to enhance the effectiveness and marketability of its publications. The ongoing revitalization of the *UN Chronicle* continues to build on the promotion of thematic mandates, development of partnerships with information disseminators and, above all, the projection of the central role being played by the United Nations to meet the growing challenges before it.

38. The new edition of *Basic Facts about the United Nations*, the Department's premier sales publication, already reflects a number of improvements suggested by the findings of the 1997 readership survey. A more in-depth evaluation of this key reference publication, including through the use of focus groups, is being undertaken among the principal target audiences to ensure its continuing relevance to users and to further assess its commercial possibilities.

39. While the Department retains its primary focus on the production of print publications, effective utilization of the electronic media is now vital to the goal of broadening the Department's outreach capability. The Department is taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the electronic medium to offer material and search capabilities not possible in hard-copy versions, including more timely updating of information. The new medium also permits direct interaction with the users and redissemination of the Department's information, providing further means of ensuring the continued relevance of its outputs.

40. The *Yearbook of the United Nations* has successfully completed the incorporation of modern technology in its production process, making it possible to improve the timeliness of the production of future volumes and to make

them available on a regular basis. The elimination of the backlog will enable the Department to launch a revenue-producing CD-ROM project incorporating the first 50 volumes of the *Yearbook*, from 1946 through 1996.

41. New websites for *UN Chronicle* and the newsletter *Africa Recovery* are eliciting keen interest and are being further developed. Electronic publication is central to dissemination of the highly time-sensitive periodical, *Development Business*, which provides its subscribers with information on procurement opportunities from the regional development banks, the World Bank and other parts of the United Nations system. *Development Business*, in cooperation with the World Bank, has developed a website version of the publication and plans to offer other on-line services to its growing subscriber base.

IX. Dag Hammarskjöld Library

42. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library will continue to move in the direction of a virtual library with a worldwide outreach. While it will not neglect the traditional media for its local users, its services will become increasingly global in nature, and, for effective outreach to a global audience, increasingly electronic and multilingual.

43. To reach its goal of becoming virtual library to the world, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library will be expanding its activities in a number of directions:

(a) Internet: continuously enriching the Library page on the United Nations website, providing guidance in the use of United Nations information, particularly its documentation, to audiences worldwide. The Library's major databases, the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), will also be using the Internet. The page will be developed to the maximum extent in all six official languages, complemented by a six-language thesaurus for effective information retrieval;

(b) Making available the full text of United Nations documents available on the optical disk system/Internet through its programme of digitizing documents retrospectively in all official languages;

(c) United Nations depository libraries, well over 350 in number, will be further developed into effective channels of communication with civil society throughout the world. Regular two-way electronic communication will grow to permit speedy dissemination of information and regular feedback from the target audiences. Electronic delivery of United Nations documents to depository libraries, where

feasible, will be promoted to ensure rapid, complete and cost-effective documents distribution;

(d) Access to non-United Nations electronic information, increasingly cost-effective through the collective purchasing power of the organizations of the United Nations system, will be expanded and will include databases from worldwide sources in all official languages. This information will be disseminated to all United Nations offices, United Nations information centres and permanent missions, as well as to ordinary citizens on a global scale.

X. Structural changes

1. Communications Group

44. The Secretary-General has appointed a Director of Communications in his Office to assist in developing an overall communications strategy for the Organization and to coordinate efforts to ensure coherence and clarity in the delivery of United Nations messages. To this end, the Director of Communications convenes weekly meetings of the Communications Group composed of representatives of the various parts of the Secretariat engaged in communications functions. The Under-Secretary-General for Public Information also participates in the Communications Group.

2. Strategic Communications Planning Group

45. Apart from the redeployment of resources from the Library and Publications Division to the News and Media Services Division to establish a writers' group and to substantially improve output for the media, the Department has taken important steps to improve its strategic planning capacity. Accordingly, a strategic communications planning group, which includes all directors and service chiefs under the leadership of the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information, has been established to study relevant developments and outline information strategies for the Department.

XI. Information activities in the field

46. A central tenet of the public information goals of the United Nations is that its message must reach all peoples of the world. Therefore, an important aspect of the reorientation of public information activities is to put into practice the idea

of “a global vision, local voice” by increasing the effectiveness of the United Nations information centres and services located around the world.

47. In order to take full advantage of the potential of new information technologies, the Department of Public Information will continue its major effort to provide forward-looking training to the staff in information centres in computer-related functions, such as electronic information retrieval and dissemination, the Internet and web page design.

48. Currently, all but a few information centres are connected to electronic mail, and most have access to the Internet. Sixteen information centres already have their own web pages in local languages, dramatically increasing their outreach. Library services have improved with electronic reference tools, such as UNBIS, CD-ROM and access to the optical disk system and other electronic information resources of the United Nations system. The benefits are immediate and concrete: more up-to-date information, faster response to constituents, wider information outreach and increased potential for closer cooperation among United Nations information centres, such as sharing of local-language translation. In addition, the ability of Headquarters to provide quick guidance and other services to United Nations information centres is enhanced. An augmentation of both the quality and quantity of services provided by information centres is the result.

49. Currently, about 90 per cent of the accesses to the United Nations website come from developed countries. Therefore, the information work carried out by the United Nations information centres cannot be conveniently entrusted to computers; the centres will continue to rely on personal contacts, traditional media and outreach to the community.

50. Partnerships with entities in the local community, such as non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, local government offices, media and business, have become the mainstay of outreach activity by the United Nations information centres. As part of the reorientation, such cooperation is encouraged and supported by Headquarters, since it is only through active involvement with institutions closely tied to the community that the United Nations message can be placed into a local context.

51. As a result of the decrease over the years in the number of professional posts in the field, about half of the information centres are currently headed by staff members of the Department, while the rest are headed by United Nations resident coordinators. A continuing challenge for the Department is to achieve the most effective utilization of the limited human resources available for all the field offices.

52. With this in mind, the Department will undertake a two-pronged effort. On the one hand, it will strengthen information centres headed by staff members of the Department, in order to enable them to provide other information centres in the region with support by way of training, local-language United Nations information materials, media services and general information and communications support. At the same time, the Department must constructively address, with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the problems that have been identified in some of the information centres headed by resident coordinators. Various aspects of this issue are discussed in greater detail in the report of the Secretary-General on integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP (A/AC.198/1999/3).
