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Development of United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 49/38 B of 9 December 1994, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to explore ways and means to improve the access of United Nations radio to airwaves worldwide, bearing in mind that radio is one of the most cost-effective and far-reaching media available to the Department of Public Information. One of the goals set in the medium-term plan for the period 1998–2001) requires the Department “to consider, in consultation with Member States and relevant intergovernmental bodies, the establishment of an international broadcasting system capable of sending information about the United Nations directly to audiences around the world”.¹

2. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, in its 1996 report entitled “In-depth evaluation of the Department of Public Information”, requested the Department to prepare a feasibility study on “the technical, financial, programming and managerial implications of the development of a United Nations radio broadcasting capacity” and to submit that study for consideration to the Committee on Information at its 1997 session (E/AC.51/1996/2, annex, para. 28). Following that request, the Secretary-General’s Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, in its 1997 report, while noting that all media services should be reoriented towards real-time news cycles, underlined that the radio service especially needs

modernization, with a focus on live and direct broadcasts from United Nations Headquarters to the field.

3. As a result, the Department of Public Information commissioned Deutsche Welle to conduct a study of the development of a United Nations direct radio-broadcasting capacity. The study was completed in April 1998 and a summary of its findings is presented below.

II. Main findings of the study undertaken by Deutsche Welle

A. The demand for United Nations Radio

4. The growing international responsibilities of the United Nations call for constant, consistent, timely and professional delivery of information to various target groups to promote its core agenda. No other means of communication has proven to be more effective than radio, a quick, relatively inexpensive and well-appreciated medium, especially in developing countries. In Bolivia, for example, there are only two telephones, but 60 radio receivers per 100 people.

5. A survey was conducted among participants in the annual conference of the International Institute of Communication held at Munich, Germany, in October 1996, co-sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung of Germany and the International Research Center of Canada. A sample of 100

international experts among the participants from the broadcasting and communication industry were selected for the survey on the feasibility and demand for a United Nations radio capacity. Of those surveyed, 85 per cent believed that there was a real need for a direct means of United Nations communications, while 10 per cent believed that existing international radio stations were sufficient. Some 80 per cent said that there was a market for United Nations radio broadcasts and that potential audiences would become regular listeners once United Nations Radio went on the air. Seventy per cent said that in most developing countries, women in particular were not adequately aware of United Nations activities or had a negative view of the Organization. A majority of the experts who participated in the survey (90 per cent) saw a need for independent radio broadcasting in peacekeeping operations.

B. Current production and distribution

6. Currently, United Nations Radio produces every year some 1,200 features and documentaries in 15 languages. These are distributed to nearly 2,000 broadcasting organizations in 180 countries worldwide. In addition to the official languages of the Organization, programmes are also adapted in Bangla, Dutch-Papiamento, French creole, Hindi, Indonesian, Kiswahili, Portuguese, Turkish and Urdu. News and magazine programmes are also distributed via telephone lines and radio circuits for shortwave rebroadcast by regional broadcasters. Tape programme production and distribution in all languages totals 334 hours per year; annual distribution for shortwave rebroadcasting amounts to 266 hours, for a total of 600 hours of programmes per year.

7. Daily news programmes in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese are fed to national networks by telephone. For example, the Spanish daily news is fed to 322 stations through the United Nations Information Centre in Mexico City. In Brazil, RadioBras transmits the Portuguese daily news to some 500 affiliates.

8. In addition, United Nations Radio produces every year special series of programmes on a broad range of social issues. In 1997, special programme series accounted for a total of some 10 broadcast hours.

9. All programmes are distributed free of charge. In 1997, more than 200,000 cassettes and tapes were mailed. News programmes can also be heard through the Radio Bulletin Board, which provides news updates and the daily briefing by the Spokesman for the Secretary-General to anyone with a touch-tone telephone. Some radio stations and news agencies receive programmes by telephone dispatch in

increasingly good quality via Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) lines. Since November 1997, programmes such as the daily news in English and French have been available as audio files on the Internet. News programming in Spanish was introduced on the Internet in June 1998.

C. Organization and staffing of a broadcasting service

10. Under its current structure, staffing and programming capacity, United Nations Radio focuses mainly on information generated at United Nations Headquarters in New York. This means that valuable information originating from other major duty stations, as well as information for United Nations peacekeeping missions and field activities of other partners in the United Nations system is not adequately covered.

11. A newly designed United Nations Radio should make use of these resources, with New York not being the sole provider of information, but the main distributor and organizer. Listeners should be the target audience, not the radio station. The United Nations has, therefore, to focus on the audience. Listeners tend to establish listening habits. They want to hear the same programme with the same presenter at the same time within a regular time-span. This means that each show has to follow a recurring pattern.

12. In future, each show should belong to one of two programme groups to be produced by United Nations Radio, that is, general information programmes or peacekeeping mission programmes. The general information programmes should deal with ongoing news, information and background stories concerning the United Nations for a worldwide audience, while peacekeeping mission programmes would be of a temporary nature for a limited audience with a high demand for quick, on-the-spot and reliable information.

D. Rebroadcasting and live programme: a comparison

13. Different types of programme call for different production and transmission methods. Distribution for rebroadcasting, which offers material on tapes or through a telephone feed to radio stations, normally results in a delay of days or weeks after production. This method has its advantages and disadvantages. Rebroadcasting means that programmes reach listeners in better sound quality (through FM or medium-wave), but there is no direct contact with the audience. Also, there is no guarantee of the time of the airing. Most radio stations rebroadcast programmes outside prime

time and there is no control over what part of the programme is transmitted. Also, the United Nations may not receive credit. Rebroadcasting makes sense in established markets with reliable technical systems, but is more difficult with partners in developing countries. Moreover, rebroadcasting makes it impossible to disseminate news and current affairs programmes or monitor the product for feedback purposes.

14. By contrast, live production is the standard means of broadcasting today. It establishes a direct contact between the radio station and the listener and thus provides an immediate and credible channel of information and communication. There are some limitations, however. The sound quality may be less crisp on shortwave transmission. Live broadcasting also calls for a highly qualified production staff because of shorter production times and therefore higher stress levels. Generally speaking, live broadcasting has much to offer. It is appreciated by the audience because it delivers a sense of authenticity. Only a live programme can cope with rapidly changing political and humanitarian developments, offering the opportunity to address an audience in a crisis situation. With live programming, United Nations Radio would have control of content, thus ensuring that the United Nations message is delivered in its entirety. Finally, it is imperative for a worldwide organization such as the United Nations to have its own means of dissemination. A global organization needs to make itself heard directly and have uncensored access to its audience.

15. While the Internet is a valuable medium, it cannot be an alternative to radio in developing countries. The Internet can serve the purposes of the United Nations in the developed countries of North America and Europe, but it is only there for those who can afford it and who have the technical infrastructure in place.

E. Broadcasting options

16. Peacekeeping mission programmes call for a mix of output from United Nations Headquarters in addition to locally produced material. One prerequisite for those programmes is to have reporters on location to ensure their detailed knowledge about the local situation and ongoing developments. Reporters could feed pieces back to United Nations Headquarters to be broadcast from there, or they could broadcast their material locally. Another means of distributing those programmes would be to use short wave, which would guarantee control over process and content.

17. There are three possible options for the general information programme, as described below.

1. No change in programme distribution

18. The disadvantage of continued reliance on tape distribution for rebroadcasting involves the above-mentioned problem – little control over what is broadcast and when. This mode of programme distribution will also be phased out gradually as the Internet becomes more commonly used.

2. A mix of rebroadcasting and live broadcasting

19. In the international media market, programmes normally run for 30 to 60 minutes. Penetration of any market can only be guaranteed if a show goes on the air daily. Choosing this option would therefore mean cancelling the production of all shows that do not match the pattern. This would call for an increase in live broadcasting via short wave and/or satellite. Weekly or monthly live programmes make little impact with a listener and are not cost-effective.

20. Accordingly, it would be necessary to go on the air in English and French for a minimum 30 minutes a day, preferably 60 minutes. A further option would be to expand the airtime of those two languages and also initiate live programmes in the other four official languages.

21. Such a “middle-path” approach offers a wide variety of possibilities, broadcasting from 30 minutes up to a few hours a day, depending on the human and financial resources available to the United Nations. For example, within a few years there could be three hours each of English and French transmissions, in addition to 30 minutes of programming in the other four official languages, making an eight-hour broadcast in total. Such a broadcast would be transmitted in segments, always aiming to reach the target area in prime time, normally during the morning, lunchtime and evening periods in the target areas, on the basis of surveys of local audience patterns. These proposals would have no negative effect on existing programming in non-official languages.

3. Round-the-clock broadcasting

22. Round-the-clock United Nations broadcasting would allow the Organization to report on and react to events at any given moment and reach target audiences more often and more precisely than with the first two options. A 24-hour programme does not necessarily mean round-the-clock live broadcasting. Pre-produced programmes can be aired, as well as repeat shows. For example, five minutes of news on the hour on a crisis situation in a certain region could be followed by 25 minutes of in-depth coverage, which could often be repeated with little or no modification.

23. Of the three proposed options, a combination of rebroadcasting and live radio is the recommended approach,

as it would build on the current United Nations pre-produced output and expand it into a future live broadcast.

F. Staffing implications

24. Taking the English programme of Deutsche Welle as a model, the following roles would be assigned to staff on the new live broadcast:

(a) The Chief of United Nations Radio would be responsible for programme content, editorial policy, budgeting, organization, personnel and external representation;

(b) The Programme Coordinator would be responsible for the day-to-day output of the whole programme, as well as for the technical aspects of production;

(c) Section heads would be required for the following areas: news; current affairs (responsible for live 30 to 60 minute programmes); and documentaries (responsible for all non-live pre-produced programmes).

25. For each 30-minute show, United Nations Radio would need the following staffing per shift:

(a) A producer to organize the content of the programme and the balance of material between news, live interviews and reports from stringers;

(b) A news-writer/reader to produce and present news segments;

(c) A host (anchorman) to present the programme. Ideally, the host should present the show every day at the same time so that listeners get used to him or her. The host is the voice of the United Nations who "sells" the programme;

(d) A production assistant responsible for liaison between the producer and sources of material and for technical preparations in the studio;

(e) A technician responsible for the technical control of the programme;

(f) Reporters to provide segments for the show, either staff members or freelancers;

(g) In addition, stringers throughout the world, starting with the headquarters locations of United Nations organizations and countries where political and other missions are deployed.

26. The recommended option of the middle-path approach, a mix of live transmission and rebroadcasting, calls for the restructuring and enlargement of the United Nations Radio Service. Whereas the current output of the Department is

guided to a large degree by what can be done in New York during a working day, the suggested alternative programming would be driven by the needs of listeners. A live broadcast would have to go on air at whatever time the audience wants to listen to it. Prime time in Asia can be middle of the night in New York.

G. Distribution

27. Currently, eight staff members distribute radio and television tapes to nearly 2,000 stations worldwide. This means that only established partners can be serviced as the current staffing levels do not allow for active promotion of United Nations material. Active salesmanship means calling up radio stations, visiting them and sending promotional material to those who are potentially interested in rebroadcasting United Nations material. Deutsche Welle, by comparison, employs approximately 50 people to sell its programmes.

28. One option would be to produce a 10 to 15 minute promotional tape containing highlights from established programmes, which could be sent out to potential customers identified by United Nations staff in the field and from questionnaires sent out from Headquarters. Promotion also means announcing airtime, content and frequencies through flyers, United Nations Internet pages and advertisements in local media. It should be possible to cross-promote United Nations material. For example, in pre-produced tapes, jingles could be included on when to hear United Nations Radio live.

H. Technical capacity

29. At the end of 1985, the United Nations stopped direct broadcasting of radio programmes because of a sudden increase in transmitter costs. Since then, as has been noted, United Nations Radio has concentrated on producing tapes for rebroadcasting. In view of the inherent problems with rebroadcasting, it is recommended that the United Nations consider restarting its own radio transmission. This would have the following advantages:

(a) The United Nations would have total control of when its programmes are broadcast;

(b) Programmes would not be altered in any way;

(c) Many more people would have direct access to the programmes, since they would be able to tune in directly without dependence on local stations;

(d) Direct outreach would be particularly important in times of crisis.

I. Production facilities

30. United Nations Radio has five medium-size studios where its current programmes are produced. Each studio has a control room, with three tape recorders, a mixing console and additional equipment such as compact-disc players, cassette players etc. Four of these studios also have audio workstations in which material can be edited and mixed digitally. It is recommended that the current units be retained, but a less complicated, user-friendly, desktop sound editing system also be made available to radio producers.

31. The present United Nations Radio set-up would support a return to live broadcasting. Four out of the five available studios are well equipped and good enough to be used for such transmissions and engineers are also trained to handle such broadcasts. As it is possible that two or more live programmes may have to be transmitted at the same time, several studios may be needed for the new broadcasts and would no longer be available for current output. Accordingly, new studio production capacity would have to be created.

32. There could be several ways of solving that problem. More studios could be built at additional cost. Additional studio capacity could be hired, but this usually means that staff would have to be transported away from the base for long periods. More audio workstations could be bought for the studios, but since they are complicated to use, more technical assistance and training would be needed. The recommended option would include the shifting of production away from the studios to the editorial offices by investing in relatively easy-to-use computer stations where radio producers could do their own editing. With this approach, the same number of staff could produce more. A complete system, consisting of about seven or eight workstation computers, would cost approximately 100,000 United States dollars (\$). Many international broadcasters are turning to that option, which is the way of the future.

J. Transmission technology

33. Programmes of United Nations Radio are currently relayed on short wave by the following broadcasters:

<i>Region</i>	<i>Broadcaster</i>
Africa	Radio Cairo Radio Tanzania

Radio Vatican
WRN-World Services

Asia	All India Radio Bhutan Broadcasting Service China Radio International Radio Vatican WRN-World Services
Europe	IRRS-Shortwave WRN-World Services
North and South America	Radio for Peace International Radio Mexico International Voz de los Andes WRN-World Services

34. The above list is not exhaustive, and the coverage area for United Nations Radio and the reliability of its broadcasters have not been determined. The stations receive programmes on tape, by telephone line or via radio circuit. Taped programmes take up to two weeks after their dispatch from New York to reach the destination and there is no indication as to which programmes, or which parts of them, are being transmitted. It is suggested that there be more audience research to find out what audiences want to listen to and when.

35. When it comes to technical control over transmissions, there is a range of options for United Nations Radio to improve the current situation. These include owning or renting a transmission and distribution system, or renting airtime selectively. United Nations Radio could rent a service based on satellite distribution, local rebroadcasting and cable networks. It could approach regional broadcasting unions to see if they could rebroadcast United Nations programmes with no time delay. It could also look into the possibility of using digital broadcasting technology.

36. Short-wave broadcasting is still the only effective way of getting news and information to an audience scattered over a large area. It is the only medium capable of direct and instantaneous communication. Although short-wave radio uses what is regarded as somewhat old-fashioned technology,

that technology is still well established and relatively cheap. Also, the audiences for international short-wave broadcasts are very large, estimated at several hundred million. That is why international broadcasters rely on this medium to provide the free flow of information to all continents. Short wave provides the simplest access to radio programmes, wherever the listener is, whether at home or travelling. Since United Nations Radio has a target audience similar to those of other international broadcasters, it should be present on short wave.

K. Summary of conclusions

37. Radio broadcasting remains the most direct and cost-effective medium of communication with target audiences all over the world, particularly in developing countries. For reasons of effective outreach, the United Nations should consider restarting short-wave radio broadcasting.

38. United Nations Radio should develop a dissemination system based on a combination of rebroadcasting and live broadcasting on short wave, with a daily programme schedule of at least 30 minutes each in English and French. That could be gradually expanded and developed to include the other official languages of the Organization, without any negative impact on existing programming in non-official languages.

39. Peacekeeping radio should be an integral part of the larger United Nations Radio network, including both programme generation and local broadcasting capacity.

40. Programming should be based on defined target regions and listeners' interest, as demonstrated by audience research. It should also be diversified to include more field-generated programme material provided by correspondents and stringers.

41. The United Nations Radio Service should be restructured and reoriented towards direct/live daily broadcasting. Its technical infrastructure should be upgraded and its production and operational resources increased. It is also recommended that a controller be appointed to ensure the efficient use of resources in a live production and broadcasting situation.

42. After United Nations Radio has developed and successfully tested its new direct programme, strategic partnerships with other international broadcasters should be sought.

43. With regard to transmission technology, four options are available. The United Nations could develop and own its own network; rent a full service for programme distribution combined with worldwide short-wave coverage; rent a service

based on satellite distribution and local rebroadcasting; or seek the support of regional broadcasting unions and international broadcasters. Of the four options, rental of short-wave transmission service combined with programme distribution, as offered by the Merlin network, is the most recommendable.

44. The development of other technologies, such as direct satellite broadcasting, should be followed closely as a potential substitute for short wave, but feasibility and cost to the audience in developing communities have to be taken into account.

III. Comments and recommendations

45. The Secretary-General concurs with the thrust and findings of the Deutsche Welle study. He notes that the development of an international direct radio-broadcasting capacity remains one of the most cost-effective and far-reaching media of communication available to the United Nations, as was demonstrated by the direct short-wave broadcasts of United Nations Radio during the period from 1953 to 1985, through the facilities of the Voice of America. The agreement with the Voice of America came to an end in 1985 because of a steep rise in transmission costs which the United Nations had no budgetary allocation to meet.

46. The dissemination system recommended by the study – leasing a combination of short-wave transmission facilities and a satellite distribution system as that offered by the Merlin Corporation – has financial implications totalling \$5,948,000 per biennium. An additional amount of \$1,860,800 for a two-year period would be required to enhance field news-gathering by stringers and production capacity at Headquarters. In addition, a non-recurrent amount of \$100,000 would be required for capital equipment upgrade, as proposed in the study. Those amounts cannot be absorbed within existing resources.

47. The major cost required for the rental of transmission and distribution facilities (\$5,948,000 per biennium) is a recurring cost calculated at commercial prices and as such is not sustainable within existing resources. The Secretary-General would like to propose the alternative course of inviting interested Member States with powerful medium- and short-wave transmission facilities covering different regions to form a transmission consortium for the benefit of developing a United Nations international radio-broadcasting capacity. Those facilities would be made available to the United Nations for a limited number of hours on a pro bono or a nominal fee basis.

48. The total recurrent cost of leasing the short-wave transmission facilities combined with satellite distribution and the enhancement of field news-gathering and production capacity at Headquarters would be \$7,808,800 for two years, or \$3,904,400 annually. In addition, there would be a further requirement of \$100,000 for capital equipment upgrade, which would increase the cost for the first year to \$4,004,400.

49. Should the transmission facilities and satellite distribution system be available to the Organization on a pro bono basis, and should part of the remaining cost be covered from the savings described in paragraph 52 below, there would be a need for \$3,804,400 in additional resources for the first year, and for \$3,704,400 for the following year. Those requirements would be lower if the Organization is provided with the transmission technology on a pro bono basis or on payment of a nominal fee. The budgetary implications of those requirements would also depend on the level of voluntary contributions from other external sources.

50. The Secretary-General would also like to invite interested Member States, public and private institutions, organizations and businesses involved in the broadcasting industry and voluntary activities to set up a trust fund for the development and expansion of the infrastructure necessary for an enhanced United Nations international broadcasting capacity. That service would also be geared towards cooperation with national and international broadcasting networks for co-productions on core issues of international concern.

51. In order to offset part of the required additional production costs of \$1,860,800 for the biennium 2000–2001, the Department of Public Information proposes to streamline and reduce weekly tape programme production and distribution by 40 per cent, mainly in the languages of direct broadcasting. The reduction of weekly tape programme production will be carried out only when the proposed daily short-wave broadcasting becomes operational. That would be compensated for by a daily short-wave broadcast service in English and French, initially five times a week. The savings would result from reduced tape dubbing and pouch cost and the contractual engineering services involved. It would also enhance programme productivity to meet the requirements of a daily broadcast, leaving a budgetary requirement of \$1,560,800 for field news-gathering and production costs (excluding the rental of transmission facilities and the initial cost of equipment upgrade) for the biennium 2000–2001, to be covered by voluntary contributions to the proposed trust fund. The estimated, non-recurrent cost of technological upgrade would be submitted as part of the capital equipment cost in the regular budget for the same biennium.

52. The Department of Public Information is planning to test the technical feasibility, programming capacity and listeners' interest in a United Nations direct-broadcasting system by launching a pilot project of daily broadcasts to selected regions in Africa and Europe before the end of the year, with cost being covered from within existing resources. The results of the pilot project will guide the efforts of the Department to respond to the demand for the development of a United Nations international radio-broadcasting capacity. It should be noted, however, that the Department will only be in a position to proceed with the development of a United Nations international radio-broadcasting capacity if the extrabudgetary support referred to above is received.

Notes

- ¹ *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-first Session, Supplement No. 6 and corrigendum (A/51/6/Rev.1 and Corr.1)*, para. 23.16.

Annex

Direct broadcasting of United Nations Radio programmes

Table

Cost of direct short-wave radio broadcasting for the biennium 2000–2001

(Based on a one-hour programme, updated twice daily, for a total of three hours of transmission)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Estimated amount in United States dollars^a</i>		
	<i>First year</i>	<i>Second year</i>	<i>Total for the biennium</i>
I. Staffing			
2 P-4 executive producers (\$149,900 x 2)	299 800	299 800	599 600
4 P-3 radio producers (\$123,000 x 4)	492 000	492 000	984 000
2 General Service (other levels) production assistants (\$69,300 x 2)	138 600	138 600	277 200
Total, I	930 400	930 400	1 860 800
II. Cost of initial capital equipment upgrade	100 000	—	100 000
III. Leasing of transmission facilities and satellite distribution system	2 974 000	2 974 000	5 948 000
Total, I, II and III	4 004 400	3 904 400	7 908 800
IV. Estimated savings to be achieved through streamlining and reduction of weekly tape programme production	(200 000)	(200 000)	(400 000)
V. Additional resources required (I, II, III and IV)	3 804 400	3 704 400	7 508 800

^a Salary costs are based on the 1999 rates.