



SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE
30th meeting
held on
Tuesday, 13 November 1984
at 10.30 a.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 30th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. ABDULLATIF (Oman)

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Distr. GENERAL
A/SPC/39/SR.30
21 November 1984
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: FRENCH

The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 74: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/SPC/39/L.20)

(a) REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION (continued) (A/39/21)

(b) REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (continued) (A/39/479)

(c) REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (continued) (A/39/497)

1. Mr. DIRAR (Sudan) said that because of the central and ever-increasing role of information and communication in the modern world, the debate on a new world information and communication order was of special importance. As the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations approached, the debate also took on an aspect of urgency in the light of the current tense atmosphere in international relations. For that reason, the Committee must guard against the tendency to view the new world information and communication order as an ideological weapon used by a group of nations against another group; rather, it should be seen as a general concept and a practical programme aimed principally at closing the gap between the developed and developing countries in the area of information.

2. The current situation was characterized by an inequality between those two groups of countries in terms of the infrastructures and means of information and communication. That inequality created in turn an imbalance in the flow of information: developing countries received a flood of news, cultural programmes, publications, etc. which constituted a serious threat to their cultural identity and national heritage without providing the means for them to ensure coverage of events of concern to them and to enrich world culture with their own contributions. Information was thus no longer a means of understanding and co-operation, but an instrument of cultural domination.

3. The one-directional flow of information resulted in turn in the distortion of its content, which no longer reflected the diversity of sources of information and the pluralism of cultures. That distortion, while not always deliberate, was at the root of suspicion, misunderstanding and mistrust in international relations.

4. Since the call for a new information order had often been interpreted as an attempt by the developing countries to curb the freedom of the press, it must be noted that the present system, characterized by imbalance and distortion of information, contradicted, in practical terms, the basic principles of freedom of information. Since it originated from a single source and was intended for cultures alien to that source, the information produced by the present system portrayed only one face of the truth in the majority of cases and was necessarily biased by reason of its limited perspective and its arbitrary interpretation of facts and events. The preoccupations, basic needs and priorities of developing countries did not find their place in that system and were in fact adversely affected by models of development not compatible with the realities of life in those countries.

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(Mr. Dirar, Sudan)

5. By redressing that situation, the new world information and communication order would provide a real guarantee of freedom of the press and information, since it would enable developing countries to participate in a constructive manner in the global flow of information, guarantee the multiplicity of sources of information and ensure the fair presentation of different points of view. In view of the revolutionary developments currently taking place in the developed countries in the field of communication technology, the gap which separated them from the developing countries could only widen, with increasing dependence on one side and increasing dominance on the other. In order to forestall the negative effects of such a situation in the political, economic and cultural fields, the international community must take all necessary measures to assist developing countries in closing the gap. UNESCO had an important role to play in that area, a role which was set out in its Constitution and one which it had always played by striving to promote communication and the exchange of information, just as it was currently striving to establish a new world information and economic order. Special mention should be made of its International Programme for the Development of Communication which assisted developing countries in developing their communications infrastructure and train the necessary manpower.

6. The role of the United Nations Department of Public Information, as a focal point for the preparation and conduct of all United Nations information activities, was also essential. The Department should continue to play its co-ordinating role, and measures should be taken to discourage the proliferation of independent information units within the United Nations system. It was also important and useful for the United Nations to have its own media infrastructure and facilities.

7. Where the content of the information disseminated by the Department was concerned, he was of the view that it should serve the cause of international peace and co-operation, and focus primarily on the major contemporary problems and challenges such as threats to the environment, desertification and the current alarming economic situation in Africa. It should also publicize the policies of the Israeli occupation authorities in Palestine and the occupied Arab territories, unmask the abhorrent practices of the racist régime in South Africa and demonstrate international solidarity with the people of Namibia.

8. It was clear that the United Nations system could not, by itself, resolve all problems. Developing countries must also promote communication and the flow of information both at the national level and in the context of South-South co-operation, useful examples of which could be seen in the establishment of the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies, the Pan African News Agency and the Arabsat project.

9. In view of the importance of what was at stake, it was understandable, legitimate and desirable for everyone to have a keen interest in the debate, just as it was natural for some parties to attach particular importance to some issues. It was encouraging to see that since the adoption by UNESCO of its first resolution on the new world information and communication order in 1978, agreement and consensus had generally prevailed on discussions on the subject. His delegation

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(Mr. Dirar, Sudan)

firmly believed in co-operation rather than confrontation, which was contrary to the essence of the idea behind the new system, and it hoped that consensus would be maintained in all deliberations and resolutions on the issue.

10. Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda) said that information played a critical role in international relations, since it could foster understanding and co-operation among nations, and thus be a factor for peace, or have the opposite effect. The current climate of mistrust was largely due to the misuse of information.

11. In the information field, too, the gap between developed and developing countries was a wide one. Five press agencies from developed countries disseminated 80 per cent of the world information, and recent advances in technology, such as the use of satellites, had only worsened that situation of dependency.

12. Since the mass media in the developed countries - with the exception of some in which organs representing different interests disclosed facts which were unpalatable to the Government and in which objective reports were sometimes published on developing countries - were an integral part of the power structures, they accepted certain national or elite premises as self-evident truths, and served as important cogs in periodic propaganda campaigns organized to present half-truths or myths as presumptive facts.

13. The monopoly exercised by the developed countries prevented the free flow of information, and only the establishment of a new order would make it possible to make the principle of freedom of the press universal. As every right or freedom entailed a responsibility, the press had a moral obligation to be objective and balanced. It was a matter of regret that the well-intentioned efforts of UNESCO in that regard had been dismissed out of hand by journalists in Western countries, and discredited by the media.

14. There seemed, however, to be a better understanding of the advantages developed and developing countries could derive from the establishment of a new order. The information infrastructures of developing countries must be strengthened and modernized, and the projects carried out by UNESCO, particularly under its International Programme for the Development of Communication, were directed to that end. Uganda wished to thank those countries and organizations which had contributed to the financing of those activities and hoped that programmes such as those for training journalists and broadcasters from developing countries would be continued.

15. As preparations were being made to celebrate its fortieth anniversary, the Organization was the subject of sharp criticism, not always motivated by a desire to improve its functioning. Public support had been eroded, particularly in the Western countries. It was said that the United Nations was very costly and a burden on Member States, but, as the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva had pointed out, the world spent on armaments in a single year a sum which would be sufficient to finance the United Nations system for a century.

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(Mr. Irumba, Uganda)

The Department of Public Information must take up that challenge and counter such negative coverage of the Organization. Some delegations had suggested that the Department should increase its efforts to publicize the achievements of the Organization in the economic and social fields. Those suggestions could, of course, be followed but only on condition that they did not eclipse information on other United Nations activities such as, for example, the struggle against racism, apartheid and colonialism. Uganda was disturbed by reports that certain Member States were attempting to put pressure on the Department to ensure that its coverage of events conformed to their wishes.

16. In view of the vital role played by United Nations information centres in keeping the public aware of the work of the Organization, it was important that they should be adequately staffed with competent personnel. In that connection, Uganda renewed its request that a resident information officer should be assigned to Kampala. As the image projected by the United Nations was a reflection of its collective membership, it was incumbent on every Government to portray accurately the activities of the Organization.

17. The Group of 77 had spared no effort to ensure that the Committee on Information adopted its recommendations by consensus. Uganda hoped, therefore, that the draft resolution that had been submitted could be adopted in that spirit.

18. Mr. JESUS (Cape Verde) said that the corollary to peaceful coexistence was co-operation and understanding among nations. The interdependence of the current world imposed on all nations the obligation to co-operate in all fields and, in particular, in the establishment of a world-wide system of information that would take into due consideration the legitimate interests of all members of the international community in the free and balanced dissemination of information and in access to advanced technologies.

19. The debate on those questions that had been going on in the Committee for more than two weeks demonstrated the importance that Member States attached to them, and had once more highlighted the monopoly exercised by transnational news agencies and the manipulation of information by those who controlled its international dissemination with the objective of preventing at all costs the democratization of information.

20. That monopoly placed the developing countries in a position of dependence which could not fail to have a negative effect on peace and security. As had been emphasized by almost all delegations which had spoken on the topic, that imbalance ran counter to the democratic principles and fair relations which must be established among States. All countries must display the necessary political will and co-operate fully in the process of democratization of information with a view to the establishment of a new order. The first step in that direction should be the adoption and full implementation of the recommendations of the Committee on Information, as set forth in its report (A/39/21), aimed at ensuring a more balanced dissemination of information, diversifying the source materials and facilitating the access of developing countries to training facilities.

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(Mr. Jesus, Cape Verde)

21. His country paid tribute to UNESCO for its efforts to promote the democratization of information. The assistance it rendered to developing countries was extremely useful and his country was grateful for it.

22. At a time when international institutions were facing a crisis, it was particularly important to develop the activities of the Department of Public Information in order to strengthen public perception of the role played by the United Nations system in preserving international peace and security and promoting multilateral co-operation and understanding among nations. His delegation particularly appreciated the Department's efforts to implement General Assembly decisions in the field of its concern and its co-operation with UNESCO and the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies. It welcomed the implementation of proposals concerning the broadcasting of programmes in Portuguese in response to the interest of Portuguese-speaking African countries in United Nations activities. By making the aims of the United Nations better known those programmes contributed to peace.

23. His delegation hoped that the Department of Public Information would be able to adjust the timing of short-wave broadcasting to Portuguese-speaking African countries in such a way as to enhance its effectiveness.

24. Mr. ADAN (Somalia) said that the reports before the Committee showed that slow but steady progress was being made towards the establishment of a new world information and communication order. The debates that had taken place on the subject had provided an opportunity for the airing of real grievances and concerns, and should make it possible to move towards a genuine consensus. There should be no quarrel with aims such as the free circulation and wider and more balanced dissemination of information, the elimination of inequalities in the flow of information, the diversification of sources of information and the strengthening of the information and communication capacities of developing countries. The goals of the new world information order, which were to increase the participation of all peoples at national and international levels, would undoubtedly promote the causes of understanding, friendship and peace, and should have the support of all States.

25. His delegation welcomed the efforts made by UNESCO and its Director-General to achieve those goals. It urged that strong support be given to UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) so that it could strengthen the human and technical resources of developing countries, particularly through training personnel and technical assistance. The developing world needed such assistance not only for the development of information and communication infrastructures and systems but also for the establishment of telecommunications links at subregional, regional and interregional levels. His delegation was pleased to note, in that connection, that the Department of Public Information was continuing its co-operation with UNESCO to promote a new world information order, particularly through the organization of round-tables for leaders of mass media.

26. It was of course important that the activities of United Nations bodies involved in the promotion of the new information order should be well co-ordinated.

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(Mr. Adan, Somalia)

In that connection, his delegation supported the recommendation that the Secretary-General should be requested to prepare a study on the contributions made to that effort by UNDP, UNESCO, IPDC and ITU and on the co-ordination of their activities. The co-operation between the Department of Public Information and the Non-Aligned News Agencies marked real progress towards diversification of news sources and a more balanced dissemination of information; it should, therefore, be extended to other regional news sources such as the Pan African News Agency.

27. There had never been a greater need to ensure better understanding of the aims of the Organization and its achievements in the areas of disarmament, peace-keeping, decolonization, economic and social development, the struggle against apartheid and all forms of racial discrimination, the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, the promotion of human rights for all and the establishment of the new international economic order. The Department of Public Information had important responsibilities in that regard, and his delegation believed that its status and financial base must be commensurate with its duties; its central role in the formulation and implementation of United Nations activities must not be weakened by a proliferation of information units within the Secretariat. United Nations regional information centres should also be strengthened, particularly through the provision of services in local languages.

28. In view of the constant expansion of the power of information and communications media through technological progress, Member States should adopt measures enabling the Organization to take advantage of the sophisticated technology currently available in order to fulfil its global responsibilities in the areas of information and communications. Study of the viability of a world-wide United Nations short-wave network should be vigorously pursued and no negative decision should be taken at present with regard to acquiring a United Nations communications satellite, since such a decision might remove that option at a later date. The authority of the United Nations rested not on force but on persuasion. The international community therefore had a duty, in the vital area of information and communications, to provide the Organization with the support it deserved.

29. Mr. PALAZZO (Brazil) said that the general debate on questions relating to information had been fruitful in the sense that each Member State had been able to air its concerns, frustrations and aspirations, but it had also shown that differences in the Committee were becoming greater. His delegation believed that hardening of views and rhetoric were not the best way of convincing others. If corrective action was to be taken, it should be in keeping with the spirit of the Organization, which was one of constructive dialogue leading to a meeting of minds.

30. Considering the various statements made during the previous week in the Committee, Brazil wished to reaffirm its full commitment to the principle of freedom of information as well as to free and pluralistic access to information sources. Brazil was convinced, furthermore, that the restricted and qualified participation of the State in the area of information and communications was both valid and desirable. His delegation also restated its support for the establishment

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(Mr. Palazzo, Brazil)

of a new world information and communication order and especially for one of its main tenets, the need to correct imbalances in the circulation and dissemination of information. It also supported UNESCO and the Department of Public Information and shared a number of concerns voiced by previous speakers, particularly those from the developing countries. His delegation was always ready to engage in constructive negotiations and hoped that the consultations which would be initiated as a follow-up to the current debate would concentrate on the positive aspects and yield positive results.

31. Mr. RODRIGUEZ-MEDINA (Colombia) said that the debate on the question under consideration showed the importance of DPI's role, particularly with regard to the future of the Organization, and also the urgent need to establish a new world information and communication order.

32. Colombia was proud to have an exemplary press. Free access to sources, free circulation of information, and the keen sense of their responsibilities shown by Colombian journalists in addition to their human and professional qualities had made it possible to protect the inviolable right to inform and be informed. It was under such conditions that the new order should be established, and that order could only be based on genuine respect for truth, human dignity and the fervent pursuit of peace.

33. It had been emphasized during the debate, with figures to support the argument, that the dissemination of information was increasing and that international news agencies had a growing interest in the developing countries for reasons that were plain. The current notion of the press was, in fact, based on business interests and the development of information as an industry. His country was specifically concerned with the economics of information. Together with other third world countries, it had for a number of years drawn attention to the need to recognize the dramatic effects resulting from recent technological progress in information, communications, remote data processing and information science on the social, cultural, economic and political development of the developing countries.

34. Considering that a small number of countries accounted for 95 per cent of information technology resources, as well as having a nuclear capacity and the means to conduct space exploration, and given that the United States and Japan alone carried out 98 per cent of research and development in that area and that a small number of transnational corporations controlled 90 per cent of the global information technology market, how could one speak simply of a technology gap between the industrialized and the developing countries? If Western countries were 10 years behind the United States and Japan in that area, what of the developing countries?

35. A conference held recently at Cali, Colombia, to analyse the major consequences of that amazing progress on the development and sovereignty of the developing countries had called attention to new forms of dependency and to the way in which the notion of "technology gap" was manipulated; the conference had concluded that the developing countries could not continue to allow their

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(Mr. Rodriguez-Medina, Colombia)

technological development to be measured by the standards of the most advanced countries. Indeed, it was difficult to see how the same scale of values could be used to compare the slow progress of the developing countries with regard to the dissemination of the printed word by traditional procedures, telephone communications or local television stations, on the one hand, and the spectacular progress represented by direct broadcasting satellite, cable television, remote sensing or remote data processing, on the other. In addition, two Powers possessed 35 per cent of preferential frequency bands and 65 per cent of geostationary orbit positions.

36. Information could not be considered simply as a problem of technological development, but must be viewed in all its aspects, cultural, political and social. All interests must be taken into account, especially those of the vulnerable countries which were victims of disinformation and of the technological and scientific monopolies, which increasingly served purely commercial or, quite simply, political interests and created or manipulated dangerous information.

37. How was it possible to ensure that the media became instruments serving a development model based on participation and that the major news agencies and television companies did not disseminate distorted information about the developing countries for sensational purposes? How was it possible to ensure that journalists of the major news agencies and newspapers disseminated information about the developing countries which did not discredit their institutions or challenge their perseverance and capacity to achieve self-reliance, and which described honestly their own independent development efforts?

38. Journalists would achieve that objective when they set aside cultural, political and economic prejudices and took a larger view of things, seeking to understand and not simply call into question, as they so often did. That task was a difficult one, but Colombia was convinced that the international community had embarked upon the right course and it therefore supported enthusiastically the activities of the Department of Public Information. Its action would help to protect cultures, maintain peace and promote human dignity.

39. Colombia had worked to improve the functioning of DPI and supply it with the necessary technical skills and equipment it needed since the establishment of the Committee on Information, in the work of which it was an active participant.

40. Colombia had spared no effort to convince the Secretariat and the General Assembly of the necessity of providing the United Nations with satellite facilities which would make it self-sufficient in the field of information and allow it to develop its radio and television services.

41. His delegation was concerned to improve the image of the Organization and the information disseminated about it, as well as to establish the new information order. It joined with other delegations in urging the Committee to adopt a set of recommendations by consensus based on the interests, dignity and responsibility of all countries.

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42. Mr. AKASHI (Under-Secretary-General for Public Information) said that the highly informative and useful debate on questions relating to information, in which 69 speakers had taken the floor, was indicative of the crucial importance of information and communication in the global community. The United Nations could not hope to achieve its purposes unless public opinion in Member States gave support to its efforts.

43. Replying to questions raised put the course of the debate, particularly with regard to priorities, he recalled that United Nations information activities were supervised, by the General Assembly and the Committee on Information, which set the priorities in that area. The Secretariat, however, did not hesitate to redeploy resources in the most effective manner possible within the guidelines set by those bodies, since it was always easier to add new priorities than to identify lesser or obsolete priorities. He hoped that the members of the Committee would be willing to allow the Secretariat some discretion in interpreting its legislative mandates, bearing in mind that DPI would always be sensitive to divergent views held by Member States as to the relative priority of different questions.

44. A thread running through the statements made in the Committee had been the need for the greatest possible economy and more thorough evaluation of the work of DPI. The Department would continue to stress evaluation, relying on its improved monitoring system and calling, where necessary, on the Joint Inspection Unit for help. It would, as certain delegations had requested, make sure that evaluation itself would be cost-effective. With regard to the experimental world-wide United Nations short-wave network, the Department's evaluation would be rigorous, and no steps would be taken in 1985 unless they could be reversed if necessary.

45. Many statements had emphasized the importance of the role of DPI as the focal point for the formulation and implementation of the information activities of the Secretariat. The Department would guard against the proliferation of information activities by other units and report at a later stage on the outcome of discussions on that subject within the Secretariat. The Department would endeavour to rectify geographical imbalance in the distribution of its staff, particularly at the senior levels, but the Committee must understand that that distribution was governed by the guidelines and criteria laid down by the General Assembly on the recommendations of the Fifth Committee, and had to ensure the highest standards of competence, efficiency and integrity from the staff. Additional means given to DPI in recent years had allowed some improvement in linguistic balance, especially in the radio area, but publications and visual information did not yet adequately reflect the universal nature of the activities of the Organization.

46. He was pleased that the efforts of DPI for the establishment of a new world information and communication order had been recognized. Many statements heard in the Committee had encouraged DPI to reinforce its fruitful co-operation with the Pool of Non-Aligned News Agencies and other regional and international news agencies such as the Pan African News Agency and the Latin American Features Agency, and to continue to convene round-tables with world mass media leaders as well as its training programme for young journalists and broadcasters from developing countries. Differences in philosophical approach did not prevent Member States from agreeing on concrete activities for the benefit of developing countries.

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(Mr. Akashi)

47. The activities of the United Nations information centres had been positively appraised by many delegations, and some delegations had expressed a wish to have centres established in their countries. Such proposals would have to be considered in the context of severe resource constraints and the extent to which host countries would be prepared to support such centres.

48. DPI activities such as Development Forum and inter-agency co-ordination through the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) had been endorsed by many delegations. DPI would continue to promote such international consortia with the print and visual media, as the World Newspaper Supplement and An Agenda for a Small Planet.

49. Given the diverse perceptions of the nature of information and communication, the maintenance of objectivity and balance was inevitably difficult. DPI continued to adhere to the promotional mandates given it by the General Assembly and its Committee on Information, while striving to preserve its impartial approach in reporting the positions taken by Governments on various issues. He hoped that there was no contradiction there, as the representative of Austria had feared. The spirit of the recommendations of the Committee on Information would be kept constantly in mind by the Department in its work.

50. Several countries had expressed their desire to see recommendations made by the General Assembly implemented more rapidly. He hoped that delegations would appreciate the financial, human and other constraints under which the Secretariat worked, and would judge the performance of the Department from a substantive viewpoint and over the long term. For example, the Middle East/Arabic Radio Unit had been strengthened by doubling the length of its weekly radio feature programme, by adding a new weekly radio programme on women and by better co-ordination between the Unit in New York and the Information Service in Geneva, which also produced programmes in Arabic. The weekly television magazine in Arabic had also been strengthened by redeploying one production assistant from the Asian Unit of the Radio Service. DPI had succeeded in making its audio-visual productions more usable in the Arab world by modifying their contents. The Committee would be aware that the Department could not arbitrarily decide to produce additional programmes in any language without consulting the broadcasting organizations concerned.

51. DPI was already at an advanced stage of planning and programming its activities for the observance of the fortieth anniversary of the Organization. He considered that that event should be commemorated in a reflective and analytical spirit rather than in a spirit of simple celebration.

52. The CHAIRMAN pointed out that the Committee would not be able to conclude its consideration of item 74 before the finalization of draft resolutions. He urged the delegations concerned to complete their consultations as quickly as possible.

The meeting rose at 12.15 p.m.