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Tuesday, 7 November 1989  
at 10 a.m.  
New York

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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 16th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. OUDOVENKO (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic)

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AGENDA ITEM 79: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 79: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/44/21, A/44/653, A/44/509, A/44/329 and Add.1, A/44/433 and Add.1)

1. Mr. VERMA (Nepal), after expressing his concern at the current situation relating to information and his confidence that the international community would succeed in establishing a new world information and communication order, said that the use of the various information media by the United Nations had strengthened the Organization's positive image. Its programmes had demonstrated a preparedness to cope with media events. However, the public information programmes needed to be strengthened and systematized to meet the growing demands imposed by the current situation, in which the Organization was playing an expanding role.
2. The free flow of information was a prerequisite for development; progress in human communication had always been followed by socio-economic progress, and was particularly important for the developing countries.
3. Nepal had formulated a communications plan in 1971 to create a more informed public for the realization of its development goals. Under that plan, communications services and media had increased and the geographical obstacles had been overcome so that most of the population participated in development efforts.
4. The present situation with regard to information, which did not allow the free flow of information among States on the basis of equality and equity, seriously handicapped the developing countries. The flow of information was almost monidirectional - from the developed countries to the developing countries - with the result that the independent socio-cultural identity of the latter was threatened. A study carried out a few years ago by the Press Institute of Bangladesh was revealing in that respect: only one fifth of the news published in South Asia related to that region: 80 to 90 per cent of the international news published in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar originated from the four big news agencies (AP, Reuters, AFP and UPI) and - a significant fact - no newspaper carried any news on education.
5. The imbalance in information and communication was multi-dimensional. The relatively more developed among the developing countries tended to be given more of the time and space of the media in the developing countries and almost nothing was said about the small countries even on the regional level. That imbalance existed within the countries themselves, where large areas remained virtually unreported on. Nepal was no exception in that respect: news flowed from a few urban centres while the events and activities in rural areas were unreported.
6. If left unimproved, that unjust information structure, which was incompatible with the principle of equality of States, would continue to widen the gap between the developed and developing countries. The situation called for the establishment of a new information order to promote balance, equity and justice in the dissemination of information and to help developing countries to transmit their

(Mr. Verma, Nepal)

independent views, preserve their identity and strengthen their security. To that end, the developed countries should not only contribute generously to the creation or strengthening of the communications infrastructure and the training of personnel in the information media of the developing countries but also, and especially, be guided by new principles, a new code and a new communication philosophy, one of whose most important components would be respect for the equality of all States.

7. Mr. FAWZY (Egypt) said that in the current situation, in which the great Powers were advocating non-confrontation in international relations, there was an imperative need for restructuring the information order so as to allow a balanced flow of information through a two-way process ensuring the participation of all States in an exchange of ideas and views that would enhance their cultural and national identities.

8. The issue of DPI's mandate had not been as contentious as that of the new world information and communication order. Nevertheless, account should be taken in the Department's restructuring of the need to implement fully the decisions of the General Assembly pertaining to priority issues such as the struggle against apartheid, the question of Palestine and the Middle East and the independence of Namibia, which offered a unique occasion to promote the right of peoples to self-determination and respect for their fundamental freedoms. The restructuring should, moreover, respect equitable geographical distribution of posts in the Department, particularly at the higher levels, and strengthen the co-operation between DPI and the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries and the Broadcasting Organization of Non-Aligned Countries.

9. The Committee should seize the opportunity offered by the current favourable situation, in which the ideas of transparency and the balance of interests were common currency and the thought processes that would prevail in the twenty-first century had already begun, in order to achieve the long-desired consensus on questions relating to information.

10. Mr. DIMITROV (Bulgaria) said that the general debate at the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly had been characterized by the common desire to strengthen international peace and security and promote development. The time had come for the international community to abandon confrontational attitudes. In that context, information and communication had become an indispensable element in consolidating and strengthening mutual understanding and confidence among States and peoples. However, information on the changes in international relations was reaching most of the population of the planet through the communications media, particularly radio, television and the press, which, unfortunately, were still not guided by the standards of the new political thinking. There was therefore an urgent need for the communications media to adopt the new attitudes evident in the political and diplomatic spheres so as to promote greater knowledge and understanding among peoples and therefore greater mutual trust.

11. His delegation was not completely satisfied by the results achieved by the Committee on Information at its last session, and believed that, as on many other

(Mr. Dimitrov, Bulgaria)

occasions in the forty-four-year-old history of the United Nations, if an effort of understanding and co-operation was made, a consensus with respect to transboundary information exchanges could be achieved.

12. The world needed a new approach in the field of information which would guarantee the dissemination of balanced and reliable information serving the interests of all nations. The principle of the freedom of information must be combined with that of the responsibility of States and the communications media to prevent the illegal use of information to produce disinformation.

13. For years there had been a great disproportion in the distribution both of means of communication and of the balance of information flows between the industrialized and the developing countries. His country supported the legitimate demands for the restructuring of international information relations and the establishment of a new international information and communication order which would take into account the interests of the international community and would contribute to strengthening the national sovereignty and independence of the developing countries.

14. His delegation welcomed and supported UNESCO activities in that field, particularly the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), which was one of its priority projects. For its part, Bulgaria was assisting the developing countries within its limited means: over 200 students were now enrolled in the School of Journalism of the University of Sofia, with all expenses paid.

15. He shared the opinions that had been expressed by various delegations about the role of the United Nations in the sphere of information, particularly that of DPI, and expressed his satisfaction with the favourable results that had recently been achieved in spreading the idea of peace, building confidence and strengthening co-operation among States.

16. His delegation welcomed the measures adopted by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information for the restructuring of the Department and trusted that that would enhance its efficiency. The restructuring should be carried out in accordance with the relevant General Assembly resolutions and the Secretary-General's recommendations in documents A/44/433 and A/44/329. The Department should intensify its activities aimed at informing world public opinion about the efforts being made by the United Nations, UNESCO and States regarding peace, security, disarmament, development, decolonization, human rights, the struggle against apartheid and racial discrimination and the problems of Namibia and Palestine.

17. His delegation would continue to co-operate with other delegations in a spirit of understanding and political will so as to enable the Committee to adopt a consensus resolution on the question of information.

18. Mr. JERKIC (Yugoslavia) said that, in an atmosphere of intensified dialogue and understanding, the question of information at the global level was of particular importance. Information could create the conditions for co-operation in and co-ordination of activities aimed at greater harmonization and promotion of international relations. Reliable and objective information was therefore an inseparable part of the development of those relations.

19. Owing to the social and political impact of information, the United Nations had been discussing that question for several years. It was well known that the current world information system was inequitable: the developed countries were at an advantage, as they had the necessary technical and scientific resources for producing and disseminating information. Therefore, information flowed in only one direction and was selective. The monopolization of information posed a threat to objectivity and even-handedness in the recording of events.

20. That was why the developing countries had committed themselves to establishing a new world information and communication order designed to change the existing situation and achieve a more balanced flow of information. That new order had been reaffirmed at the Ninth Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries, recently held in Belgrade, and would help to achieve better international understanding and promote international co-operation in all areas. The achievement of that new order called for the bilateral and multilateral co-operation of all countries.

21. The developing countries and the non-aligned countries were endeavouring, through various activities, to help to bridge the gap in the field of information between the industrialized world and the developing world, as they believed that equality and freedom of information consisted in the equitable participation of all, with equal rights and opportunities in the world information system. To that end, he noted the particular importance of the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries, which was helping the news agencies of non-aligned countries to participate on an equal footing in the exchange of information at the international level. Of equal importance were the activation of the Eco-Pool of the News Agencies of Non-Aligned Countries and the activity and co-operation of their radio and television broadcasting organizations. Owing to their lack of resources, some non-aligned countries needed increased assistance from the United Nations and the international community in order to be able to participate more fully in the Pool and in the world information system. In that regard, he commended the role being played by UNESCO through IPDC.

22. His delegation welcomed the Secretary-General's report (A/44/553). It was particularly pleased that the United Nations continued to co-operate with the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries and trusted that that co-operation would continue and be extended. It believed that the United Nations information system should be modernized and appreciated the measures taken so far to make the work of DPI more efficient. Moreover, it was ready to support the proposed actions. Those improvements would not be easy to carry out, owing to the Department's limited resources. However, in assessing the priorities, it was essential to ensure that programmes aiming to reduce the imbalance in world information flows were not

(Mr. Jerkic, Yugoslavia)

threatened. In that regard, he repeated that, while the scope of the education programmes for broadcasters and journalists from the developing countries was still limited, they had an important place in the Department's activities. When the planned reform was begun, it was essential to keep in mind the importance of maintaining the topics of particular interest for the developing countries and the need to make changes in DPI personnel in accordance with equitable geographical distribution. The modernization of the Department would make it possible to give the world a better and more truthful picture of the United Nations.

23. While numerous efforts had been made during the previous session to harmonize the various views on the question of information, agreement could not be reached. Although the Committee on Information had not formulated any proposals for the General Assembly, opinion had it that, with some additional good will, a generally acceptable text could be adopted. His delegation trusted that the current opportunity would be seized to reach an agreement and adopt recommendations that were acceptable to all, representing a step towards reducing the differences between the developing and the developed countries. The achievement of an agreement would mean that the improvement of international relations had also extended to the field of information as an instrument for enhancing understanding in an increasingly interdependent world.

24. Mr. OUEDRAOGO (Burkina Faso) said that his delegation encouraged DPI to maintain the level of its work as permitted by its means and the restrictions that had been imposed by restructuring. It trusted that the Department would continue to be responsive to the political, economic and social developments that had recently taken place in various regions of the world. To that end, it was particularly important to establish an information centre in Namibia as speedily as possible. Burkina Faso appreciated the Department's co-operation with the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries and noted the usefulness of publications providing information about the role of the United Nations.

25. Financial limitations did not allow the Department to avail itself fully of current technical advances. However, he noted the modernization programme that the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information had undertaken in the Department with regard to United Nations information centres.

26. At the beginning, the Department's activity was limited to informing the public and making known United Nations activities. Later, owing to the imbalances in information flows, placing developing countries at a disadvantage, the General Assembly had assigned to DPI the function of promoting free circulation of information under a new information order. The existing information order applied the truths of the North to the realities of the South. It was an injustice that with the great proliferation of communication technologies, information on divisions and disturbances in societies of the southern hemisphere was systematically disseminated without recognizing the enormous efforts made by those peoples, efforts frequently compromised by the existence and persistence of an unjust international economic order.

(Mr. Ouedraogo, Burkina Faso)

27. Burkina Faso saw freedom of information and of the press as part of an indivisible whole which, along with other freedoms and responsibilities, constituted human rights. Favouring one of those elements would upset and endanger the balance. The countries of the South were victims of slanted media information. For example, recently a major New York newspaper had published information about Burkina Faso that at the very least constituted disinformation. Burkina Faso applied an open information policy and was concerned with regular dissemination of technologies, knowledge and information, and respected the right of the people to evaluate what was said about them and their leaders. Burkina Faso accepted criticism, but requested that it should be based on knowledge of the facts.

28. The task and the mission of information in the present day was to promote the desire to know others and thus build a common future. The product of the lack of that desire was ignorance of or attacks on social values or cultural traditions, imbalances in information flows and obstacles to economic and social development. It was necessary to take advantage of the current climate in international relations in order to outline the true problems. The international community had realized that it lived in a small world and that the survival and development of that world would not be possible without co-operation and solidarity. At the dawn of the twenty-first century the international community should know what kind of a world it was leaving to its children: closed, open, informed or uninformed. The answer to that question was being prepared now.

29. Mr. GREEN (Canada) supported the statements made by the representative of France on behalf of the 12 States members of the European Community and by the representative of Norway on behalf of the Nordic countries. He reiterated his country's commitment to the principles of freedom of information and of the press, which were at the heart of all democratic societies and were enshrined in the constitutions of many nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But those rights must be respected and promoted if they were to be of any value.

30. Canada remained sympathetic to the concerns of many developing countries about the need to protect and promote their cultural and national identity, and recognized that a one-sided flow of information could be detrimental to those efforts. But it could not accept that the way to redress that imbalance was to impose controls on the information media or to interfere with their freedom. Such imbalances could be corrected through the strengthening of existing media structures in developing countries and the development of new vehicles to carry their messages. UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) provided one such mechanism and should be supported.

31. The reports submitted to the Special Political Committee and to the Committee on Information by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information gave a very clear picture of the activities of DPI in accordance with its mandate and the relevant General Assembly resolutions. His delegation understood that the Department and the Executive Media Service had done excellent work in publicizing the United Nations role in Namibia.

(Mr. Green, Canada)

32. The reform of DPI should receive full support, as that Department must function in the most efficient and effective way during the current period of budgetary restraints. As favourable world attention was once again focused on the United Nations, the work of DPI became even more important. Canada was encouraged by the progress achieved to date and looked forward to future improvements. In that regard, he took note of the reports of the Joint Inspection Unit on the reorganization of the Department and on the United Nations information centres, and also the comments of the Secretary-General on those reports.

33. His delegation regretted that the Committee on Information had been unable to reach consensus on a draft resolution to be considered by that Committee. Nevertheless, it was pleased that efforts to seek consensus were continuing. The efforts of the spokesmen for the regional groups and of China were to be commended. Canada encouraged all delegations to work in the spirit of compromise in order to be able at last to reach an agreement on that important subject.

34. Mr. EHLERS (Uruguay) said that freedom of thought, opposition and expression were inseparable from the freedoms that constituted the exercise of democracy. It was now impossible to ignore the fact that through management of the mass communications media it was possible to direct the currents of opinion, shape its content, and influence interpretation and evaluation of what was transmitted. Thus, the greater the concentration of the media, the greater the responsibility of those operating them. Both government censorship and centralization of information in the hands of a few were dangerous to the exercise of freedom of information.

35. In its international dimension, the problem lay in the fact that the flow of information, images and messages ran from developed to developing countries, while the problems, culture and customs of the latter did not receive the same attention in the industrialized countries. The flow of information between developing countries was equally limited. Consequently, events occurring in industrialized countries had excessive repercussions on public opinion in developing countries. On the other hand, the inhabitants of developed countries were not aware of the concerns and interests of developing countries, which worsened conflicts that otherwise could be more easily solved.

36. Information existed in all regions of the world. However, the transmission of that information came up against financial and technical obstacles. It was in precisely that field that the United Nations in general and UNESCO in particular had worked the hardest. All the activities of IPDC were oriented towards improving the resources of receiving States, a praiseworthy and constructive activity that should be supported by all.

37. The reception and dissemination in the developed countries of information originating in the developing countries was a service carried out by commercial companies whose incentive was profit and which, as a consequence, focused on those news items that they considered to be of greater journalistic value. But there was little awareness of the impact that events in the developing countries could have on the well-being of the inhabitants of the developed countries. That was the key

(Mr. Ehlers, Uruguay)

to the problem and the link between the imbalances of the flow of information and the work of the Department of Public Information.

38. As seen in document A/44/653 and reflected in the remarks made by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information before the Special Political Committee, the Department had carried out intensive and commendable work on subjects to which the General Assembly had attached priority importance. However, dissemination had been compartmentalized. DPI was being asked to disseminate information on issues that were already being sufficiently covered in the media because of their commercial value. Uruguay supported those measures, but a master plan was needed to give global meaning and harmony to those activities and to those that would be undertaken in the future.

39. That concept of DPI's work could provide a guiding idea and new impetus for the activities of the Department, which could result in greater mutual understanding among all the countries of the world. To that end, DPI must be provided with the advanced technology needed to complete its task. The approach described should be analysed in the Committee on Information. Uruguay was prepared to contribute to that task and would request membership in the Committee at the appropriate time.

40. Mr. OMRAN (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that his delegation had followed with interest the observations made on the report of the Committee on Information in document A/44/653, because freedom of information, when constructively used, could enhance relations among peoples. Such a process must take into consideration the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the International Declaration of Human Rights. Having itself been a victim of a disinformation campaign, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya was aware of the negative impact that the misuse of information might have.

41. The Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had participated in the international efforts within the framework of the United Nations and in conjunction with the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, UNESCO and regional organizations to achieve a new world information and communication order. His delegation supported the recommendations of the Group of 77, which were the minimum needed for reaching a consensus.

42. The existing imbalance between the developed and the developing countries must be overcome. To that end, his Government supported the efforts made by UNESCO to enhance infrastructures through the International Programme for the Development of Communication and it was also in favour of increasing co-operation between UNESCO and DPI.

43. With regard to the statement by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information, which appeared in annex II of document A/44/21, his delegation noted the necessity of underscoring the priorities and needs of the developing countries and highlighting the importance of such questions of world interest as Palestine, Namibia, decolonization, racism, violations of human rights, disarmament, development, the environment, transfer of technology and the dangers of narcotic

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(Mr. Omran, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya)

drugs. It was also necessary to bear in mind equitable geographical distribution for high-grade administrative posts and to support the United Nations information centres so that they could carry out their task. It was also important to enhance co-operation between DPI and the News Agencies Pool of Non-Aligned Countries as well as co-operation with the Organization of African Unity, the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

44. His delegation also stressed the importance of disseminating information on the practices of the Zionist entity with regard to the occupied Palestinian territories, which had interfered with the transmission of information on the intifadah. Furthermore, the information media should not be used to distort the facts. The Libyan Arab Jamahiriya supported the convening of a special session of the General Assembly on the new world information and communication order.

45. With regard to paragraph 117 of document A/44/329, which touched upon the elimination of eight United Nations information centres, including the one in Tripoli, his delegation underscored the importance of that centre and recommended expanding its activities. The Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had provided all available financial resources so that that centre could function and realize its objectives.

46. Mr. WOLOSI (Afghanistan) said that 10 years after the creation of the Committee on Information, the information and communication gap between the developed and the developing countries continued to widen, the flow of information was unjust and imbalanced and multinational information corporations dominated communications. As a result, the establishment of the new world information and communication order continued to be delayed.

47. For more than a decade, the Republic of Afghanistan had been faced with a dangerous psychological war waged by certain Western mass media. More than 50 Western stations with a total volume of radio broadcasting of 150 hours per week were pursuing a malicious and unbridled campaign against Afghanistan. A victim of the unjust world information and communication system, the Republic of Afghanistan strongly supported the promotion of a new world information and communication order to strengthen world peace and international understanding on the basis of the free flow of information.

48. As a result of remarkable scientific and technological developments, information had become an increasingly sensitive matter. Providing modern communication and mass media techniques to the developing countries had become a prime necessity of the day. In that context, his delegation supported the views reflected in paragraph 42 of document A/44/433, which he read out. Lastly, increased co-operation among developing countries in the field of information and communication was the basis for the establishment of the new world information and communication order, and his delegation supported the acceleration of that process.

49. Afghanistan emphasized the need to strengthen the Department of Public Information so that it could carry out the tasks set out in its mandate. Afghanistan was striving to strengthen its own information and communication

(Mr. Wolosi, Afghanistan)

infrastructure and had urged its mass media to direct their efforts towards reducing regional and international tensions, strengthening universal peace and world security and promoting disarmament and the prevention of war, particularly the catastrophe of nuclear war.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.