

Statement on behalf of the Group of 77 and China by H.E. Ambassador S.R. Insanally, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Guyana to the United Nations, Chairman of the Group of 77, to the twenty-first session of the Committee on Information

New York, 3 May 1999

Mr. Chairman,

As the Committee on Information begins its work, I am pleased to convey on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, our views on issues of importance to the Group. Before doing so, however, allow me to extend congratulations to you and other members of the bureau on your election and to assure you of our full confidence in your guidance of the deliberations during this Twenty-first Session.

I would also wish, to acknowledge the presentation just made by Mr. Kensaku Hogen, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and to welcome his assurance that information and communication will be fully integrated in the activities of the United Nations. The statement of the Representative of UNESCO has been noted with interest.

The Group's appreciation is also extended to the Secretary-General for his reports which will undoubtedly facilitate our discussions over the next few days. We are disappointed, however, that none of these reports was available within the six weeks time frame established for their circulation. Even more disturbing is the fact that some reports are still outstanding despite the commencement of the Session. It is the hope of the Group of 77 and China that this lapse will not recur in the future given the importance of the timely circulation of these documents in all the official languages of the United Nations, for informed discussions within the Commission.

Mr. Chairman,

We live in an Information Age propelled by rapid developments in telecommunications, convergence, digitization, the world wide web and the internet. All our countries as well as the United Nations are seeking to take advantage of its potential benefits while attempting to curb such negative effects as unbalanced and misinformation. The reform process initiated by the Secretary-General in the area of public information and communication reflects the growing concerns of the United Nations to effectively address the challenge of the information revolution not only within the UN system but also in terms of improving the public image of the Organisation and its activities. The Group of 77 and China has always been supportive of these efforts as we recognize that the revolution in communication technology is just beginning and will undoubtedly lead to even newer applications. Despite the many changes, it may be useful at this juncture, to examine the effectiveness of the methods employed thus far to achieve the goals of the reform programme.

We note the establishment of the Communications Group and the Strategic Communications Planning Group by the Secretary General aimed at better integration of information into the work of the entire United Nations system and at enhancing public awareness of the United Nations. Such a Group, if effectively utilised, could provide a greater focus, coordination and coherence to DPI's wide range of activities. However, we would wish to be provided with the details of its composition, role and achievements in order to assess its impact.

The Group welcomes the expansion of courses organised by the DPI to train journalists from developing countries. Such training is sorely needed to develop media skills and to cultivate professionalism in the information field. These courses have proven to be useful and we therefore urge the DPI to expand this practice and to allocate adequate resources to the programme.

Mr. Chairman,

As we have observed on past occasions, recourse by the UN to more modern means of disseminating information increasingly favours the developed countries to the detriment of the peoples of the developing world who are clearly disadvantaged by their lack of access to such advanced technologies. This information technology gap is likely to affect inter State cooperation in a number of areas including commercial and economic relations. The UN must ensure that the developing countries are more equitably served. The Secretary-General has acknowledged that currently, about 90 percent of the access to the United Nations Web Site come from developed countries and he has thus reassured us that the DPI will continue to maintain and expand the use of traditional means of information given the constraints faced by developing countries in the computer age.

These assurances are welcomed by the G-77 and China but seem to be contradicted by the discouraging conclusions of the DPI regarding the pilot project for the establishment of a United Nations broadcasting facility. The radio remains for most of our countries, the major medium for the dissemination of information. Our Group would therefore expect that as attempts are made to introduce costly, high-tech changes within the UN, such as digital television technology, similar diligent efforts will be made to strengthen the UN Radio and to proceed with the pilot project in order to reach a world wide audience and thus redress, to some degree, the imbalances and inequalities between developed and developing countries in the field of information and communication.

Mr. Chairman,

Given the important auxiliary role which DPI can play in furthering global awareness and support for major UN activities, we would ask the Department to take account of work being done for the Financing for Development and the upcoming Review Conferences on Social Development, Population and Development, Women and the Barbados Action Programme. As with the dissemination of information on UN's peacekeeping operations, the public should be equally aware of the importance of these development initiatives as necessary contributions to peace. We would encourage, with due respect to relevant mandates of the General Assembly, cooperation between DPI, governments and civil society to intensify the advocacy for development issues.

A major concern of our Group is for the objectivity and impartiality of DPI's publications and reports. Since the United Nations homepage and all its sites are essentially publications, they must be treated like other publications with due respect for balanced, comprehensive, and objective information on all issues before the Organization and in all the official languages of the UN. Equally important is the need to maintain editorial independence, impartiality, accuracy and full consistency with all relevant resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly.

Mr. Chairman,

I turn now to the question of the integration of United Nations Public Information Centres with UNDP which has been with the Committee for some time now. We are gravely concerned that despite the General Assembly's decision that the integration exercise should take into account the views of host governments as well as follow a case-by-case approach, the review has ignored these key requirements. Moreover, the Task Force's findings that the reorientation of the UN public information activities carried out through the integrated Information Centres has not been uniformly productive, together with the number of deficiencies in the report of the Secretary General contained in document A/AC.198/199/3, necessitate a thorough review of the policy of integration of the United Nations Information Centres with the other UN field offices. The Group reiterates its call for a case-by-case review of the performance of all integrated centres to be conducted on a priority basis and in full consultation with the host governments. A report on this review should also be

presented during the fifty fourth session of the General Assembly through the Committee on Information.

Mr. Chairman,

The mandate of the Committee on Information set out by General Assembly resolution 34/182 remains as relevant today as when it was first conceived in 1979. We, the Group of 77 and China, continue to attach the highest importance to the commitment of the United Nations to the establishment of a New World Information and Communication Order aimed at ensuring impartiality and balance in the flow of information, improving the information and communication infrastructure and capacity of, the developing countries through the transfer of advanced information technology and expanding their access to information. We look forward to working with our negotiating partners during this Session to fulfill the provisions of our mandate.

I thank you.