

Opening statement by Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Interim Head of the Department of Public Information (22 April 2002)

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your most generous words in launching our meeting. Your kindness towards the Department of Public Information, and to me personally, only accentuates how great a pleasure and a

Member States, who have historically been divided on the subject. It may amuse you to note that in 1960, Professor Leon Gordenker of Princeton University wrote an analysis of what was then the Office of Public Information (OPI) in the American Political Science Review. He noted

Gordenker's words, "those governments which stood primarily for economy joined others, which objected to the content of the OPI program, to demand lower information appropriations. They were opposed by a majority, including all the Latin American states and many underdeveloped countries, which supported both the substance of the information programme and the budget". However, despite the repeated debate and attacks, Professor Gordenker observed that the Office proved "enduring and resilient". He wrote this 42 years ago.

As the French like to say, plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Some Committee members may not be aware that since that time in the Department's history, and particularly in the last 20 years, it has been the subject of at least seven periodic reviews and reappraisals, with a major restructuring carried out in 1987-1988. Yet, despite these attempts at reform, the Department continues to face criticism, often characterized by the point of view that the Department's functions are not central to the purposes of the Organization and may therefore be curtailed. Obviously this point of view is not widely held in this Committee, but it often prevails in the financial and administrative bodies, where some delegates prefer to give priority to funding other activities of the Organization. As a result, we have been caught in the paradoxical situation of receiving specific mandates from the Committee on Information in the annual draft resolutions submitted to the General Assembly, while, in the same session, attempts are made in other legislative bodies to curtail the resources required to fulfil these very mandates.

As you know, this critical view of the Department climaxed last December during consideration of its programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003. While, in the end, the General Assembly approved the relevant section of the programme budget, in the same resolution, resolution 56/253 of Christmas Eve 2001, it requested the Secretary-5 (t)3.6 (he)0.6 (r)-1.4 (el)1.5 (e)6.

The Secretary-General has put forward his vision on how to position DPI for greater impact in the report on the reorientation that you have before you. This report, which represents a first step in the comprehensive review of DPI, outlines several important issues and questions which emerge from the in-depth analysis and assessment of the Department which has just been completed. These relate to a lack of clarity around DPI's mission; the existence of fragmented activities with unclear linkage to a coherent overall strategy; a limited capacity to understand whether our programmes and activities match "cus

of DPI are not, in other words, ends in themselves; they serve as a means to help the United Nations fulfil its substantive goals.

Some delegations have pointed out to me that their own countries have dispensed with their

certain instances, these activities reach relatively limited audiences. On the other hand, Member States value and have grown accustomed to some of these activities, and consider them worthwhile, for reasons outside of strict cost considerations. The views of the Committee will be valuable in this respect, as the Department reviews the relative importance of these activities.

The second special area of review concerns the United Nations information centres. As this operation accounts for approximately 35 per cent of DPI's budget, and is of particular interest to many members of the Committee on Information, it warrants detailed consideration. The information centres are the voice of the United Nations in the field, and as such are central to the Department's ability to convey information in a way that is accessible to local audiences around the world. The Centres' activities, however, are now being performed in a changing en

requiring legislative approval, and as a second stage, proposals will be included in his report on the comprehensive review of the entire Secretariat to the next session of the General Assembly. The final results of the reform process will become a road map for the preparation of the Proposed Programme Budget for 2004-2005, and a revision as required of the Medium Term Plan for 2002-

and empower the Department to live up to the expectations that you, and the public at large,