It is a privilege to be with you at the opening of this, the thirty-seventh session of the Committee on Information. And it is a particular honour to succeed my good friend and valued colleague, Ambassador Al-Mughairy. I will not seek to match her elegance and grace, but I hope I can try and emulate the wise guidance she extended to the Committee, in its formal and informal deliberations.

And to the other members of the outgoing Bureau of the Committee, our gratitude.

I am particularly delighted that my tenure as Chairman begins so soon after the assumption of charge by Ms Cristina Gallach (*pronounced Gaa-yaak*) as Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. Having been privileged to know her in her earlier roles as spokesperson and journalist, I know she will be both a supporter and an ally in our work. In the complex world of UN acronyms, UNCG has traditionally stood for the United Nations Communications Group; today it can still be true to the public information cause and stand for the UN’s Cristina Gallach!

Distinguished members of the Committee and of DPI,

This past Saturday---the day before yesterday---marked the 70th anniversary of the start of the San Francisco conference which drafted the Charter of the United Nations. Allow me to recall an observation President Truman of the host country, the United States, made on that day. “Differences between men, and between nations, will always remain,” he stated, and continued, “in fact, if held within reasonable limits, such disagreements are actually wholesome. All progress begins with differences of opinion and moves onward as the differences are adjusted through reason and mutual understanding.”

I believe it us that imperative which animates all our activities in the area of communications and information. Differences in perception and perspective may remain, but it is incumbent upon us to offer the facts, as much as reflect competing arguments, to facilitate the exercise of reason, and the enhancement of mutual understanding.

Story-telling is a centrally human enterprise and the Department of Public Information is the preeminent story-teller of the UN. You are the narrators of the world’s collective and individual experiences. You are the means by which humans learn about each other, and do so in a manner unfiltered by the national or corporate biases which are all too often present in other news organizations.
While there might never be one unified perspective or unvarnished truth, DPI represents the very best attempts to see the world as it really is.

And let us not overlook how important it is pursue a wide-ranging and comprehensive portrayal of the world as a whole. In this era of increased sectarianism, when provincial loyalties appear to largely rule, the pursuit of a global perspective, free from self-interest, and in quest of dispassionate truth, is an enterprise worthy of genuine celebration.

Let’s celebrate too our contributions to democracy and transparency, those fundamental virtues of a world that strives for freedom from tyranny. We are the body that guides the telling to the world of what the United Nations is doing; we are its transparency. And when we facilitate communications back to the UN from civil society, we are engaged in creating the two-way communication which is the essence of democratic governance.

Distinguished friends,

There is a saying in my country that sweet words can attract and tame the most dangerous of snakes. Effective communication derives from that truth and must offer ready, affordable and effective means to bring the manifold activities of the Organization alive to its critics and to those who feign indifference, while equally addressing the need for information among its supporters, including Member States. The huge popularity of social media is particular demonstration of the world’s desire for participation in communication, rather than mere passive consumption of it. Seizing its opportunities is not only consonant with the world’s desires, but offers the means to make the UN even more immediate and relevant to the people of the world while strengthening its fundamentally democratic nature.

This relevance implies that while crises of a political, strategic or humanitarian nature will continue to demand urgency in our energy and our time, we must retain our focus on continuing crises that are only optically less immediate. Seventy years ago today, on April 27, 1945, at the San Francisco conference, Paul Henri-Spaak of Belgium remarked: *quote* “From a strategic point of view there are no more frontiers. We are all dependent on one another. But why do we have to wait for war to become conscious of this reality? It exists as well, it exists as much, and it exists even more in times of peace.” *unquote*

It remains the primary responsibility of the Department of Public Information to make visible the possibilities and the promise of this inter-dependence, which guides how nation states as much as individual women and men must relate to each other. Allow me, in this context, to specifically address you, distinguished
members of the Committee, in what I see as our common responsibility to both
the Organization and to our governments and citizens at home. The sometimes
mystifying architecture of the United Nations means that several among you
address the diverse and disparate subjects before the Fourth Committee. At one
level, there is little to connect questions relating to information with, say, the
peaceful uses of outer space. But, at another level, both are intimately linked
because, when effectively managed, both can contribute to the wellbeing of the
planet and people our Organization is mandated to serve.

Extending that thought is the consistent reaffirmation by the General Assembly
that “a culture of communications and transparency should permeate all levels
of the Organization.” This makes explicit that public information is integral and
not incidental to every action, every assertion, every aspiration of the
Organization. I have often been mystified at products in grocery stores that
claim to be “organically flavoured” because, surely, either it is organic or it is
not. Similarly, I do not see the logic of any activity at the United Nations being
“communications flavoured” as an add-on or after thought—communications
must be at the very start of processes and must sustain their outreach.

We must be clear also that success in communications manifests success in the
Organization’s efforts towards peace, security, development and human rights.
When DPI’s television programme “Twenty First Century” features the
nurturing of walnut trees in Kyrgyzstan, it offers a metaphor of how traditional
agricultural practices can be made economically and environmentally
sustainable. When DPI’s Holocaust outreach programme remembers the horrors
of none too distant European history, it universalises the lessons of the none too
distant dangers of genocide. When the United Nations Information Centre in
Algiers launches a “zero discrimination” project, it reflects the dangers not far
from its shores where hapless women and men embark upon what the Secretary-
General has described as “journeys are fraught with risks including
discrimination.”

And so, my fellow delegates, it remains our responsibility to not only guide and
counsel the Department of Public Information in its work, but to guide and
counsel the work of our colleagues in other committees and forums of this
Organization to ensure the acknowledgment and centrality of the
communications effort.

Distinguished friends,

In 1971, as the United Nations looked back upon its first quarter century, it
invited cellist Pablo Casals to perform what he titled a “Hymn to the United
Nations” in the General Assembly Hall. When he spoke on the occasion, the
Maestro quoted a traditional Catalan song. I will not attempt, in Ms Gallach’s presence, to quote from it in its original language, but to cite the English translation of one of its verses:

"It is neither winter nor summer
But rather springtime;
A flower is born
That gives a sweet smell all around
And fills the whole world."

Today, as we echo that thought in a late but much awaited spring, and think back to a similar season of hope and gentle opportunity seventy years ago, we realize, for all its perils, the flower still blooms and remains in our collective care to watch, to nurture and to hold dear. And, Madam Under Secretary-General, I thank you and your energetic and talented team for all you are doing in that cause—the News and Media Division, led by Hua Jiang, Michelle du Bach, Mita Hosali and Hak Fan-Lau; the Outreach Division, led by Maher Nasser and Maha El-Bahrawi and the Strategic Communication Division led by Deborah Seward, Margaret Novicki and Janos Tiszovski. I look forward in the course of my work with you to putting faces to these many illustrious names! And I thank you, and all who work with you, for proving each day that DPI represents, and stands for, Dedication, Professionalism and Imagination.