STATEMENT BY THE UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION
AT THE OPENING OF THE THIRTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION
MONDAY, 27 APRIL 2015, 10:00 A.M.
(Multilingual version)

Mr. Chairman,

Ambassador Al-Mughair,  

Our valued members of the incoming and outgoing bureaux,  

Distinguished delegates.

Before we begin, please allow me to extend our deepest condolences to the people and Government of Nepal, and also to the people and governments of Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and India. Our hearts and thoughts go out to the families of those who perished and we extend our full support to all those who are suffering as a result of Saturday’s earthquake.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me formally congratulate you, Ambassador Imnadze, on your unanimous election as our Chairman. You bring to your position a wealth of experience in both the public information and diplomatic fields. Our warmest felicitations to you and the other members of the Bureau.

Allow me also to express my own gratitude, and that of my Department, to Ambassador Lyutha Al-Mughair for her graceful stewardship of this Committee over the last two years. A wonderful photographic exhibition now on at the Cooper Union in downtown Manhattan is titled The Three Faces of Oman; Ambassador Al-Mughair has shared with us yet another face of her country in its readiness to lead and guide effective global collaboration, and do so in so warm and collegial a manner.

To Ambassador Juan Manuel González de Linares Palou; Mr. Gabriel Orellana Zabalza; and Mr. Yehor Pyvovarov – our deep appreciation for your investment in the smooth functioning of this Committee as Vice Chairmen in 2013-14. Our thanks to Mr. Chibaula Silwamba for his work as our Rapporteur in this period, and we are delighted that he will continue on the Bureau as Vice Chairman.
I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my predecessor in the Department of Public Information – Mr. Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal, who worked so closely with this Committee and many of you. I would like to also thank Mr. Maher Nasser, seated here beside me, who led the Department following Peter’s departure. I have drawn on their wise counsel in the hope that I can continue building on their fine stewardship of this Department.

Distinguished delegates,

This week I will complete three months in my current position and I am grateful, in this period, to have had the privilege of meeting many of you personally. I look forward to getting to know those among you that I have yet to meet. Soon after I joined the Department, I was asked what my priorities were. I responded that my priorities were those established by the General Assembly and under the guidance of the Secretary-General. Those priorities, in their turn, derive from the wisdom and direction given to our Organization by its Charter.

The United Nations agenda is a universal one. Our goals – whether it is ensuring that all children are able to attend school and receive a quality education; or assisting millions of refugees fleeing war, famine or persecution; or protecting human rights through treaties and conventions; or preventing conflicts thanks to the deployment of peacekeepers, to name just a few – are your goals too.

That is why Member States are our most important partners. I encourage all of you to proactively engage with us to explain the work of the Organization to your national publics – to, in effect, “tell the UN story”.

We have a shared responsibility to be as transparent as possible in informing the public – on whose support the legitimacy of the UN rests – about what we are doing. This becomes even more critical today as we live in an era when there is increased questioning of public institutions. As the information landscape evolves around the world, we cannot expect to succeed if we are passive communicators.

And we cannot succeed on our own. These partnerships cannot just unite the UN and Member States. We must engage the media, academia, civil society, the business community, students, celebrities and others if we are to truly make an impact.

Differences in perception and perspective may remain, but it is incumbent upon us to offer the facts, to reflect competing arguments, to facilitate the exercise of reason, and to enhance mutual understanding.

To that end, I turn to what is essentially the story of the year. As you the Member States and the Secretary-General have made clear, 2015 is a year when the international community must take once-in-a-generation decisions that will determine the shape of the world we live in for decades to come.

The “2015: Time for Global Action” campaign, led by the Department of Public Information, aims to raise global awareness of the issues that are relevant to the Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa, the Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda in New York in September and the Paris Climate Conference in December. The campaign showcases how the UN has
worked to improve people’s lives through the Millennium Development Goals, while explaining the need for a new people-centric post-2015 agenda centered on sustainable development.

Communications across the UN system on these issues have been coordinated by the Department, through its leadership of UN Communications Group task forces on sustainable development and climate, which meet on a regular basis to share ideas, best practices and strategies. This has enabled the UN to project the work it is doing in these areas in a coherent and consistent manner. We work with partners inside the UN system and with civil society groups to raise public awareness about the issues and to mobilize engagement and action – a recent example being the People’s Climate March leading up to the Climate Summit in New York last year. The Department uses all the tools at its disposal to promote these critical issues, including traditional media outreach, social media, and its network of field offices. It maintains websites dedicated to sustainable development and climate change in all six official languages.

Our efforts to involve universities around the world with this year’s “time for global action” theme are reflected in two global contests. In partnership with the un-Hate Foundation, the UN Academic Impact (UNAI) initiative will identify 10 projects to be led by students and young faculty to celebrate diversity as a means for development; each of these projects will be awarded €20,000. In collaboration with ELS Educational Services, an essay contest in the six official United Nations languages is being held on the sustainable development agenda; 70 winners will assemble at a UN70 Youth Forum in the General Assembly Hall in July. We are grateful to our partners in these efforts and to the Government of India for its continued financial contributions to UNAI.

Global deliberations are the source of international agreements and the popular stake in their success is strengthened by the degree to which they are accessible. The Department’s UN Webcast service received more than 21 million video views in 2014, a 24 per cent increase on 2013 figures, via web platforms and wireless mobile devices. In the recent coverage of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Sendai, audiences worldwide were able to follow Member States’ deliberations in real-time across multiple languages. The 13th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice that concluded just over a week ago in Doha was yet another example of a “whole of Department” effort, with our Vienna staff in the lead, and teaming up with colleagues from New York and Cairo to provide a full array of public information service to the Congress, as well as involving two dozen or so UN Information Centres in communicating the themes of the Congress in local languages to a wider audience across the globe.

Señor Presidente,

De otras maneras y a través de otros programas, el Departamento de Información Pública trabaja con los Estados miembros y otros para crear conciencia sobre la amplitud de los temas en la agenda de la ONU. Un ejemplo reciente fue el apoyo de comunicaciones ofrecido por el Departamento al evento de Alto Nivel de la Asamblea General de la semana pasada sobre la “Promoción de la Tolerancia y la Reconciliación: Fomento de sociedades pacíficas e incluyentes y la lucha contra el extremismo violento”, así como al debate abierto del Consejo de Seguridad sobre “El papel de la Juventud en la Lucha Contra el Extremismo Violento y Promoción de la Paz”.

3
El Premio Nelson Mandela Rolihlahla de las Naciones Unidas, será entregado por primera vez en julio. El galardón celebra la vida de una personalidad de dimensiones históricas. El Departamento tiene el honor de actuar como secretaría del comité del premio, y trabajamos con la Oficina del Presidente de la Asamblea General y los Estados miembros para identificar tanto a las posibles nominaciones como a los miembros del comité de selección. Les pedimos con vehemencia que nos ayuden a promocionar el premio y a convocar a una amplia gama de nominaciones.

Nuestros programas conmemorativos sobre el Holocausto y la Esclavitud celebran la dignidad y el valor del ser humano. Este año se cumple el décimo aniversario del Programa de Divulgación sobre el Holocausto y las Naciones Unidas; como parte de sus actos conmemorativos y de educación, en colaboración con la Misión Permanente de Italia y la organización B'nai Brith, celebraremos un evento titulado “Toscanini: Un director de orquesta por la Justicia”. Todos están cordialmente invitados a participar en ese evento que tendrá lugar mañana en la Sala de Conferencia 3, desde las 6 y media de la tarde a las 8 de la noche.

Apenas el mes pasado, el 25 de marzo, honramos la memoria de unos 15 millones de personas que cruzaron el Océano Atlántico en barcos de esclavos, al observar el Día Internacional de Recuerdo de las Víctimas de la Esclavitud y la Trata Transatlántica de Esclavos. Ese día inauguramos en la sede de las Naciones Unidas un monumento permanente. Titulado El Arca de Retorno, el memorial ofrece un testimonio visual sobre esa tragedia y nos invita a meditar sobre el legado de la esclavitud y a nunca olvidar los que sufrieron sus horrores. Si aún no lo han hecho, los invito a visitar este monumento extraordinario, situado en la Plaza de Visitantes.

En el contexto de esta conmemoración, nuestro Programa de Remembranza de las Víctimas de la Esclavitud y la Trata Trasatlántica de Esclavos solicitó la subtitulación de la película “They are We” y organizó su distribución a través de los Centros de Información de las Naciones Unidas en todo el mundo. Los UNICs proyectaron la película a audiencias jóvenes, que luego participaron en un animado intercambio en el que estudiantes de Lusaka debatieron y compartieron sus ideas con los de Lagos; y los de Antananarivo con sus pares en Brazzaville; los de Accra con los de Puerto España, y los de Dakar con los de Port-au-Prince.

Messieurs les représentants,

Les Centres d'information des Nations Unies sont actifs sur un autre front, en collaboration avec le Département des opérations de maintien de la paix et le Département des affaires politiques, pour améliorer la compréhension du rôle essentiel joué par les opérations de maintien de la paix des Nations Unies et les missions politiques spéciales. Ceci est particulièrement important au sein des publics que constituent les généreux pays fournisseurs de contingents et de personnel de police.

Le Département est également fier d'abriter le Bureau de l'Envoyé du Secrétaire général pour la jeunesse. Figurent, parmi les nombreuses initiatives entreprises par le Bureau, la création d'une plateforme en ligne unique permettant aux jeunes d'accéder aux informations et aux opportunités qui leurs sont offertes partout dans le monde à travers le système des Nations Unies, ainsi que l'établissement d'une plateforme qui permet aux internautes de participer activement à nos produits en vue d'établir les questions prioritaires sur les jeunes dans le programme de développement pour l'après-2015.
En marquant, à la fin de l’année passée, le vingtième anniversaire du Programme d’action mondial pour la jeunesse, le Bureau a co-organisé, à Bakou, le premier Forum mondial sur les politiques de la jeunesse, qui a réuni des représentants de plus de 165 pays et est aujourd’hui à la pointe d’une campagne des médias numériques et sociaux visant à commémorer le Programme d’action mondial pour la jeunesse, #YouthNow, laquelle compte à ce jour plus de 80 millions de reprises dans les médias sociaux.

La Journée internationale du bonheur, célébrée le 21 mars, fut l’occasion de répondre à l’intérêt croissant des jeunes et du grand public à travers le monde en faveur de cette journée. En partenariat avec la Fondation des Nations Unies et la plate-forme de partage de musiques MIX RADIO, le DPI a lancé la campagne de médias social #HappySoundsLike ; une plateforme numérique dans les six langues officielles de l’ONU, plus l’italien et l’hindi. Elle a réuni le Secrétaire général, les Messagers de la paix des Nations Unies et des artistes du monde entier dans le but de composer la sélection de chansons « la plus heureuse du monde ». La campagne a donné lieu à plus de 800 millions de reprises dans les médias sociaux; au Siège de l’ONU, elle a donné lieu, en point d’orgue, à un événement éducatif dans une salle de l’Assemblée générale comble, au cours duquel le chanteur Pharrell Williams a appelé les jeunes à s’investir dans l’action en faveur du climat.

En ce qui concerne l’avenir, nous sommes actifs dans d’autres domaines, notamment notre programme sur la question de la Palestine, conformément au mandat qui nous a été confié par les États Membres. Le mois prochain, les 26 et 27 mai, le Département, avec le soutien généreux du Gouvernement du Kazakhstan, organisera à Astana le Séminaire international de l’ONU annuel des médias sur la paix au Moyen-Orient. Ce séminaire vise à encourager les journalistes, les décideurs politiques, les intellectuels et d’autres à s’engager sur la voie à suivre vers la paix entre Israéliens et Palestiniens.

Mr. Chairman,

International understanding, including through formal agreements, are also the premise upon which we seek “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,” as stated in the UN Charter. The UN70 slogan – Strong UN. Better World – and logo, designed by the Department’s graphic designers, and available in the six official UN languages, visually tie together UN70 commemorations and products. The logo is widely used by UN offices and our global partners. We are happy that many Member States have already integrated the logo into your own activities and some of you are even including it in your email signatures.

On 29 June, we will open a newly curated exhibit featuring the works of the renowned United States painter and illustrator Norman Rockwell, including his historic United Nations drawing and the original painting of his iconic Golden Rule, to complement the mosaic already on display at the UN. We look forward to welcoming you to the opening and to presenting these and other products to you in more detail at this afternoon’s interactive session.

This year’s observance of World Autism Awareness Day on 2 April was of special importance as it provided the platform for the launch of the Secretary-General’s Call to Action to businesses to provide employment opportunities for persons with autism. As such, the event and its outcome have the potential to make a tangible difference in the lives of so many, considering that the unemployment
rate of adults on the autism spectrum is estimated to be more than 80 per cent. We are grateful to the many Permanent Missions who partnered with us on this occasion.

Last month, the Department highlighted the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action through extensive news coverage and feature reports across various multilingual media platforms. In February, it also drew attention to gender issues with dedicated coverage to the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation.

Distinguished delegates,

I have tried, in the course of these remarks, to give you a flavor of how the activities of the Department continue to serve the core premises of the Charter. Central to this endeavour is the visibility of an integrated United Nations information presence. At the 1945 San Francisco conference which drafted the UN Charter, the delegate from Czechoslovakia remarked that “vital to the success of the organization contemplated in the Charter now being written is that the organization have a strong, well developed information service” and the truth of that assertion has stood the test of 70 years.

Just a few weeks ago, we launched a new-look www.un.org home page in all six official UN languages. It offers a more intuitive, visually arresting and dynamic user experience for a complex and multi-layered Organization looking forward in its 70th year. At the interactive session this afternoon, we will also have a chance to see the UN 70th anniversary dedicated website, as well as other products and services of the Department geared to this anniversary.

In a world inundated by digital media outputs, DPI’s multilingual News Centres have fused a traditional coverage approach with social media elements – incorporating infographics, special reports, features, photographic essays and interviews – into one seamless news-gathering and news-disseminating process. Through a pro bono service partnership with the company Audio Now Digital, the Department also launched a smartphone app giving access to UN Radio programmes and live audio from meetings of the General Assembly and the Security Council in eight languages. The Department also developed an app about the UN response to the Ebola crisis, which features multimedia updates for iOS and Android devices and offers audio reports in eight languages as well as video access.

The Department advises on how best to use social networking platforms to amplify UN messages, and to do so as a complement to the dissemination of UN information via traditional news platforms such as UN Radio, UN Television and the UN News Centre. We send weekly social media guidance and convene monthly UN System-wide meetings on staff working on social media. The Department, in collaboration with several Member States, organized January’s “Social Media Day”, which brought experts, the UN family and Member States together to discuss the latest social media trends. The global network of UNICs continues to communicate with local audiences; they publish information materials in 43 local languages. They also use their social media platforms to engage local young audiences through the 49 Facebook, 42 Twitter and 29 YouTube accounts they maintain.

In this context, I am heartened to report that, according to the latest report from Twiplomacy, which studies how digital technology is used by diplomats and international organizations, our English-
language Twitter account – which is about to welcome its four millionth follower – has become the most followed account on the platform among all international organizations.

Our social media reach in Chinese has scaled new heights, with Sina Weibo followers now reaching 7.5 million. Spanish social media has continued its pattern of steady growth with YouTube video viewership of videos having more than doubled, and Twitter followers having risen by more than 100 per cent.

As numbers continue to grow on Facebook, in the past six months we have also tripled the number of fans on the photo-sharing platform Instagram, which is increasingly used by young people worldwide. The audience for the UN channel on YouTube has also exceeded 14 million, a 40 per cent increase from the previous year.

Following new trends, UN Radio has secured a partnership with the social medium SoundCloud – which allows audio content to be shared with followers that can be tracked immediately, and has had huge appeal in the Arabic-speaking world.

Mr. Chairman,

Another area where we count on the support of Member States is in pursuit of the goals of press freedom and the establishment of an independent, vigorous, pluralistic media environment worldwide. The Department is a staunch supporter of these aims. To this end, we would welcome your engagement later this week when we commemorate World Press Freedom Day with an event here in this room on Friday 1 May.

Having been a media professional myself throughout my career, I regard the word “information” as the most critical in the title of the Department it is now my privilege to lead. Close to one hundred days at the United Nations have altered that perception; information is critical, certainly, but it is the means to reach and to serve what I now see is the most important word – the “public”. From the opening words of the Charter framed 70 years ago, to a thought tweeted 70 seconds ago, it is the peoples of the world who want to learn and be informed of the possibilities and the pitfalls that lie ahead of them that set the direction. We hold this Organization in trust for them.

Thank you.

***