United Nations Information Centre Activities to Counter Terrorism
Report prepared by the United Nations Department of Public Information

Introduction:

In June 2002, the Policy Working Group on the UN and Terrorism recommended that the Department of Public Information (DPI) initiate a review on reaching "…local populations that support terrorist aims, in a form that is designed to be heard by those communities." The full extent of this request is more appropriately handled under the auspices of UN Development Group (UNDG), since the same recommendation goes on to suggest that "country teams be used to the greatest extent possible to determine the best means of conveying messages to target audiences". Nevertheless, DPI is able to inform on the work of its own offices at the country level, the UN Information Centres (UNIC), which routinely collaborate with the country teams.

The Working Group also asked that the outreach activities of UNICs to civil society be reviewed and enhanced, including to the growing number of institutions and think-tanks in Arabic-speaking countries.

DPI requested each UNIC to review efforts to date and suggest ideas and proposals on how to assist the UN's work to combat terrorism. Responses were received from 35, representing broadly a balanced mix of geographical locations. A database on UNIC activities, maintained in New York, has provided further information.

While this paper concentrates on UNICs' activities to reach "local populations", it is useful to note that a large number of activities have also been organized by DPI in New York, which in their own way reach out to "local populations" and civil society. This includes 31 briefings in 2003 on topics closely related to terrorism, held by the Group Programmes Unit, with a total attendance of 1301 individuals, as well as many radio and television programmes, panel discussions, a conference, and various publications on the issue of terrorism (see attached paper providing an update on DPI action in 2003).

The information gathered on UNICs shows that they are already undertaking a wide variety of activities aimed at a number of population segments. In fact, UNICs have been reaching out to local populations for many years, and especially in the wake of 11 September 2001.

Nevertheless, various concerns have been pointed out. Among these are budget considerations, which may not allow for measures as comprehensive as desired considering especially that even the Secretary-General has emphasized the dangers of allowing the war in Iraq and the war against terrorism to overshadow the considerably broader activities of the Organization. In addition, some have pointed out the possible government objections to UNIC work in this area which could be viewed as interference. There is concern about the lack of a universally agreed definition of terrorism, and exactly who is to say which "local populations" are likely to "support terrorist aims."

For these very reasons, reflecting widely differing circumstances and needs in each country, local and cultural sensitivities, difficulties in identifying (other than intuitively in each case) a specific group or groups which may be considered to be at risk, and the fact that terrorism means different things to different people, it would be impractical to design a strategy that would apply in all countries. Nonetheless, a number of common ideas and activities that could be replicated in many countries, have been outlined below.

"At-risk" Countries and Regions:

It is clear from UNIC responses that there is a strong sense of regional conflict in parts of Latin America, which some observers have defined as terrorism, and similar peace and security concerns in African countries. UNICs from South and East Asian countries cited local or regional threats. Concern is also great in the Middle East, where responses illustrate a perceived need for a strategy which reaches out to civil society at large, and which tackles the underlying factors which may facilitate terrorism such as poverty, illiteracy and underdevelopment. There is little perceived threat in Western Europe and most of Eastern Europe.

There are specific local reasons for some UNICs' attention to counter-terrorism, which may require careful handling if pursued: the New Delhi office on account of groups proclaimed as terrorist by the Government of India in Kashmir, Tamil Nadu and North-East states; the Pakistan office, also with concerns over Kashmir and other conflicts; the Moscow office because of concerns in Chechnya and North Caucus; and the Rabat office on account of recent terrorist attacks in Casablanca. Counter-terrorism is high on the agenda in Mexico owing to its bilateral relationship with the United States. Sydney's interest reflects close geographical proximity to countries in which terrorist attacks have occurred, as well as Australia's role as a regional economic and political leader.

Identifying Target Audiences:

The major challenge is to identify the target audience, and then to reach out to it with appropriate counter-terrorism messages that will be heard. Those who are "excluded" or "disenfranchised," which some say are at high risk of being recruited, are a disparate group, and by definition hard to reach. For example, they may count among them the unemployed, those of school age who are not in school, or the illiterate who cannot access information materials.

Most UN advocacy efforts reach out to "all citizens" or to civil society in general. In fact, the involvement of civil society groups and other local partners in UN public information activities, often gives these activities an element of being locally owned, making them more credible and fostering local "buy-in".

Specific selected target audiences include:

    i)   Opinion makers: such as government officials, community and religious leaders or other role models such as scholars and intellectuals;

ii)   Vulnerable groups: populations perceived to be vulnerable, due to the incidence of poverty, the political situation, or other socio-economic factors;

iii)   Young people: youth, through formal and non-formal educational outreach aimed at schools and universities.

i)   **Influencing the opinion makers**:

A number of information activities already being taken by UNICs are directed at those most influential in societies, among them community and religious leaders, intellectuals and scholars. Relevant messages are for the most part based on promoting peace and tolerance rather than informing about the realities and consequences of, or means to combat, terrorism. For example, the Tehran and Tripoli UNICs suggest encouraging respected individuals to guide public opinion by publishing op-eds or articles on building harmony in communities. The UNIC in Lima aims to undertake activities to educate the media on peace culture and the link between peace and development.

UNICs have also sought to inform those who influence society through formal political structures, such as government officials, political party leaders or local authorities. The Mexico UNIC has included government officials and parliamentarians in its distribution of information materials on the UN's work on counter-terrorism. Likewise, UNIC-Islamabad covers Security Council and General Assembly debates and resolutions in its regular newsletter which goes to editors, ministries, parliamentarians, NGOs, academics and other opinion-makers. However the UNIC cautions that government and security authorities may be reluctant to have the UN further highlight the issue which remains charged. The New Delhi UNIC collaborated with the National Human Rights Commission in organizing a seminar on terrorism and human rights. The UNIC in Ouagadougou mentions local authorities among its intended audience.

ii)   **Reaching the vulnerable**:

The UNIC in Lome stated that students and the unemployed were thought to be among the first recruited as terrorists in Togo. They made efforts to reach this audience through television, radio, a CD on peace and disarmament and seminars. An attempt has been made to reach out to the unemployed in Prague, through unemployment associations.

UNIC New Delhi proposed focus on three regions - Kashmir Valley, the North-east states and Tamil Nadu - as primary target areas due to local circumstances. Focus should be largely on educational initiatives emphasizing dialogue, peace and tolerance. UNIC Delhi cautions however that outreach to "populations that support terrorist aims" could be viewed as interference in government affairs.

iii)   **Educating young people**:

Many UNICs identified young people, especially school children or students, or those in an 18-35 age range as an audience for their communications outreach on counter-terrorism, and have made considerable efforts to reach these younger populations.

Schools and universities have proved the readiest means to reaching the largest numbers of young people. As examples, the Bangkok UNIS tries to educate young people throughout the Asia-Pacific region in partnership with respective United Nations Associations (UNA) in the region, and the Beirut UNIC sees educational institutions as a prerequisite to devising a counter-terrorism strategy. Other UNICs have been involved in non-formal education activities such as model UN debates on the theme of terrorism.

Messages:

Key messages that UNICs are disseminating include:

i)   The UN works to counter terrorism. Information is based on literature available from UN agencies, the Secretariat and the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the Security Council, or in the public domain;

ii) The need to address the underlying factors facilitating terrorism, such as poverty, disenfranchisement and underdevelopment, highlighting the need for progress towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals. The need to combat terrorism does not lessen the need to address development, human rights and other challenges to peace and security, which, if left unaddressed, can exacerbate terrorism;

iii) The importance of promoting tolerance and unity, and encouraging open dialogue in society as a means to address attitudes which may foster terrorism.

i)   **The UN works to counter terrorism**:

Many UNICs publicize the work and output of the United Nations to combat terrorism. UNIS Vienna held a day-long workshop with media from the region in November on Terrorism and the Media with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The UNIS in Bangkok translates UN information materials into many regional languages, and coordinates with UNDP throughout the region to ensure distribution. In addition to doing the same in Tanzania, the Dar-es-Salaam UNIC also reviews the local media to monitor feedback. Many UNICs, including Copenhagen, Prague, Geneva, Sydney, Mexico and Warsaw publicize the work of the special envoys, agencies and the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and place statements of the Secretary-General and international conventions on their websites. The UNIC in Mexico distributes such documents to NGOs, academics, government officials and political parties. The UNIC in Manila raises public awareness in the Philippines of relevant UN projects, while the office in Yerevan organized a display of counter-terrorism publications in the lobby of UN House.

ii) **Addressing the underlying factors facilitating terrorism**:

The UN is constantly involved in global challenges, including poverty, underdevelopment, and proliferation of arms among others, which impact directly or indirectly on peace and security, and on terrorism. UNICs continue to be involved in advocacy on these issues. For example, the UNIC in Asuncion has organized seminars on arms deconstruction, political ideologies, globalization and human rights. The Sydney

office drew attention to the rise in the use of arms in Australia and New Zealand. UNICs, including in Brazzaville, promote messages on human rights and the economic and social consequences of terrorism in order to dissuade populations from embracing terrorism. As mentioned earlier, UNIS Vienna, with the UNODC, discussed linkages between terrorism and drug-trafficking and organized crime at a November workshop with media.

Similarly, combating hunger, poverty, illiteracy and social injustice, as potential underlying factors contributing to terrorism, are on the agendas of many UNICs. Some offices, among them Sydney, Rabat and Prague especially underlined the promotion of the Millennium Development Goals as part of their strategy. Others mentioned their support or facilitation of humanitarian work. UNIC/ Bogota, for example, supports the UN's humanitarian assistance work geared to 1.5 million internally displaced persons and others affected by terrorist activities and internal conflict.

iii)   **Promoting tolerance**:

Some UNICs, including in Lima and Moscow, suggest that helping to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, cultural understanding, democracy and civic values, rather than concentrating simply on disseminating information on the realities and consequences of terrorism, fosters unity, communication and dialogue in potentially divergent societies, and so reduces opportunities for terrorists. The Moscow UNIC mentions preventing alienation in society, and promoting openness to the outside world in order to deflect vulnerability to religious, ethnic or political propaganda. The Moscow UNIC also mentions the importance of seeking collaboration with civil society organizations in counter-terrorism efforts. The UNIC in Tripoli proposes distribution of materials on peace-building to encourage dialogue in communities, while UNIC/ Lome has distributed CDs delivering disarmament and peace messages.

Communications Tools and Tactics:

Successful communications programmes being undertaken by UNICs are employing a wide range of tools to reach out to large populations. Among these methods are:

i)   Using the media: placement of messages or stories on television and radio and in print media, and use of print and broadcast media campaigns;
ii)   Information materials: distribution of information materials including posters, kits and newsletters, including through websites;
iii)   Events: organization of participatory events focused on action against terrorism, such as workshops, seminars, conferences, model UN debates and special events for related UN days;
iv)   Partnerships: facilitating partnerships between different organizations – including NGOs, think-tanks, religious institutions, and governments – towards common objectives; and
v)   Educational outreach: formal and non-formal educational outreach aimed at schools and universities.

i)   **Media**:

Using the broadcast, print and electronic media has proven effective in reaching broad/ mass populations. This is especially relevant where the at-risk population is hard to identify or to reach directly. A number of UNICs, including Brazzaville, Bangkok, and Ouagadougou, are working on television advertisements, public service announcements, programmes or UN films on the issue of terrorism. The Bangkok UNIS mentions the need to dub these into local languages. The Bogota UNIC produces a UN radio programme broadcast on 300 local radio networks, about the UN's work, especially as it affects populations in conflict-ridden areas. UNIC/Nairobi aims to produce a radio series linked to terrorism since Kenya recently experienced two international terrorist attacks.

Press briefings about the UN's work on countering terrorism have been organized. Manila mentions coordinating this with related UN project site visits for local media, in the Mindanao area in particular. In October 2001, the UNIS in Bangkok organized a press conference, led by the Executive Secretary of ESCAP, to inform the public on UN activities to counter-terrorism, and now proposes the circulation of op-eds on counter-terrorism throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The Tehran office encourages Iranian writers to publish their own op-eds to convey counter-terrorism messages. A similar strategy is proposed by UNIC/Tripoli to promote harmony and understanding in communities. The New Delhi UNIC suggested initiating a capacity-building seminar for media to heighten awareness on the UN's position on terrorism.

ii)   **Information materials**:

UNICs also disseminate relevant information kits and other materials, including CDs or videos, newsletters, papers, and key documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These have been distributed widely in schools and universities, or to governments and local authorities by UNIC offices including Asuncion, Bangkok, Brazzaville, Dar-es-Salaam and Lome among others. Many UNIC offices have also arranged for local translations to be made. In this way, for example, the Bangkok office seeks to inform many neighbouring communities in the region including in Laos, Cambodia, Viet Nam and China.

Many offices, especially in Western countries, have made information on counter-terrorism available on their websites, often in local languages.

In order to expand the amount of information available on terrorism and counter-terrorism, the UNIS in Bangkok has established an information database of scanned news, views, reports and legislation, as well as a library. This would enable users to participate actively in political and ethical decision processes impacting on counter-terrorism in the region.

iii)   **Participatory events**:

Encouraging participation of local groups and organizations in specific counter-terrorism activities is a more proactive way of drawing out audiences. A number of events such as workshops or informative seminars and panel discussions have been organized in Paraguay by the Asuncion office. The Pretoria UNIC suggested encouraging the media to sponsor programmes and workshops on the role the media plays in the fight against extremist groups and prevention of terrorism. This would help draw other influential groups into a national discussion on the issue. Similarly, Tehran is discussing the possibility of organizing a conference on terrorism jointly with the government. The UNIC in Copenhagen proposed framing terrorism as an issue for appropriate observance of UN-designated international days. Younger generations have been encouraged to participate in model UN debates on terrorism. As one example, Yerevan organized a youth summer camp to train students for a model UN on the theme of counter-terrorism, and Pretoria is planning a model UN on terrorism in 2004. The office in Harare organized a debate on terrorism at the University of Zimbawe.

iv)   **Partnerships**:

Working through partnerships has proved effective in ensuring that messages are redisseminated widely. The UNIC office in Manama suggested that a significant role could be played in reaching local populations and educational institutions through collaborative ventures with UNESCO and cooperating with Middle East think-tank organizations. The Ouagadougou UNIC mentions collaborative partnerships with government, human rights movements, the University of Ouagadougou and Press Club of Burkina Faso to stimulate national discussion on terrorism prevention. Others mentioned partnerships with the media, UN agencies, government offices, NGOs, religious institutions and Human Rights Commissions to support humanitarian assistance or development efforts.

v)   **Educational outreach**:

Many UNICs reported involvement in educational outreach, both formal and non-formal, as a means of reaching out to young people. The Bangkok UNIS highlighted an outreach programme involving various United Nations Associations (UNA) in the Asia-Pacific region. This is based on a traveling lecture series on the UN and counter-terrorism, targeting high schools and universities in the region. The Beirut UNIC mentioned educational institutions as a prerequisite to devising a counter-terrorism strategy, and UNIC/ Buenos Aires indicated that it had been facilitating lectures in academic institutions on the subject in Argentina since October 2001. Other offices, such as in Dhaka, plan to disseminate UN publications to educational as well as other institutions, while the Tripoli office suggested encouraging UN staff members to visit schools to educate young people on counter-terrorism, and encourage discussions in school.

Conclusions:

i) The importance of information as a tool in the UN's counter-terrorism work is already recognized by UNICs.

ii) Lack of resources for programme activities limits the work of UNICs.

iii) Different approaches in different countries reflect differing social and political circumstances between countries or regions. A single blueprint approach is not feasible as local knowledge and intuition are required.

iv) There is no uniform and accepted definition of terrorism to guide efforts.

v) It is virtually impossible to identify "local populations that support terrorist aims", though attempts have been made. Targeting or profiling may, on the contrary, in itself, be symptomatic of social division, and therefore counter productive.

vi) Terrorism is a sensitive issue. UNICs note sensitivity towards perceptions of middle-eastern societies in the global arena, based on cultural, religious and political factors. Offices in countries or regions where terrorism has been highlighted as a problem have emphasized their wariness of being seen to interfere in government affairs, or the UN being perceived as imposing its views or, in some countries, those of the United States.

vii) It is virtually impossible to measure relative levels of success in these activities.

viii) UNICs are continually involved in promoting the UN's on-going efforts to address the traditional challenges to peace and security, and poverty and hunger, factors generally recognized as exacerbating terrorist threats and opportunities.

Recommendations:

i) UNICs activities should continue to be guided by local circumstances and judgment, and not based on any blueprint one-fits-all solution.

ii) The information contained in this report should nevertheless be circulated among UNICs offices to frame on-going activities.

iii) Key messages developed in New York by DPA and others should be circulated to UNICs by DPI, as appropriate, for use in their advocacy initiatives, and media outreach activities coordinated with key developments in the global arena.

iv) UNICs are already reporting regularly on on-going communications activities and the information fed into a database maintained in New York. However, UNICs could be encouraged to draw particular attention to their activities relating to counter-terrorism in this regard.