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**REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE OF THE
COMMISSION: RESOLUTION 48/2**

(Item 5 of the provisional agenda)

Report of the Executive Secretary

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INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations has been undergoing continuous reform. The current process began in the mid-1980s when the delays in the payments of the assessed contributions of Member States began to have an impact on the Organization. This affected the normal operations of the United Nations. A decade later the financial situation of the United Nations had become much more serious. With the appointment of the new Secretary-General at the end of 1996, there was renewed hope that this state of affairs might soon end. However, the financial situation of the United Nations was still in a serious state.

2. In recent years, ESCAP has experienced restructuring in the form of changes in its conference structure. In 1988, the call for restructuring was instigated by budget cuts, which impacted on the number of intergovernmental meetings ESCAP could conduct in one year. This number had to be reduced, and the logical consequence was that the number of committees had to be reduced from nine to seven. The second reform was undertaken in 1992, which aimed to enhance the responsiveness of ESCAP to its member States' concerns and also to attract higher-level participation in its meetings. Both these reforms are briefly described in section I of the present report.

3. The current reform process, which is discussed in section III below, was initiated by the Executive Secretary in January 1996. It is being conducted pursuant to the mandate contained in Commission resolution 48/2 of 23 April 1992, which established the current ESCAP conference structure. It also constitutes part of the global exercise to revitalize the United Nations system. Through its resolution 52/1 of 24 April 1996, the Commission also required the Executive Secretary to call a regional preparatory meeting at the latest by February 1997 to review this reform exercise. The present document provides a general description of the status of the current reform to facilitate the Commission in taking its decisions.

I. PREVIOUS RESTRUCTURING OF ESCAP

4. ESCAP was first established by the General Assembly in 1947 as a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council, and thus it reported to the Council. The ESCAP conference structure consists of the Commission itself as the highest body within the organization, and, reporting to it, the Commission's subsidiary bodies, which are the committees and special bodies established by the Commission. By General Assembly resolution 32/197 of 19 December 1977 on restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations system, ESCAP was given the mandate to serve as the main general economic and social development centre within the United Nations system for its region and as an executing agency for intersectoral, subregional, regional and interregional projects. This mandate was further reinforced with the adoption of General Assembly resolutions 33/202 of 29 January 1979, and of 34/206 of 19 December 1979.

5. Prior to 1988, ESCAP had nine committees, each one dealing with activities in a particular economic and social sector or cluster of sectors. The nine committees were on (a) agriculture development, (b) development planning, (c) industry, technology, human settlements, and environment, (d) natural resources, (e) population, (f) shipping, transport, and communications, (g) social development, (h) statistics, and (i) trade.

6. The ESCAP programme, "Regional cooperation for development in Asia and the Pacific", comprised 15 programme areas (these were later called subprogrammes), almost all of which were sectoral in nature. These were: (a) development issues and policies, (b) agricultural and rural development, (c) international trade and development finance, (d) industrial and technological development, (e) human settlements, (f) transport and communications, (g) environment, (h) energy, (i) natural resources, including marine affairs, (j) population, (k) human resources development, (l) social development, (m) women in development, (n) statistics, and (o) least developed, landlocked, and island developing countries. These programme areas or subprogrammes were dealt with by the nine subsidiary committees of ESCAP.

7. In 1988 the Commission decided to reduce the number of committees in order to decrease the number of committee meetings that needed to be conducted in one year. However, the number of subprogrammes or sectors was not correspondingly reduced: the same 15 programme areas or subprogrammes were maintained. The restructuring was achieved by designating to each committee the task of dealing with more than one subprogramme or sector. Thus the conference structure was changed from nine to seven committees dealing respectively with (a) agriculture, rural development and environment, (b) development planning and statistics, (c) industry, technology and human settlements, (d) natural resources and energy, (e) population and social development, (f) trade (including transnational corporations), and (g) shipping, transport and communications.

8. The structure adopted in 1988 did not lead to fruitful deliberations in the committee sessions, principally because few countries could send representatives from more than one ministry or agency to a meeting and, as a consequence, the participation in a committee meeting from the member countries comprised officials from several different sectors. At most, only about half of the representatives could participate in the debate on any one issue. Such a state of affairs was obviously unsatisfactory. Therefore, in 1990 the Commission began once again to deliberate on reform and to seek the views of a group of eminent persons. The discussion continued into 1992, when the Commission decided to adopt a thematic approach to its conference and programme structure.

9. The selected themes were (a) regional economic cooperation, (b) environment and sustainable development, and (c) poverty alleviation through economic growth and social development. Two sectoral subprogrammes were retained: (d) transport and communications, and (e) statistics. In

addition, the Commission felt that the concerns of certain groups of countries deserved special attention and established two "special bodies", to deal with (f) least developed and landlocked developing countries, and (g) Pacific island developing countries.

10. In the meantime additional activities not included in the 15 programme areas mentioned in paragraph 6 above were being addressed by ESCAP. These new areas, however, have not yet been granted subprogramme status in the programme budget of the United Nations. The areas are: (a) remote sensing, which was later renamed space technology applications, and (b) tourism.

II. CURRENT REFORM PROCESS

11. There is no doubt that the ESCAP conference structure is in need of further reform. As world developments have progressed, priorities have undergone changes, and more and more players have come on the scene. Most important of all, the resources being made available to the United Nations have been greatly reduced. Many member countries, therefore, have expressed the necessity for enhanced efficiency in the utilization of scarce and dwindling resources and for increased effectiveness in the conduct of meetings.

12. Thus it is important to find a new structure that will enable a better focus to be achieved in the meetings convened and organized by ESCAP. A first step would be to narrow the focus through a suitable choice of clusters of closely related sectoral disciplines. In view of the still wide spectra of these clusters, however, it is also important to consider the modalities of convening the subsidiary and intergovernmental meetings. It has been the experience of ESCAP that, in general, high-level participation has been obtained in meetings convened to discuss particular sectors, such as the Committee on Transport and Communications and the Committee on Statistics. The items on the agendas of the meetings could be thematic or cross-sectoral; nevertheless representation has been largely from sectoral departments, agencies or ministries.

13. The current reform process was mandated by the Commission through its resolution 48/2. The Executive Secretary in January 1996 established within the secretariat the Working Group on ESCAP Reform, chaired by the Deputy Executive Secretary. The basic objective of the Working Group was to review the conference and programme structure of ESCAP, with a view to achieving a better focus in the work of the organization on the basis of its comparative advantage, thereby improving its ability to meet the priority needs of the region.

14. The Working Group commissioned three background papers: (a) a review of the current status of United Nations reforms, with particular reference to its implications for ESCAP, (b) emerging needs and priorities of Asia and the Pacific, and (c) assessment of the comparative advantage of ESCAP in relation to other existing mechanisms (multilateral and bilateral) to meet the priority needs

of the region. The Working Group also established three task forces, whose membership was drawn from all levels of the Professional staff of the secretariat. The task forces submitted reports on (a) coordination, collaboration and linkages, (b) a review of the continuing relevance of the thematic orientation and the current six subprogrammes to the needs of the region in the light of the comparative advantage of ESCAP, and (c) a review of the secretariat's experience in putting into operation the thematic approach. Each of the task forces completed its respective report by May 1996 and the Working Group completed its draft by June 1996. In July 1996, a staff seminar was held to discuss the draft report, which was then finalized by 31 July 1996.

15. In the meantime the Working Group devised a questionnaire which was distributed to member Governments in April 1996 to obtain their views on the importance of the functions of ESCAP and the effectiveness of the thematic programming approach. Inputs were obtained from member States and by July 1996 the Working Group report was finalized, taking into account the results of the survey.

16. The main findings of the Working Group on ESCAP Reform were as follows:

(a) The thematic orientation of the work of ESCAP was of continuing relevance. The themes were, however, conceptually too broad and diverse, and as a consequence the activities undertaken under the programmes were too diffuse and lacking in coherence. A better focus was required;

(b) ESCAP should have the following six programme areas and six corresponding committees: (a) development policy management, (b) international trade, investment and industry, (c) social development, (d) environment and natural resources management, (e) infrastructure development, and (f) statistics.

17. After the completion of the work of the Working Group on ESCAP Reform, the Executive Secretary established within the secretariat the Task Force on ESCAP Reform, which was charged with the task of analysing the secretariat's capabilities and, taking into account developments in the intergovernmental process at United Nations Headquarters and the inputs made by staff members on the secretariat's electronic bulletin board, to report to the Executive Secretary further suggestions or recommendations on the Working Group report. The Task Force completed its report in November 1996 and it was made available to the members of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission (ACPR).

18. The Task Force on ESCAP Reform submitted a comprehensive report which analysed the ESCAP conference structure. It discussed not only the advantages of the thematic approach but also the shortcomings, i.e. that it had failed to obtain the appropriate representation from the capitals and that it had created problems in accountability. In essence, however, the report did not depart from

the proposals for the conference structure made by the Working Group. The Task Force Report had a much improved format, with details for the proposed conference and programme structure provided as annexes to the report. The new names of the six proposed committees and programmes were brief and, perhaps, more focused: (a) development policy analysis, (b) trade and industry, (c) social development, (d) natural resources management, (e) infrastructure development, and (f) statistics.

19. In the meantime ACPR had, in October 1996, begun its own review of the conference structure in the ACPR Informal and Open-ended Working Group, which, over the period from October 1996 to January 1997, met on 10 occasions to discuss various aspects of the current thematic programming and conference structure and its implementation. Although ACPR had acted on its own, it had benefited a great deal from the report of the secretariat Task Force. The ACPR report, as mandated by the Commission in resolution 52/1, was also submitted to the Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Review of the Conference Structure of the Commission, held in Bangkok in February 1997, for its consideration alongside the report of the Task Force on ESCAP Reform.

20. The Executive Secretary had also sought views on the report of the Task Force on ESCAP Reform from a group of selected eminent persons with broad multisectoral perspective on the region's economic and social issues, a general awareness of the United Nations' structural reform issues, and an appreciation of the distinct role of ESCAP in the Asian and Pacific region. Three responded in a positive manner: Ungku A. Aziz, Royal Professor and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya; Rafeeuddin Ahmed, Associate Administrator, United Nations Development Programme and former Executive Secretary of ESCAP; and Kuniko Inoguchi, Professor of International Relations, Sophia University, Japan. Their responses were included in the documentation for the Regional Preparatory Meeting.

21. Among the most notable observations and recommendations of the three eminent persons were that drastic action was needed. Among the actions recommended were that the number of committees should be reduced to three; working groups could be established to address various cross-sectoral areas; the Office of the Executive Secretary should be strengthened; and the Commission should have a focus on the role of women.

22. Meanwhile, the overall United Nations review process proceeded at the intergovernmental level in New York with dialogues, high-level meetings and in-depth discussions concerning such issues as the composition of the Security Council, the assessment of the contributions of Member States, restructuring of the economic and social sectors, the role of the Secretariat, the operational activities of the United Nations, the enhancement of the efficiency and effectiveness of the intergovernmental process, the volume of documentation and oversight services within the United Nations system. These culminated at the end of 1996 with the election of the new Secretary-General.

23. Several proposals for restructuring the economic and social sectors of the United Nations have been circulating within the Secretariat. These are of crucial relevance to the restructuring of the regional commissions, including ESCAP. Among the proposals discussed is one that foresees the regional commissions serving as the regional committees of the Economic and Social Council, in which case their subsidiary bodies would become regional subcommittees. This is certainly an interesting proposal which would appear to merit closer attention.

24. The newly appointed Secretary-General immediately instituted new working methods within the United Nations secretariat, including the creation of the Policy Coordination Group, which has provided further impetus to the overall reform process of the United Nations. More recently he established a Steering Committee on United Nations Reform and appointed an Executive Coordinator for United Nations Reform. He also announced a two-track reform process: (a) measures undertaken within his purview, including reorganization of headquarters departments in the economic and social sectors, and (b) recommendations to be made by the end of July to Member States on measures to be undertaken at the intergovernmental level.

25. The Regional Preparatory Meeting, which was convened pursuant to Commission resolution 52/1 of 24 April 1996, considered three basic documents:

- (a) "Findings and recommendations of the secretariat Task Force on ESCAP Reform";
- (b) "Report of ACPR on the review of the conference structure of the Commission";
- (c) "Views and comments of eminent persons on the review of the conference structure of the Commission".

The Meeting deliberated on the issues relating to the most appropriate conference structure for the Commission. Its recommendations have been submitted to the Commission as document E/ESCAP/1048. These are summarized in section III below.

III. RESULTS

26. The Regional Preparatory Meeting viewed the advantages of the thematic approach as outweighing the disadvantages. It considered that a process of evolution was preferable to any radical change, and felt that the right approach would be to consolidate the gains and make necessary changes in the case of those committees and subprogrammes where some reordering of programme areas or a clearer expression of focus could be of advantage.

27. The Meeting recommended that the sessions of the Commission should continue to be held on an annual basis, and that they should comprise a senior officials' segment followed by a ministerial segment. It further recommended that the number, frequency and duration of intergovernmental

meetings should be reduced wherever possible, and that the amount of documentation submitted to those meetings should be limited. It also recommended that a review should be undertaken by ACPR, after the fifty-third session of the Commission, of the possibility of further reducing the number of days of the annual Commission session from the current seven working days.

28. The Meeting also felt that conformity between the conference structure and the programme and secretariat structure would be a desirable means of ensuring the effective and efficient functioning of the Commission.

29. It prescribed an intergovernmental structure subsidiary to the Commission comprising the following:

Committee on Regional Economic Cooperation

Committee on Socio-economic Measures to Alleviate Poverty in Rural and Urban Areas

Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Development

Committee on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development

Committee on Statistics

30. It recommended an annual frequency of meetings for the Committees on Socio-economic Measures to Alleviate Poverty in Rural and Urban Areas; on Environment and Natural Resources Development, and on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development. It proposed a biennial frequency for the other committees. It felt that the Special Body on Least Developed and Landlocked Developing Countries and the Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries should be retained and reinvigorated, and that the sessions of those bodies should be held biennially, one each in alternate years, back-to-back with the annual sessions of the Commission. It recommended that the duration of the sessions of the Committees should not be more than three days.

31. In accordance with the wishes of the Regional Preparatory Meeting, the secretariat prepared detailed terms of reference for each of the Committees, which were reviewed by ACPR at its two hundred and thirteenth, and two hundred and fourteenth sessions. These will be incorporated in the draft resolution on the conference structure to be discussed at the present Commission session.

IV. EXPECTED COMMISSION DECISIONS

32. The recommendations of the Regional Preparatory Meeting have been studied carefully by the secretariat. They certainly hold the promise of enhancing the relevance of the Commission to its membership and of streamlining the work of the secretariat. However, there are certain aspects which merit further consideration by the Commission.

Conference structure

33. The process of arriving at a consensus on the names of some of the new committees during the deliberations of the Regional Preparatory Meeting was, perhaps, the most difficult aspect of the Meeting. The following comments are submitted for the consideration of the Commission.

34. The secretariat was fully cognizant of the importance members of the Commission would attach to names of committees. However, when the Regional Preparatory Meeting deliberated on alternative committee names, it did not have as yet the full text of the terms of references of the committees. To be sure, the Meeting had access to copies of resolution 48/2 with the terms of references of the current conference structure, as well as the proposed terms of references in the report of the secretariat Task Force. But these were different from the draft terms of reference prepared by the secretariat and deliberated upon by ACPR at its two hundred and thirteenth session on 3 April 1997, and finalized at its two hundred and fourteenth session on 8 April 1997. Therefore, it is suggested that it may be advisable for the Commission, from the point of view of elegance and transparency, to reconsider those names and to make the most appropriate choice of names. This suggestion is made with no intention of changing in any way the character of the five committees as decided by the Regional Preparatory Meeting, but simply to elicit new succinct names. It is to be noted that the important phrases which had been the concern of the delegations at the Regional Preparatory Meeting have been incorporated in the preamble or in the articles of the terms of reference of the committees.

35. Another issue which in the view of the secretariat merits further consideration by the Commission concerns the modality of committee meetings, which affects representation. Each committee should address, in any one meeting, only a limited number of economic and social sectors, in order to maintain its focus of discussion and to facilitate high-level participation from the capitals of member countries. This would not preclude the possibility of including in the agenda those issues and items which are cross-sectoral or multisectoral.

36. To facilitate discussion of this issue, the following table is provided to assist the Commission in achieving a consensus on the areas of focus that need to be addressed by the committees. It is to be noted that each committee session should discuss two types of agenda items: (a) substantive issues, and (b) administrative and organizational aspects. The table lists the area(s) of focus for the substantive issues, whereas the administrative and organizational aspects, particularly with respect to the ESCAP programme of work, should pertain to all areas and sectors within the purview of each committee.

Areas of focus for Committee sessions

COMMITTEE	EVEN YEARS	ODD YEARS
Regional Economic Cooperation	Steering Group: trade and economic policies	Steering Group: industry and economic policies Committee: trade, industry and economic policies
Socio-economic Measures to Alleviate Poverty in Rural and Urban Areas	Economic issues	Social and population issues
Environment and Natural Resources Development	Natural resources and space technology applications	Energy and environment
Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development	Non-transport issues	Transport issues
Statistics	Statistics	
Special Body on Least Developed and Landlocked Developing Countries	Least developed and landlocked countries	
Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries		Pacific island developing countries