

United Nations
**GENERAL
ASSEMBLY**

NINTH SESSION
Official Records



**FIFTH COMMITTEE, 465th
MEETING**

*Friday, 19 November 1954,
at 10.50 a.m.*

New York

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Chairman: Mr. Pote SARASIN (Thailand).

AGENDA ITEM 55

Translation of some official documents of the General Assembly into the Arabic language in accordance with rule 59 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly (A/2681, A/2761; A/C.5/579; A/C.5/L.294) (*continued*)

1. Mr. ASHA (Syria) thanked the delegations which had supported the six-Power proposal (A/2681) to place on the agenda of the ninth session an item relating to the translation of some official documents of the General Assembly into the Arabic language in accordance with rule 59 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly. The Arabic language was spoken by more than seventy million people in Asia, Africa and elsewhere, and the populations which used Arabic were among those which were particularly interested in the work of the United Nations in the political, in the economic and social and in the trusteeship fields. Those peoples could assist the United Nations in arriving at a solution of the problems concerning them if they had at their disposal, in a language that they could understand, the main documents and publications of the United Nations. The translation of those documents into Arabic would thus be of great benefit not only to the peoples in question, but also to the United Nations and to cultural, educational and social agencies in the Middle East countries.

2. He drew attention to the part played by Arab civilization in the course of history and to the contribution of Arab culture to science, and in that connexion quoted several pages from a book by Robert Briffault showing that science was indebted to the Arabs not for astonishing discoveries or revolutionary theories but for its very existence.

3. He read out the most important parts of the explanatory memorandum addressed to the Secretary-General by the six nations (A/2681), in particular those sections dealing with the principal documents for which a translation was desired and with the annual number of pages to be translated. Syria was prepared to accept the arrangement whereby the translation of the three or four thousand pages contemplated would be spread over a twelve-month period, as suggested by the Secretary-General in his statement of financial implications (A/C.5/579), and it shared the Secretary-General's opinion that the quality of the final Arabic

text should be in keeping with the established standards for United Nations documentation.

4. The Secretary-General had also considered the possibility of getting the translation done in the Middle East on a contractual basis through a reliable agency. The Syrian delegation objected to that proposal, for various reasons. Firstly, there was no reliable agency in the Middle East capable of undertaking the work; and, secondly, if the work were assigned to teachers at various universities in the Arab-speaking countries, the translations would differ widely both in substance and in form. As the persons concerned would not be present at the meetings of United Nations organs and would not have the records of those meetings, they would find it very difficult, however great their abilities, to interpret the documents correctly and accurately. The work of the revisers would be very heavy, and more of them would be required. Thus, the only efficient method was to have the work done in the Secretariat by persons who were familiar with the special questions dealt with in the documents and had access to the United Nations library.

5. In paragraph 6 of its report (A/2761), the Advisory Committee expressed the fear that the proposal would set a precedent which could be invoked with equal validity by numerous other Members of the Organization in the territories of which the national languages in use are not among the five official languages. He did not feel that the adoption of the proposal would in any way set a precedent, because each particular case had to be considered on its own merits. The present request did not represent an excessive demand on the General Assembly, for the Arab States constituted one-tenth of the membership of the United Nations, and the volume of translation would not exceed four thousand pages. The sponsors of the proposal could not therefore be charged with wanting to waste United Nations funds, particularly as the Syrian delegation had always supported the economies recommended by the Advisory Committee.

6. He regarded paragraph 8 of the Advisory Committee's report as irrelevant. Non-official circles did, of course, receive information concerning the United Nations in the form of special feature material, Press releases and basic booklets and leaflets; however, Syria and the other countries were not asking for general material but for the translation of official documents.

7. The Syrian delegation therefore hoped that the Fifth Committee would approve the appropriation of \$80,000 necessary to give effect to the proposal and that the Secretary-General would not press his suggestion for getting the translation done in the Middle East on a contractual basis. It asked the Committee to adopt the twenty-four Power draft resolution (A/C.5/L.294) unanimously.

8. Mr. HAMBRO (Norway) said he was not unaware of the debt owed by the countries of Europe to

Arabic-speaking scientists and philosophers. He therefore appreciated the full weight of the Syrian representative's arguments; and he also agreed with him that finance was not the paramount consideration. However, he wished to point out that every group of nations had made its contribution to civilization. Moreover, he was disturbed by the apparent trend in the United Nations to place increasing emphasis on national prestige. The United Nations already had five official languages; if that trend continued it would soon have more.

9. In his opinion one language would be enough. The unrestricted application of rule 59 of the rules of procedure would result not only in splitting up the Organization but also in destroying its spirit of unity and harmony.

10. Although the representative of Syria had said that the adoption of the six-Power proposal would not set a precedent, there was nothing which that representative could do to prevent other States from having a different opinion and requesting recognition of their languages also; indeed, some had already indicated their intention of doing so two years ago. The Netherlands had already made such a proposal in the Council of Europe, where the official languages were English and French, and there was nothing to prevent that country or other countries from making the same proposal in the United Nations.

11. The Syrian representative had said that the basic booklets and leaflets referred to in paragraph 8 of the Advisory Committee's report (A/2761) were not enough. But if Syria had asked the United Nations Department of Public Information to send United Nations official documents in addition to such booklets and leaflets, it would have done so. Moreover, the translation of United Nations documents into Arabic was not the most effective way of stimulating popular interest; such documents were difficult to read and their usefulness was mostly confined to the diplomatic services, in which English, French or Spanish were generally understood. There were certainly other ways of satisfying the legitimate wishes of the Arab peoples.

12. Furthermore, although the estimated expenditure was based on four thousand pages of translation to be spread over a twelve-month period, the volume of translation requested would inevitably grow larger, because of the steady increase in the length and number of documents. There were still many documents which it had not been possible to translate into the five official languages, and the translation backlog should not be aggravated by adding further documents which would not in any way add to popular interest in the United Nations.

13. For those reasons the Norwegian delegation would be unable to vote for the twenty-four Power draft resolution (A/C.5/L.294).

14. Mr. URRUTIA (Colombia) said that the situation in the Arab States was very often discussed in United Nations bodies. It was therefore a matter of duty that the principal official documents should be translated into Arabic. The aim of the United Nations must be to extend its influence and make itself known throughout the world. It was important that it should explain to the Arab States those of the problems before it that concerned them, so that those States could help in solving them.

15. He agreed with the Syrian representative on all the points of detail the latter had raised. In particular, he thought it would be better for the translation to be done in the Secretariat, so as to minimize the loss of time.

16. In reply to the representative of Norway, who had expressed the opinion that the ideal would be to use only one language, Mr. Urrutia drew attention to the problem he himself had been faced with in the Security Council: either to speak in Spanish, in which case the Council would have had to listen to two consecutive interpretations, or to speak in another language, in which case he would have had to translate his speeches into Spanish for the Press.

17. In his opinion, it was important for foreign service representatives and officials that documents should be translated in view of the speed with which the United Nations disposed of its business. If they were to be expected to send instructions to their delegations in good time, foreign offices should not be compelled to translate official documents.

18. The Colombian delegation did not think that the adoption of the proposal could set a precedent; it was a special case not comparable to any other. While the Arab States made up 10 per cent of the membership of the United Nations, 50 per cent of the discussions in the Organization related to problems affecting those States.

19. The Colombian delegation would therefore vote for the twenty-four Power proposal (A/C.5/L.294), and considered that it was the Fifth Committee's duty to adopt it.

20. Mr. SAMMAN (Saudi Arabia) said that the draft resolution, which he had co-sponsored, had every logical and practical justification. Since its establishment the United Nations had dealt with a large number of questions which directly affected the Arab countries, and the translation into Arabic of certain important General Assembly documents would certainly increase the interest of those countries in the Organization's work. While the Department of Public Information's radio broadcasts and Press releases were very useful, their scope was limited. Furthermore, only the large countries could keep numbers of Press correspondents at Headquarters.

21. The draft resolution was a very modest one, and he hoped the Committee would be able to adopt it unanimously.

22. Mr. SAPRU (India) said that the request put forward by the twenty-four sponsors of the draft resolution was based on rule 59 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly. It was in no way excessive, since at first only certain very important documents would be translated into Arabic; for example the report of the Secretary-General, the annual reports of the three Councils to the General Assembly and the resolution of the principal organs, together with any reports dealing with either specific or general problems of interest to the areas where Arabic was spoken, such as the annual report on economic conditions in the Middle East, the reports of the Technical Assistance missions and the annual report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

23. The proposed measure would create great interest in all the Arab countries. It must not be forgotten,

moreover, that for all Moslems Arabic was primarily the language of the Koran. In that connexion, he pointed out that his country included forty million Moslems and that Urdu contained many Arabic borrowings. The contribution of Arab civilization to science and philosophy, and the importance of Arab thought in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance needed no emphasis. The influence of Arabic civilization was not confined to the Near East; it extended as far as Indonesia.

24. The Committee should appreciate that the question of the translation of certain documents into Arabic involved values which were too important to be considered from a strictly budgetary point of view. The proposal was in the interests not only of the Arab-speaking countries, but also of the West, and above all of the United Nations. It was a matter of capital importance that the message of the United Nations should reach the Arab peoples, so that they might know that the United Nations was concerned about their conditions and their problems.

25. He hoped that one day other Asian languages besides Chinese would be used by the United Nations. Meanwhile, he urged the Committee to adopt the twenty-four Power draft proposal for the translation of certain official General Assembly documents into Arabic.

26. Mr. RIZK (Lebanon) said he was sure after the cogent arguments advanced by the representative of Syria that many delegations would be prepared to support the draft resolution.

27. He had no intention of expatiating on the part played by Arab scholars and philosophers in preserving and enriching the heritage of the Greek and Roman civilizations at a time when Europe was sunk in barbarism, or on the contribution of the Arab world to western civilization. Representatives of the Spanish-speaking countries in the Committee would be able to bear witness to the influence which eight centuries of Arab occupation had had on Spanish civilization.

28. The importance of Arabic had not yet been fully recognized. People forgot that it was very much a living language, whose vigour was an essential factor in the cultural, social, economic and political renaissance that was at present taking place in the Arab world.

29. It was therefore very important that certain documents of the United Nations, whose main task it was to promote cultural, social, economic and political advancement, should be translated into Arabic, so that the Arab-speaking peoples should know that the Organization was keenly concerned about their difficulties, and so that they should be better informed about the action the United Nations was taking to solve their special problems and problems affecting the world as a whole.

30. The Lebanese delegation was therefore unable to share the Advisory Committee's view (A/2671, paragraph 9) that the draft resolution should not be adopted because the Arab world was already receiving plentiful information about the United Nations from a daily radio programme in Arabic, and by means of the distribution, through the Cairo Information Centre, of Arabic versions of special feature material, in addition to general and special Press releases, basic booklets and leaflets. While he did not deny the great value of

the work done by the Department of Public Information and the Cairo Information Centre, the limited amount of information they provided could not give a complete picture of the Organization's work. Everyone knew that a summary could be deceptive, and that where the issues were very delicate a mistake or omission could do the United Nations great harm. Press releases, radio broadcasts and pamphlets could usefully supplement the publication in Arabic of important official documents, but they could not replace it.

31. In paragraph 6 of its report, the Advisory Committee expressed fears that the adoption of the proposal might set a precedent which could be invoked with equal validity by numerous other members of the Organization in the territories of which the national languages in use were not among the five official languages. Those fears, which were based on administrative and budgetary consideration, had led the Advisory Committee to conclude that such a precedent might call for an exorbitant expenditure of money and the engagement of translating and other staffs of unmanageable proportions. In his view the concern displayed by the Advisory Committee was altogether excessive and quite unjustified. Arabic constituted a special case: it was the language of six Member States of the United Nations, not to speak of the other Arabic-speaking States which had applied for admission. For millions of Moslems living in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, Turkey, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, China and other countries, it was also the language of Holy Writ. In any event, even if the Advisory Committee's apprehensions were justified and six, eight or ten Members having the same official language one day submitted a request similar to the one at present before the Committee, the Lebanese delegation would be the first to welcome and support it. It must not be forgotten that one of the principal purposes of the United Nations was to draw closer the bonds between peoples and nations and to promote more harmonious international co-operation. Everyone knew that a common language was one of the strongest bonds by which peoples could be united and co-operation between them facilitated. Even if the request now put forward on behalf of the Arab-speaking countries was followed by other similar requests, the Committee should not, in a matter of such great importance, give priority to strictly budgetary considerations. Pushed to extremes, the desire for economy could run counter to the interests and purposes of the Organization.

32. Furthermore, the financial implications of the adoption of the twenty-four Power draft resolution, as set forth in the Secretary-General's statement (A/C.5/779), would be quite small in relation to the considerable advantages which *pace* the representative of Norway, would be derived by both the United Nations and the Arab-speaking countries from the translation of some official documents of the General Assembly into Arabic.

33. In conclusion, Mr. Rizk wished to thank the eighteen delegations which had joined the six Arab countries in proposing the draft resolution, which he fervently hoped the Committee would adopt.

34. Mr. MELO LECAROS (Chile) observed that during the general discussion at the 441st meeting and in the discussion (453rd meeting) on the budget of the Department of Public Information his delegation

had emphasized the importance it attached to any measure which would enable the United Nations to discharge its obligations more efficiently. The task was difficult, for the United Nations had sixty Members and might eventually have eighty. It was a matter of finding a common medium of expression. French had long been the diplomatic language; but it had been the language of the chosen few, unknown to the mass of the peoples. In the United Nations the goal should be universality. The Catholic Church, which was universal, spread its message in all languages.

35. In paragraph 8 of its report the Advisory Committee referred to the information which the Arabic-speaking countries were already receiving. He felt that the United Nations should find more effective methods of reaching the peoples directly. By adopting the draft resolution before it the Committee would be helping the United Nations towards the ideal of universality and would be paying a tribute to the greatness of Arabic civilization. The Chilean delegation was prepared to vote for the draft resolution and to grant the Secretary-General the necessary appropriation.

36. Mr. EL MESSIRI (Egypt) acknowledged the efforts which were being made on behalf of the Arab countries in matters of information, a point on which the Advisory Committee had made some observations (A/2761, paragraph 8). However, basic booklets and leaflets were not enough; for instance, they offered no means of explaining substantive problems, whereas the official documents of the General Assembly dealt with questions which closely affected all Member States. Moreover certain reports of a more specific interest, such as those of missions to the Near East, were of great importance to the Arab countries; the publication of such documents in the language of the countries concerned would give them a better understanding of the difficulties they had to overcome and the means needed to do so, an understanding which in turn would help the work of technical assistance experts.

37. Nor should the importance of the Press in the dissemination of information concerning United Nations activities be underestimated; the Arabic Press, which had not yet been in a position to make known to Arab peoples the constructive work done on their behalf by the United Nations, would be happy to receive in Arabic part of the valuable literature published by the United Nations.

38. The Advisory Committee pointed out (A/2761, paragraph 7) the impracticability of giving all Member States absolute equality of treatment; but, ever since the United Nations had come into being, there had been neither absolute equality of treatment (for the languages of the Member States were not all official languages) nor the relative equality which would have prevailed had there been only one official language. It was for that reason that the General Assembly had adopted rule 59 of its rules of procedure, under which rule the Arabic-speaking delegations were requesting action on the grounds set forth in the explanatory memorandum (A/2681), grounds which the Advisory Committee itself acknowledged to be well founded (A/2761, paragraph 4).

39. In recommending the General Assembly not to adopt the draft resolution, the Advisory Committee also cited resolution 789 (VIII) concerning the control and limitation of documentation. But the purpose of that resolution was to prevent waste, not to hinder the

attainment of the basic purposes of the United Nations. It was true that the volume of documentation must be limited, but it was no less true that that documentation must be given the widest possible circulation. In that connexion resolution 636 (VII) concerning the dissemination of resolutions of the United Nations was relevant; the publication of documents in a language common to many countries, where they would be widely reproduced, was a highly effective means of dissemination.

40. The Advisory Committee also stated that the proposal would, if adopted, set a precedent (A/2761, paragraph 6). His reply to that point was that for two-thirds of the Member States their official language, or one of their official languages, was one of the official languages of the United Nations and that as a result, those Member States, in view of the provisions of rule 58 of the rules of procedure, enjoyed a great advantage. In those circumstances it would not be setting a precedent to grant six Member States which used the same language a right which the vast majority already enjoyed.

41. In conclusion, he asked the Committee to examine the question in the light of the Principles and Purposes of the Charter, not of budgetary considerations alone. The modest appropriation which would have to be made was an investment and not an additional expense. The Egyptian delegation hoped that the members of the Committee would consider the question from that angle and that they would vote in favour of the draft resolution.

42. Mrs. PERERA (Cuba) said that the Cuban delegation would support the twenty-four Power draft resolution, for the reasons given by the Syrian, Colombian, Chilean and other representatives. By adopting that draft resolution, in accordance with rule 59 of the rules of procedure, the General Assembly would facilitate the task of the United Nations, which was to strengthen world peace and to bring the peoples closer together.

43. Mr. MCGILL (Canada) said that the Canadian delegation had close and friendly relations with the Arab delegations. It recognized the important position which the Arab countries occupied in the world and would vote for the twenty-four Power draft resolution in the conviction that it was in the interest of the United Nations to publish General Assembly documents in Arabic. The adoption of that draft resolution, however, should not set a precedent; each individual case must be considered on its merits, and for that reason the Canadian delegation reserved its position should the General Assembly receive similar requests in the future.

44. The Arab delegations would appreciate that it would be wise to keep the volume of translations requested to the minimum; it was doubtless with that intention that they themselves had set a limit of 4,000 pages. It was also important that the corresponding expenditure should be kept to the minimum, and he had no doubt that the Secretary-General would do everything in his power to do so.

45. Mr. RODRIGUEZ FABREGAT (Uruguay) said that the Uruguayan delegation, which was one of the twenty-four co-sponsors of the draft resolution, would vote against the Advisory Committee's recommendation (A/2761, paragraph 9). It was plain from

the Committee's explanation of its reasons that it had considered the matter purely from the budgetary standpoint. The Norwegian representative had supported the Committee's recommendation, but he had acknowledged the importance of other considerations, and had paid tribute to the influence of Arabic culture on modern civilization. While the Advisory Committee was obliged to proceed from budgetary considerations alone, the Fifth Committee must consider the question which was one which lay within the realm of thought from every angle.

46. Contrary to the Norwegian representative's belief, it was not a matter of publishing documents in Arabic merely to file them or make them available to scientists or experts; such persons did not need them, for they already knew where to find the information they needed. The aim was to reach the ordinary Arab, to show him the true face of the United Nations, and to inform him of the serious problems of the hour which were being dealt with by the United Nations organs and by political leaders throughout the world.

47. The fear of setting a precedent would be justified only if the proposed decision were a strong one; but Mr. Rodriguez Fabregat was by no means convinced that the procedure of using only one or even a very small number of languages was ideal, for no one could make his full contribution in a language other than his own. In the days of the single official language, potentates had negotiated among themselves in disregard of the aspirations of peoples; kings had concluded the Holy Alliance; the great Powers had divided the world between them. The situation had greatly changed; today the peoples of the world, liberated

from Nazism, had united in affirming the principle of the dignity of man and their desire for better understanding. Therefore the Cuban representative had been right in emphasizing the advantages to be gained by adopting the draft resolution. In any case the plan was not an ambitious one; it was not a matter of making Arabic a working language but merely of publishing a small number of documents in that language.

48. The measure submitted to the General Assembly was a very modest one, but it would enable the Arab world to participate more closely in the work of the United Nations. The Western world must be aware of all it owed to Arabic culture, the contribution of which had been emphasized by the Indian representative. The peoples of Latin America, the heirs of a land of three religions and three cultures, the Christian, the Jewish and the Arabic, appreciated that contribution to the full.

49. From the budgetary point of view it would be recalled that predictions that the United Nations would go bankrupt had been made even during the discussion on the draft resolutions for the adoption of Spanish as a working language of the General Assembly, and later of the Economic and Social Council. Reference to the Secretary-General's report (A/C.5/579) would show that the amount of the appropriation requested was small; thus even from that point of view there was no reason why the General Assembly should not make the gesture of solidarity which was being asked of it. The Uruguayan delegation, for its own part, would vote enthusiastically in favour of the twenty-four Power draft resolution (A/C.5/L.294).

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.