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FORTY-FOURTH SESSION

Official Records

FIFTH COMMITTEE
10th *meeting*
held on
Wednesday, 11 **October 1989**
at 10 **a.m.**
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 10th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. AL-MASRI (Syrian **Arab** Republic)

later: Mr, VAHER (Canada)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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AGENDA ITEM **128:** PATTERN **OF** CONFERENCES (**continued**)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 128: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/44/32 and A/44/502: A/43/586, A/44/135 and Add.1 and A/44/221)

1. Mr. GUPTA (India) endorsed the views of those who felt that, given the political and highly technical nature of deliberations in certain United Nations bodies, no unilateral cuts should be made in the conference-servicing resources provided to them. However, bodies which recorded a consistently low "utilization factor" should be asked to state the reasons for their poor performance, in order that all United Nations bodies might be made aware of Member States' opposition to the wasting of conference-servicing resources. His delegation welcomed the proposal to expand the core sample of bodies whose meetings statistics were subject to review and felt that the procedure could be progressively extended to all subsidiary organs of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and the other principal organs established under the Charter.

2. The Committee's decision to consider at its 1990 session the report of the Secretary-General on *reviews* of recurrent publications was welcome, but the fact that such reviews had led to a net increase in the number of publications underlined the need for further close scrutiny of the subject. With regard to conferences and meetings, it might be useful to request that the Committee on Conferences keep under review the changes *in* overall conference-servicing demand at Headquarters and other principal duty stations and provide details of such changes in reports to the General Assembly. His delegation was also pleased to note the continued efforts of the Department of Conference Services to apply new technology and fully supported its plans to introduce the Documents Records, Information and Tracking System.

3. His delegation agreed with the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit to the effect that the *role* of the Representation Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General should be reorganised and strengthened and that the process of receiving and examining invitations should be separated from the approval function. While the recommendation that attendance at international meetings should be limited, as a general policy rule to only one representative was valid, the executive heads of the specialized agencies should be allowed some flexibility in particular cases. Statistics indicated that adequate discretion had been exercised by the agencies in that matter, and by the United Nations in the case of travel requests. It was important that such discretion should be maintained. His delegation hoped that both the Secretary-General and the executive heads would devote appropriate attention to the conclusions and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit.

4. Mr. Vaher (Canada) took the Chair.

5. Mr. AKHTARUZZAMAN (Bangladesh) said that conference services were crucial to the success of United Nations meetings. As the tasks facing the United Nations grew, the Department of Conference Services had to provide services for more and more activities, and it thus became difficult to limit the number and duration of meetings. The General Assembly had recognized the part that technological innovations could play in improving conference planning and servicing. Yet the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments had reported that some parts of the technological innovations programme announced the previous year had had to be postponed for lack of funds. It was to be hoped that the necessary resources would be made available.

6. In 1989. for the first time, the Committee on Conferences had met as a permanent subsidiary body of the General Assembly. In general, he supported its decision to adopt a two-year programme of work. Although, under that work programme. the Committee would not take up the question of documentation until the following year, he wished to voice concern at the late issuance of documents essential to deliberations in United Nations bodies. Documents must be made available to delegations on time in all the working languages, and all the working languages must be treated equally.

7. He urged those bodies and Secretariat departments with a low utilization rate for conference services to improve their performance in that regard.

8. Generally speaking, his delegation was satisfied with the efforts of the Committee on Conferences to schedule conferences and meetings throughout the year. Every effort must be made to avoid overlapping. At the forty-third session, his delegation had asked the Committee to give consideration to the needs of smaller delegations in scheduling conferences and meetings: he wished to repeat that appeal.

9. Finally, he noted that the Committee on Conferences was expected to consider the finalized version of the chapter of the proposed medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 governing conference services before the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) took it up in early 1990. As far as his delegation was concerned, consideration by the Committee on Conferences must be without prejudice to work by CPC and the Fifth Committee on the plan.

10. Mr. DIABY (Senegal) said that his delegation endorsed the draft calendar of conferences for the period 1990-1991, which represented a marked improvement in the planning and co-ordination of meetings and conferences and took into account the relevant resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly. The consideration by the Committee on Conferences of the draft calendar of conferences and meetings of subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council for 1990-1991 was also a step in the right direction.

11. The report of the Committee on Conferences showed a slight decline in the overall utilization of conference-servicing resources in 1988 as compared with 1987. Though some bodies had improved their performance, others had fallen well below the recommended utilization rate of 75 per cent. His delegation therefore

(Mr. Diaby, Senegal)

endorsed the Committee's decision to request its Chairman again to write to the chairmen of the bodies concerned with a view to a more rational use of resources. Because of the very complicated and delicate questions with which they were asked to deal, some committees had difficulty in achieving the recommended utilization rate and it should not be used as the sole indicator of efficiency.

12. The reforms under way should be accompanied by the adoption of a strict policy in regard to recurrent publications. The intergovernmental bodies should play a major role in evaluating the usefulness, quality and topicality of publications, as required by the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly.

13. The central planning and co-ordination of all organizational aspects of conference servicing was vital. By helping to prevent duplication and overlapping and waste of all kinds, the Organization, while making savings, would develop a clearer idea of its calendar of conferences and meetings. Such co-ordination was, however, linked to some extent to the outcome of the in-depth study of the United Nations intergovernmental structure and functions in the economic and social fields and the resulting revitalization of the Economic and Social Council.

14. Referring to the chapter of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 relating to conference services, he said his delegation welcomed the steps proposed to ensure adequate servicing of meetings and conferences during the plan period and hoped that due account would be taken of the comments made by the Committee on Conferences at its substantive sessions. As the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments had stressed in his opening remarks, the Organization would be facing an increased demand for conference services. With careful management of conference-servicing resources and with the help of the technological innovations being introduced, it should be able to meet that demand.

15. At the forty-second session, the debate on the resolution on the equal treatment of the official languages of the United Nations (resolution 42/207 C) had demonstrated the importance attached to the subject by the different language groups within the Organization. In paragraphs 3 and 4 of that resolution, the General Assembly called for the provision of adequate resources to meet conference-servicing needs. Those needs were still pressing. Conference services, in particular the interpretation, translation and editing services, were vital elements in the functioning of the United Nations because they provided for linguistic balance. Moreover, without those services, negotiation would be impossible. The Secretary-General's report on the implementation of the resolution (A/44/502) showed that the matter was still receiving the Administration's close attention. His delegation would support any steps to make the necessary financial resources available to the Department of Conference Services.

16. The Committee on Conferences had completed a successful first year as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly. He believed that the Committee, while remaining a technical advisory body, was in a position to make a positive contribution to the rationalisation of the Organization's conference and documentation services.

17. Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda) said that the annual debate on the pattern of conferences tended to leave the real underlying issues and problems unaddressed. The Department of Conference Services was left without any clear guidance or sense of direction. All Member States must share responsibility for the absence of a clear mandate for the Department. The matters that should be addressed were: the precise number, content and duration of conferences and meetings included in the calendar: the pragmatic criteria that should govern the number of documents issued and their length: and the root causes of the underutilization of conference services. The Secretary-General had frequently appealed for guidance in addressing those problems. His delegation's position was that they could only be resolved through a pragmatic and flexible approach which took into account the interests of all Member States. The issues and concerns of the international community had become so interdependent that no single Member State or group of States could expect to have its views prevail over the interests of others. His delegation was uneasy about the attempts by some delegations to have the Organization focus on particular issues of interest to them at the expense of issues of interest to all Members. Certain proposals for streamlining the calendar of conferences and dealing with the problems of documentation gave grounds for serious concern. They should be addressed, and conclusions reached, with due regard for the interests of all Members.

18. The work of the Department of Conference Services was critical to the successful operation of all United Nations bodies. His delegation therefore attached particular importance to the enhancement of the Department's effectiveness.

19. His delegation had taken note of the list of bodies with a low rate of utilisation of conference services and welcomed the conclusions of the Committee on Conferences, in paragraphs 44 and 45 of its report, regarding the inadequacy of the methodology applied in preparing the list and the failure to take into account the contribution of informal meetings to the successful outcome of the work of the bodies concerned. In evaluating the utilization of conference services, the Committee should take into account the complex and delicate issues addressed and the need for dialogue outside formal meetings which current criteria for evaluation failed to reflect. It was also of paramount importance that, in performing its work, the Committee on Conferences should fully respect the legislative mandates of other bodies.

20. The legislative mandates of other bodies should also be taken into account with regard to the question of documentation. A flexible approach was required. While documentation should be kept to the minimum, that should not be done at the expense of information needed to facilitate dialogue, particularly on substantive issues. His delegation noted the recommendation on the application of General Assembly resolution 41/177 D on the provision of summary records and looked forward to receiving the proposals of the Committee on Conferences at the forty-fifth session.

21. The Committee's efforts to reduce peaks and valleys in the calendar were welcome, but certain meetings of critical importance still overlapped. For example, the forthcoming joint meetings of CPC and the Administrative Committee on

(Mr, Irumba, Uganda)

Co ordination (ACC) overlopped with meetings of tho Fifth Committee. Such clashes were particularly troublesome for small delegat ions.

22. Tho mandate of the Committoe on Conferences, which had been discussed in detail at the forty-third session of the General Assembly, had been recommended for odoption on the clear understanding that it wnn not. to he construed AR giving the Committee on Conference6 any role in the budgetary process or authority to override decisions on programme6 and on meeting6 and *conferences* duly decided upon by the legislative organs of the United Nations, The General Assembly had endorsed that mandate with that clear understanding. It would be detrimental to all Member States, and to the Committee on Conferences, for any delegation to attempt to question that important decision of the General Assembly by reopening the matter. His delegation was prepared to enter into a dialogue if other-6 so wished, but only on the clear understanding that resolution 43/222 would then have to be renegotiated in its entirety,

23. Mr. Al-Masri (Syrian Arab Republic) resumed the Chair.

24. Mr. DANKWA (Ghana) said that resolution 43/222, which conferred permanent status on the Committoe on *Conferences,* represented the General Assembly's expectations and hope6 with regard to the role that the Committee could and should play in the drive for maximum efficiency. The draft calendar of conferences and meeting6 Cor the biennium 1990-1991 showed that the Committee had made an appreciable effort to reduce overlappiny, ensure improved utilization of conference resources And save money by reducing the resort to temporary assistance. Although his delegation would have liked to see a reduction in the frequency and duration of meetings, a6 envisaged by the Group of High-Level Intergovernmental Experts, it recognized that the factor6 that might bring about such a reduction were outside the Committee's jurisdiction. It therefore welcomed the draft calendar a6 the beet that could be produced in the circumstances.

25. The notion of the equitable distribution of conference activities among the conference-servicing locations of the United Nations should be examined in the light of tho General Assembly resolution requiring meeting6 to be held as far a6 possible at the headquarter6 of the body concerned, His delegation would have difficulty in the subscribing to any arrangement that sacrificed economy for the sake of theoretical equity or the convenience of certain Member States.

26, His delegation supported the Committee's recommendations regarding the low rute of utilisation of conference-servicing resource6 by a number of bodies and urged the Committee to continue its efforts to refine its methodology. The agreement reached by the Committee, a6 reflected in paragraph 45 of the report., was encouraging. The Committee's review of the draft biennial. calendar of conferences and meetings of subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council inspired hope of inc reased efficiency through rationalization.

27. The productivity and efficiency of the Department of Conference Services could undoubtedly be further enhanced, but the timing of the "fresh outside look", during

(Mr. Dankwa, Ghana)

the biennium 1990-1991, suggested in the Secretary-General's report (A/44/222, para. 104) was perhaps unfortunate. Any such review should await the analysis by the General Assembly of the recent reforms and their effect on administrative and financial efficiency. The Committee on Conferences should play a leading role in that regard: the question could be included in the draft medium-term plan or, if the Committee on Conferences felt it necessary, the services of the Joint Inspection Unit could be utilized.

28. His delegation would unreservedly support the technological innovations proposed by the Department of Conference Services, provided they were intended to address the problems of the late issuance of documents, reliance on temporary assistance, and delays in retrieval of information, and, above all, provided they would promote efficiency without a disproportionate increase in expenditure.

29. The late issuance of documents was a matter of serious concern. The cause had been identified by the Under-Secretary-General as the late submission Of manuscripts, a problem which lay outside the Department. The development of understanding and co-operation with other units of the Organization to deal with the problem was a specific objective that could be built into the medium-term plan. It was, however, not necessary to wait until the plan came into effect in 1992, and the Committee on Conferences should take the matter up at once with a view to the adoption of measures to improve the situation. It might, for instance, be advisable for each document to indicate the date on which the manuscript had been received by the Department of Conference Services.

30. The observations and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on representation at conferences and meetings (A/43/586) were in general well founded. While it was perhaps not appropriate to fix a general limit on participation, as JIU did in recommendation 3 (b), participation should serve a clearly identified purpose. It should be properly authorized, prepared in advance, effective and properly evaluated after the event.

31. The Department of Conference Services was fundamental to the success of multilateral diplomacy, particularly within an organization such as the United Nations which had six official languages, all of which should receive equal treatment. His delegation was ready to contribute to any effort to enhance the Department's capacity to play its role.

32. Ms. RABB (Pakistan) said that the new status of the Committee on Conferences constituted an acknowledgement of the importance of conference servicing to the proper functioning of the Organization. Her delegation had noted with satisfaction the efficiency and sense of purpose with which the Committee had conducted its business during the first year under its new mandate and believed that its new biennial approach would enable it to deal with issues in greater depth. Efforts to adapt the calendar of conferences with a view to ensuring the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources should be maintained, as should compliance with the established-headquarters principle.

(Ms. Rabb. Pakistan)

33. Application of a 75-per-cent "utilization factor" as the criterion for efficiency should not lead to a reduction in services, but the practice of addressing letters to the chairmen of bodies that failed to make adequate use of the facilities provided to them should be continued. Her delegation welcomed efforts to refine the methodology used to measure utilisation of services, through the inclusion of information on informal consultations and on time lost owing to the late start or early adjournment of meetings. Measures to ensure the timely issuance of documents were also essential.

34. Her delegation looked forward to considering the draft chapter of the medium-term plan governing conference and library services at the forty-fifth session of the General Assembly and was pleased to note that the Committee on Conferences *would* consider that item in early 1990.

35. With regard to the proposed review of the productivity and efficiency of the Department of Conference Services, the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments was right to state that the Secretariat *needed* feedback from Member States; the Committee on Conferences should play a part in the *review.* Finally, the budgetary side of conference servicing should be left to the subsidiary organs established for that purpose, while the Committee on Conferences devoted its attention to the pattern of conferences.

36. Mr. TALAVERA (Peru) pointed out that his question about why some subsidiary bodies had been granted exceptions to the general curtailment of summary record coverage had not yet been answered. He also asked what was meant by the **established-headquarters principle" referred to in paragraph 20 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

37. Mr. WYZNER (Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments) explained that the "established-headquarters principle" was an oblique reference to paragraph 4 of resolution 401243. The Department of Conference Services generally interpreted the "headquarters" of a body as being the United Nations office where the department dealing with the substance of the body's deliberations was based.

38. Ms. FRIESSNIGG (Chairman, Committee on Conferences) said that the utiliaation of conference services clearly remained a matter of vital interest to Member States. The Committee on Conferences welcomed the challenge of developing a new methodology which would lend itself to a statistical analysis of performance while respecting the flexibility required in actual usage.

39. She welcomed the support expressed for the Committee's efforts to even out the schedule of meetings over the year. Resolution 40/243 had been fully respected during the early stages of intersecretariat consultations, and had been a primary guideline to the Committee during its consideration of the draft calendar of conferences.

(Ms. Friessnigg)

40. In response to a question from the representative of Canada, she said that the secretariats of ICSC and the Joint Staff Pension Board had provided clarification on the consultative process they envisaged and the timing of the ICSC session. It was for that reason that the Committee highlighted the fact that the venues for the ICSC and Pension Board meetings did not coincide,

41. In response to the representative of Peru, she outlined the background to the adoption of resolution 37/14 C, including the reasons advanced by the Committee on Conferences for exceptions to the general curtailment in summary record entitlement (A/37/32, para. 44).

42. Many delegations had addressed the question of the control and limitation of documentation, In accordance with the Committee's biennial approach to its work, that topic would be given detailed consideration in 1990. The Committee would continue to place significant emphasis on the need to ensure the timely issuance of documentation.

43. The work of the Committee on Conferences had just begun, The Committee had gained much from the constructive input by delegations during the current discussion, and she was sure that the steps taken so far would form the basis for further agreemont and increased activity in fulfilment of its mandate.

44. Mr, WYZNER (Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments) assured the Committee, in response to a question raised by the representative of Ethiopia, that the Department of Conference Services had for several years been taking steps with a view to eradicating the chronic problems delaying the iseuanca of documentation, By including a reference to further efforts in it:; draft medium-term plan (A/44/32, pare, 87), it had been the Dopartmont's intention not to givo tho impression that it chose to delay closer co-operation with author department-s until the plan was adopted but t.o signal its recognition that further efforts were required to ensuro the most efficient utilization of cc-nference-servicing resources and the compliance of author dopartments with editorial regulations and processing schedules, and to develop appropriate strategies t.o improve co-ordination in that area.

45. With regard to the concerns expressed by the representatives of Canada, the United States and Iceland (on behalf of the Nordic countries) in respect of the proposed scheduling of some meetings away from their headquarters locations, the Secretariat would continue fully t.o respect the terms of General Assembly resolution 40/243.

46. It hnd been gratifying to note tho strong interest in and encouragement for the Depar tment' s plans t.o apply new technology as a means o f enhancing its productivity and the quality o f its servicewhile offsetting the impact. of staff reductions. In reply to tho questions on that subject raised by the representative of the Phi 1 ippines, he noted thnt the financial resources requested in respect of major projects currently in progress, as well as those planned for the biennium 1990-1991, were cont ained in section 29 of t.he proposed programme budget.,

(Mr. Wyzner)

while plans for the period 1992-1997 were outlined in the draft medium-term plan. Communications And documentation exchange link6 between Geneva And New York had been co-ordinated, with the result that both locations had approximately the same modorn equipment and aoftware at their disposal. On individual projects, the two duty station6 shared responsibility for research and development and thus avoided duplication of effort, New York had taken the lead in developing terminology data bases, while Geneva had Undertaken the pilot project in tha applications of optical disc technology for the storage and retrieval of documentation. The benefits of both projects, however, were being shared, Most of the technological innovations applied at Vienna had been undertaken in services currently administered by the United Nation6 lndustrial Development Organization, but it was hoped that closer co-ordination among the three headquarters location6 would he achieved if confercnco services were unified in Accordance with the proposal of the Secretary-General.

47. To date, it was anticipated that the servicing of the three special conferences planned for 1990, as well a6 the special session of the General Assembly planned for April of that year, would be absorbed within the resources Allocated under section 29 of the proposed programme budget, It should be noted that the Department was also expected to meet, within existing resources, the servicing responsibilities resulting from decisions taken by the Economic And Social Council At its first And second regular sessions of 1989. If the proposal to convene in 1990 A further special session of the General Assembly on the subject of narcotic drug6 were to be approved, A statement of programme budget implication6 would then have to be prepared for submission to the Fifth Committee. Developments of that sort served to illustrate the additional burden6 which taxed conference resources and curtailed the Department's ability to service the meeting6 programme within the permanent staffing establishment, thus rendering essential the provision of the full level of temporary assistance requested in section 29 of the proposed programme budget.

48. In conclusion, he wished to assure the representative of Japan that the report on work--load And meeting statistics And other data concerning the three conference services at Nsw York, Geneva and Vienna, as requested by the Advisory Committee in document A/44/7, was under preparation and would be submitted as requested,

49. He thanked the Committee for the very kind expression6 of appreciation And support for the important role played by conference services in support of the work of Member States in the achievement of the goals of the international agenda.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.