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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report on communications in the United Nations system

Observations of the Administrative Committee
on Co-ordination

Note by the Secretary-General

1. In October 1971, the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) requested the Joint Inspection Unit to carry out a broad review on a system-wide basis of the operational communications requirements of the United Nations system of organizations. At the time, ACC considered that such a review would be helpful for planning purposes and also to prepare the ground for working out, at a later stage, arrangements to meet the communications requirements of the various organizations. It is in response to that request that the "Report on communications in the United Nations system" (A/9067), which is now before the organizations of the United Nations system, has been prepared by Robert M. Macy. In view of the fact that the report deals with the communication problems of the United Nations system as a whole, ACC considered it appropriate for a single response to be prepared reflecting the consolidated views of the executive heads of the organizations of the common system, that is, the United Nations, the ILO, FAO, UNESCO, ICAO, WHO, UPU, ITU, WMO, IMCO and IAEA. Therefore ACC submits herewith its comments on the report for consideration by the governing bodies of the organizations concerned.

General observations

2. Inspector Macy's report, which has been carefully studied by those organizations members of ACC that are concerned, constitutes a timely and valuable contribution to the continuing search for the most efficient, reliable and economical means of communication available to the organizations of the United Nations system. When it requested the Joint Inspection Unit to examine the matter, ACC was primarily concerned with the analysis of the telecommunication requirements of the system. Inspector Macy broadened the scope of his inquiries to cover all

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forms of communications including, notably, mail, and this provides a more comprehensive, helpful picture, although some telecommunication problems would have perhaps warranted a somewhat fuller treatment. The report gives a useful summary of comparative communication procedures found in the organizations concerned and provides a good basis for further improvements of communication arrangements. It should be noted, however, that the Inspector did not visit all of the organizations concerned, and that the relevance and applicability of his recommendations will, by necessity, vary from organization to organization, depending on their practical requirements, their location and the facilities actually available to them.

3. Special importance is attached by ACC to the possibility of ensuring speedy and safe telecommunications, which should not be hampered or delayed through circumstances unconnected with the operation of the United Nations system throughout the world, such as strikes or civil disturbances at particular locations. The wider availability of automatic dialling equipment, the use of leased telex facilities and the potential use of stand-by radio equipment recommended by Inspector Macy would no doubt overcome a number of difficulties involved in the use of ordinary facilities dependent upon outside operators. But this does not altogether resolve the problem, particularly where it is necessary to communicate with individuals or offices which do not have the facilities available between headquarters locations. In those cases, the right to initiate "government" telegrams and telephone calls, which enjoy high priority and freedom from traffic interruptions (as well as lower rates), would be most helpful. This right is provided for in the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, 1/ the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialized Agencies, 2/ in the Articles of Agreement of the Bank and the Fund, and in the Agreement on the Privileges and Immunities of IAEA. 3/ This right is enjoyed by the United Nations, the Bank, the Fund and IAEA, but, as a result of decisions of successive ITU Plenipotentiary Conferences, the agencies do not enjoy that right in practice. This situation is viewed with continuing concern by ACC, which hopes that the problem will be suitably resolved in due course.

4. The cost of telecommunications is clearly an important consideration and ACC welcomes the suggestions made by Inspector Macy to widen and strengthen the application of existing cost control measures. Inspector Macy was, however, clearly aware of the need to balance the immediate cost factor against efficiency in terms of results and, indeed, made the point that a timely telephone call might later save a costly trip by ensuring that the right decision is taken at the right time. Thus, while cost control measures are essential, they should be taken within the framework of a global cost/benefit approach. The wider availability of modern telecommunication techniques have an impact on working methods which require some reappraisal of traditional approaches. Thus, the report confirms that a letter is not always cheaper than a telegram nor is a telegram cheaper than a telephone call, and that telex is usually cheaper than a telephone call or a telegram and sometimes even cheaper than an express letter. Consequently, a flexible approach to the use

1/ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. I, No. 4, p. 15.

2/ Ibid., vol. 33, No. 521, p. 261.

3/ Ibid., vol. 374, No. 5334, p. 147.

of telecommunications is desirable and must take into account both cost and other factors, such as effective speed of communication, particularly where mail services are inadequate, and the urgency of taking the right action or obtaining fuller information than could be made available by cheaper methods, all of which may vary according to the locations between which communication is to be established. Finally, total telecommunication costs may have to be weighed against other costs required to secure the same results, including travel costs and general administrative expenses.

5. Factors such as these may often be the deciding reason why one form of communication is chosen over another and may account, in part, for the fact that, as mentioned in paragraph 33 of the report (A/9067), the cost of communication has, in some organizations, been rising faster than the rate of growth of the budget as a whole. In any case, as is stated in the report, comparative cost data, and particularly those given in table I, must be used with great caution. This is owing not only to the differing budgeting and accounting procedures used in the organizations and to the other factors mentioned in paragraph 21 of the report, but also to the fact that the nature of communications required and the best "mix" of types of communications varies from organization to organization according to their particular responsibilities.

6. Nevertheless, ACC agrees with Mr. Macy that with a shift to performance or programme budgeting and with the development of a more uniform classification of accounts among members of the United Nations system, a more accurate and comparable estimate of communication costs will be developed, which should result in economies. It should be pointed out that the United Nations and most of the larger agencies have moved, or are moving, over to budgeting on a programme basis and that a more uniform classification of accounts is rapidly being developed.

Recommendations

7. The comments of ACC on each of the recommendations made in the report follow seriatim.

Recommendation 1

The ACC agrees in principle to the suggestion that one supervising office should be responsible for all communication services. This is already the case at United Nations Headquarters, the other United Nations offices and a number of specialized agencies, including the ILO, UNESCO, ICAO, WHO, IMCO and UPU. In other organizations, such as FAO, the structure of the organization might not make it feasible or desirable to implement the recommendation fully.

Recommendation 2

The ACC endorses this recommendation, which proposes the development of better routine management reports, particularly by placing more emphasis on performance controls. The United Nations, the ILO, FAO, UNESCO and WHO have already introduced

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a number of measures to improve efficiency in line with the observations made in chapter IV of the report. These measures call for stricter control and a reduction in communication costs through closer supervision over the use of long-distance telephone calls and cables. The ACC recognizes that such measures should be kept under review and a continuing process of education of staff members in proper communication procedures by means of internal directives and reminders should be maintained. At the same time, ACC would wish to caution that for the smaller agencies the establishment of performance controls requires careful thought, since the volume of operations involved might not warrant the setting up of an elaborate system.

Recommendation 3

This recommendation proposes the establishment of expenditure quotas to be assigned to the various divisions of an organization and enforced. This policy is already being implemented in the United Nations at the headquarters of FAO and in the six regional offices of ICAO. Other organizations, for example, UNESCO and WHO, are in the process of studying its feasibility. Again the question of volume of traffic will be an important determinant in deciding on the utility of this recommendation to particular organizations. The ILO, for its part, considers that this proposal would not necessarily be the most effective means of reducing expenditure. It has already been considered in the ILO, but it was found that the administrative work and cost involved in departmental communications budgets were likely to outweigh the advantages. As a result of strict directives given in August 1970, the expenditure on telegrams and telex messages of the ILO have been reduced and maintained at one half of the previous level, indicating that other measures may achieve the desired results. With regard to the Inspector's proposals that UNDP should include all communication costs, including UNDP messages sent over the United Nations network, in its "overhead" contributions to executing agencies, UNDP has implemented this proposal as of 1 January 1973. Some of the organizations have indicated that the effect of this decision will be that these communication costs will have to be borne by their regular budgets. They consider, however, that with the introduction of proper cost accounting procedures relating to the assessment of overhead costs, communication costs should be included in UNDP overhead payments to executing agencies.

Recommendation 4

The Inspector recommends that for day-to-day operations attention should be focused in future on making better independent use of public and commercial telecommunication systems by each member of the United Nations system, except in those cases where the combined volume of traffic justifies leased telex channels for joint use. The ACC agrees with this recommendation, which is already being implemented wherever practical. Moreover, specialized agencies have been invited to make use of the recently leased cable channel between New York and Geneva and to make greater use of the United Nations radio network for traffic in United Nations business which does not fall under the provisions of ITU resolution No. 25 adopted by the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 1965. This resolution prohibits the use,

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under normal circumstances, of the United Nations telecommunication network for traffic with the specialized agencies in competition with existing commercial telecommunication networks.

Recommendation 5

The Inspector urges that steps be taken to ensure that the "pouch room to pouch room" time for mail from Europe to New York does not exceed one day, with comparable goals being established for other destinations. This recommendation is accepted by ACC and action will be taken to implement it where it is not presently being applied. The Inspector suggests that a second pick-up truck may be necessary in New York or a relaxation of overtime rules to meet these goals. Where necessary, special trips to and from the airport to ensure one-day service between New York and Geneva are, in fact, already being made. Further steps to reduce normal delivery time to and from the airport will continue to be explored.

Recommendation 6

The ACC accepts this recommendation, which proposes that, for those countries having good mail service but infrequent pouch service, increased use should be made of airmail express letters with telegraph-type messages to speed up communications without expanding the use of more costly telegrams and telephone calls. Telegraph-type messages dispatched by air mail or pouch are currently used by the ILO (ILOGRAM), FAO (FOODAGRAM), UNESCO (UNESCOGRAM) and WHO (WHOGRAM) and in several United Nations offices. Their use will be studied by the other organizations. The United Nations also rents post office boxes (as recommended by the Inspector) in numerous locations to facilitate increased use of efficient postal services and has, conversely, again in line with Inspector Macy's proposals, expanded pouch schedules in those areas in which the local postal services have been unable to fill the communication needs of the Organization. At the same time, ACC wishes to note that other alternatives to some of the proposals made by the Inspector under this recommendation warrant study. As UPU has explained to ACC, while it is true that the level of quality of the postal service varies from one country to another and is, of course, linked to the economic and social development of a country, the industrialized countries also face difficulties owing to the considerable increase in traffic and the scarcity of personnel. In fact, where uncertainties exist, they can be mitigated by direct contact with the postal and customs authorities to determine the best conditions for dispatch and distribution of mail. Deposit of mail in a main post office rather than a nearby mailbox or a remote post office, as well as the renting of a post office box, as proposed by the Inspector, will help. So too will an additional service, such as the "express" service mentioned in paragraph 62 of the report (A/9067), but it should be remarked that the use of this service, which consists in the delivery of the mail by a special messenger, cannot be systematic, since many postal administrations do not have it. In any case, the ordinary airmail letter should benefit, according to the rules of the Universal Postal Convention, 4/ from the best dispatching

4/ Ibid., vol. 611, No. 8845, p. 105.

conditions. The aerogram form available in most countries offers an inexpensive airmail facility for short messages and might lend itself for the transmission of telegraph-type messages. The ACC wishes to report that UPU will be making available to the various organizations, upon request, more detailed information concerning a wider use of the post office.

Recommendation 7

This recommendation calls for the taking of the necessary steps, particularly at United Nations Headquarters, to ensure that urgent air freight is either sent by pouch or given special handling as regular air freight. It has already been implemented at United Nations Headquarters for air freight clearly marked "URGENT".

Recommendation 8

The ACC agrees in general with this recommendation, which proposes that an exchange service be arranged between members of the United Nations system for address lists for documents and publications. Such exchanges have, in fact, taken place between organizations in the past from time to time. Practically speaking, however, any really systematic exchange of lists will have to await computerization and the target audience data bank and these innovations will themselves have to be carefully reviewed in terms of cost-effectiveness.

Recommendation 9

This recommendation proposes increased use of leased telex channels where justified by the volume of traffic, including an extension of the network to such points as Rome and Paris, and the modernization of some of the equipment not likely to be replaced by telex service in the near future. The United Nations is studying the volume of traffic between various points in its network to determine areas in which the use of additional leased telex channels may be justified. This study also includes the immediate and long-term requirements of the United Nations for special communications equipment, including the use of rotatable "log-periodic" antennas and radio transmitters whose frequency can be changed rapidly. The results of these studies will be evaluated during 1973 in terms of the continuing needs of the United Nations.

UNESCO has found that the new arrangements have been beneficial financially and is prepared to examine the possible extension of the link to Paris. FAO is in the process of investigating the possibility of the use of leased telex service between Geneva and Rome, with the possibility of linking in to the service between Geneva and New York, but the first indications of this investigation are that traffic is insufficient to warrant changing over from normal telex transmission, at cost per minute used, to leased telex at a fixed fee for 24-hour daily usage.

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Recommendation 10

The Secretary-General fully endorses this recommendation, which is addressed to the United Nations and proposes that advance arrangements be made for the emergency use of satellite channels. The use of emergency satellite channels, on which priority would be given to United Nations peace-keeping and disaster relief communications, would ensure fast, efficient and high-quality transmission of important messages in the event of future political crises. A request for emergency use of satellite facilities was originally submitted to the International Telecommunications Satellite Consortium (INTELSAT) in 1969, but was not acted upon. The request will be resubmitted to the Secretary-General of INTELSAT in 1973.

Recommendation 11

The ACC supports this recommendation, which suggests (a) strengthening the use of telex service through more restricted distribution of copies of cables over leased channels; (b) the issue of a "telex book", including the telex numbers of all parts of the United Nations system; (c) the insertion of telex schedules in loose-leaf telephone books. With regard to (a), the United Nations wishes to point out that instructions have been issued at United Nations Headquarters to ensure that no unauthorized copies of cable traffic are distributed. The proposal for the creation of a United Nations system "telex book" calls for United Nations action and co-ordination and the United Nations will undertake the preparation of such a book in consultation with ITU. Finally, the insertion of telex schedules in loose-leaf telephone books is an innovation at WHO headquarters which has proved useful. The ILO also utilizes a similar system.

Recommendation 12

The ACC agrees with the proposal that the organizations concerned should continue to transmit data for computers through the mail, but would add that they should periodically review technical developments in the field of "data transmission". The cost/benefit factor of transmitting such data by computer link will, in particular, be kept under review and technical developments carefully studied. As the Inspector mentioned, the other proposals under this recommendation are outside the scope of his report but have, nevertheless, been duly noted.

Recommendation 13

Inspector Macy is of the view that organizations should adopt a policy of controlling long-distance telephone calls through administrative checks immediately after a call has been completed. The ACC fully accepts the need to implement adequate administrative measures to ensure strict control over long-distance calls. The Inspector is aware, however, that variations on such controls are possible and he presented two alternatives in paragraph 106 of his report (A/9067). At United Nations Headquarters, the procedure suggested by Mr. Macy has

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been in effect for quite some time. In addition, certain categories of Headquarters staff are also required to obtain specific prior approval by a senior official before making a long-distance call. While FAO and IMCO already maintain a procedure such as that recommended, WHO, which also has a procedure of administrative checks, proposes to follow it on an increased basis in future. Under measures introduced in 1970, the ILO controls long-distance calls before they are made and is satisfied that this procedure, together with the computer-aided control of telephone expenditure described by the Inspector (A/9067, annex VI), has been an effective check on any abuse of long-distance telephone calls.

Recommendation 14

This recommendation proposes the acquisition of a stock of single side band (SSB) radio equipment by the United Nations for use as needed in emergency situations. The use of SSB radio equipment to transmit and receive emergency peace-keeping and disaster relief communications is being reviewed by the United Nations. If the use of SSB radio equipment to augment existing facilities is deemed desirable and government permission can be obtained for its use in the areas in which it may be required, the United Nations will give further consideration to installing this equipment at strategic points as recommended. The ITU, for its part, agrees that suitable portable equipment should be readily available for communication from and to disaster areas when normal facilities have been disrupted or are of doubtful reliability, on the understanding that the role of such equipment would be to provide a link to an appropriate public telecommunication centre not affected by the disaster rather than to communicate directly with Geneva or New York.

As regards communications for emergencies, ITU does not entirely agree with Inspector Macy's conclusion that pre-disaster planning and post-disaster rehabilitation activities need not involve any unusual communication requirements. In fact, ITU has received reports that communications in the field during rehabilitation operations have occasionally proved to be inadequate. This is, perhaps, a matter which requires further study. The ITU also maintains that there may be cases - not only on the occasion of a disaster, but also in connexion with peace-keeping operations - where a complete mobile system providing short-, medium- and long-distance links of acceptable quality (as has been proposed by ITU) could play an important role.

Recommendation 15

The proposal of the Inspector that any slack time on leased telex channels be used to transmit scripts of recorded programme material for news broadcasts applies primarily to the United Nations, which is making every effort to utilize leased channels to their full capacity. It should be noted, however, that line transmission of scripts or other written material intended for distribution by the recipient creates manpower, equipment and supply problems at the receiving end in terms of retyping, stencilling, reproducing etc. Under the circumstances, it

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is felt that in most instances a sufficient number of mimeographed copies of such material should be dispatched by pouch, since this would eliminate processing problems at the receiving end which frequently negate the sole advantage of speed provided by line transmission. The use of special stencils on receiving machines to facilitate the reproduction of lengthy messages is under study. Should this prove feasible, further consideration can then be given to utilizing any slack time on cable channels for the transmission of such material.
