

UNITED NATIONS
General Assembly
FORTY-FIFTH SESSION
Official Records

FIFTH COMMITTEE
29th meeting
held on
Thursday, 15 November 1990
at 10 a.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 29th MEETING

Chairman:

Mr. KOULIK
(Vice-Chairman)

(Ukrainian Soviet
Socialist Republic)

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

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Distr. GENERAL
A/C.5/45/SR.29
23 November 1990

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

In the absence of the Chairman, Mr. Koulik (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 127: UNITED NATIONS COMMON SYSTEM (continued) (A/45/30; A/C.5/45/23, 24, 29 and 43)

AGENDA ITEM 128: UNITED NATIONS PENSION SYSTEM (continued) (A/45/9 and A/45/699; A/C.5/45/7, 22 and 43)

1. Mr. TRAXLER (Italy), speaking on item 127 on behalf of the 12 States members of the European Community, said that the Organization relied essentially on its staff, who must receive due encouragement and reward. Appreciating though they did the special concerns and specific mandates and circumstances of the various organizations in the United Nations system, the Twelve considered that the common system, applicable to all organizations and their staff, was a corner-stone of the United Nations system, whose quality and integrity it enhanced. Unity of conditions of employment was an essential feature. Diversification of personnel policy, and special arrangements, led to unfairness and discrimination, which undermined the United Nations system.
2. The Twelve commended the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) on its work, but considered that its report (A/45/30) should be further improved in terms of presentation and comprehensibility.
3. The objective of the system must be to recruit, retain and motivate staff in accordance with the Charter and to ensure that they received equitable treatment irrespective of the duty station at which they served. In view of the continuing concern in that regard, especially at some of the hard-currency, low-inflation duty stations, efforts to develop mechanisms to respond to the problem must continue, including work on a methodology for conducting checks at five-year intervals to determine which was the highest paid national civil service in accordance with the Noblemaire principle. For the time being the Twelve took note of the current net remuneration margin calculated in accordance with resolution 44/198. They noted the reported disparity in increases in remuneration between United Nations officials in New York and staff of the comparator civil service. They would consider carefully the question of margin management.
4. The Twelve took note of the possible establishment of tripartite working groups on major issues, and considered the attendance of staff representatives at the Commission's meetings to be useful and necessary.
5. Regarding pension arrangements, the Twelve were sympathetic to the views of the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Board and agreed that frequent changes should be avoided. The Commission's recommendation that income replacement in New York should continue to be used as the basis of the methodology for determining pensionable remuneration of staff in the Professional and higher categories was reasonable, but the Twelve had not expected that to imply retention of the existing

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methodology, including the previous year's adjustment, which had been presented as an interim measure. They would welcome confirmation that the Commission was now satisfied that the interim adjustment should become definitive, and clarification of the rationale behind that conclusion. Noting that possible future changes in the United Nations federal tax system were identified as a factor beyond the General Assembly's control which might in future influence the relationship between United Nations and United States pensionable remuneration amounts, and the related recommendation that a clearly defined and approved margin range should now be established, the Twelve assumed that the management of such a margin, if approved by the General Assembly, would be consistent with the management of the net remuneration margin. They continued to believe that appropriate account should be taken of conditions prevailing for the staff of the comparator civil service.

6. The Twelve stressed the interrelationship between pensionable remuneration and remuneration generally of all staff, including the executive heads of the agencies and Professional staff. Those issues came under the overview of the General Assembly, and their consideration by the Pension Board should be carried out in close co-operation with ICSC. They would comment on the question of pensionable remuneration of the executive heads when considering the report of the Pension Board.

7. With regard to the conditions of service of Professional and higher categories and specifically the question of housing and remuneration structure, the Twelve noted that the Commission now recommended no basic change in the existing structure, and shared the Commission's obvious disappointment with the rather meagre results obtained after so much effort, especially in the treatment of housing. They were not fully satisfied with the criteria for selecting the duty stations proposed for further experimentation on a different structure, nor with the proposed treatment of housing in them. They were prepared to examine further the case for implementation of each of the various arrangements proposed. Since those arrangements constituted part of the comprehensive review, however, any resulting costs must be subject to the provisions on absorption set out in paragraphs 1 and 2 of resolution 44/198. As a general principle, the Twelve continued to believe that maximum absorption of non-discretionary cost increases by all organizations of the common system was indispensable.

8. The Twelve noted that ICSC would study further the possible harmonization of practices regarding the granting of expatriate entitlements to staff members living in their home countries while stationed at a duty station located in another country. The suggestion that the acquired rights of serving staff members might be protected while discontinuing the entitlements in question for staff entering service after a specified date seemed reasonable, and the Twelve would appreciate information on the reasons why the Commission had not opted for such a course.

9. Regarding the conditions of service of officials at the Assistant Secretary-General, Under-Secretary-General and equivalent levels, the Twelve noted the Commission's conclusion that no action was required with respect to pay comparability, but, while acknowledging the need for some flexibility, believed

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that comparability within the system was also necessary at the senior levels. Post adjustment entitlements must be accurately determined in order to maintain confidence in the operation of the common system and avoid discrepancies in purchasing power between different duty stations. Where there were perceptions of unfairness, staff had a particular incentive to co-operate in place-to-place surveys, and it should be recalled that a new round of surveys using revised methodology had been mandated by the General Assembly in resolution 44/198. It would be helpful to have an indication of the number of cases where post adjustment indices were expected to be markedly lower than the existing pay index. The Twelve appreciated the Commission's consideration of a scheme of phased reductions, but were concerned that there were apparently duty stations where there was currently an excess of six or more classes of post adjustment. It was also a matter of concern that certain organizations maintained the practice of granting extra steps beyond the salary scale approved by the General Assembly. The Twelve concurred that the case for harmonization was reinforced by the approved changes in the structure of the salary scale. They remained attached to the principle that merit should be adequately rewarded, and believed that work should be continued on the development of objective and transparent performance evaluation systems.

10. Regarding the conditions of service of short-term staff, the Twelve considered that the first step to be taken by the proposed task force should be to define clearly what was meant by "short-term staff".

11. On the question of the annual net remuneration margin, the Twelve considered that it might be advisable for the interim report on the net remuneration margin, requested in resolution 44/198, to be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth, rather than forty-seventh, session. They sought further clarification about the request by ICSC that the General Assembly should reconsider its request to manage the margin over a five-year period so that the average margin would be around the mid-point of the range.

12. The Twelve had considered the ICSC decision to recommend an 8.5 per cent increase in the current base/floor salary scale. Unfortunately, however, paragraphs 195 to 208 of the report failed to provide the necessary basic factual information to explain how the 8.5 per cent figure had been arrived at, as a result of which the Twelve were unable to take a position on the important and expensive proposals contained in that section. They asked the Commission to provide those clarifications to the Fifth Committee and suggested that such basic information should be clearly presented in future reports. Furthermore, insufficient justification had been given for the increase in payments based on the base/floor salary scale and, above all, the mobility/hardship allowance and the separation payment.

13. The Twelve took note of the result of surveys on the best prevailing conditions of service in New York, London and Rome and of the financial implications, and further noted the concern expressed in paragraphs 290 and 293 about the results of the survey for New York. They supported the Committee's statements in paragraphs 304 to 306 and stressed the urgency of solving that

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problem. Regarding the education grant, it would seem that no immediate interim action was necessary since that entitlement would be reviewed in 1991.

14. On the subject of conditions of service in the field and in the context of the comprehensive review, the decisions and recommendations of the Commission concerning the Field Service category seemed reasonable and fair. With regard to the status of women, the Twelve concurred with ICSC's opinion that qualification should be the sole criterion for recruitment and promotion of women and men alike. They were sympathetic to the general thrust of ICSC's recommendations in paragraphs 279 and 288 of its report. In conclusion, the Twelve reiterated their faith in the common system, to which all organizations had voluntarily adhered, and in the need for a common approach which strengthened the cohesion of the system and consequently its effectiveness.

AGENDA ITEM 118: PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1990-1991 (continued)

United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research: request for subvention to the Institute for 1991 (A/C.5/45/6 and A/45/7/Add.5)

15. Mr. MSELLE (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the Advisory Committee's sixth report (A/45/7/Add.5) concerning the request from the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) for a subvention for 1991 said that, although an appropriation of \$440,000 had been approved by the General Assembly as a subvention to UNIDIR for 1990-1991, the Advisory Committee had expressed the view that a formal request for a subvention for 1991, amounting to \$220,000 would have to be made to the General Assembly before the amounts could be authorized. The Advisory Committee had recommended that that request should be met (A/45/7/Add.5, para. 8).

16. In its report, the Advisory Committee had also made a number of observations concerning the future administration of the Institute. Drawing attention to paragraph 6, he said that the question at issue was that of continuing support of the Institute from the regular budget. The Advisory Committee believed that the matter should continue to be explored in order to meet the General Assembly's concern about securing additional resources from extrabudgetary sources, including voluntary contributions, to obviate the need for subventions from the regular budget. The Advisory Committee had therefore recommended that each time an earmarked contribution was received, a fair share of administrative costs should be charged by the Institute to the earmarked funds concerned.

17. The CHAIRMAN proposed that, on the basis of the note by the Secretary-General (A/C.5/45/6) and the recommendations of ACABQ (A/45/7/Add.5), the Committee should recommend to the General Assembly that should it approve the recommendation of the UNIDIR Board of Trustees for a subvention amounting to \$220,000 in 1991, no additional appropriation would be required under section 2B of the programme budget for 1990-1991.

18. It was so decided.

19. Mr. KARBUCZKY (Hungary) said that his delegation welcomed the decision just taken by the Committee because it attached great importance to the work of UNIDIR and was aware of its financial problems. The willingness of Member States to finance the Institute's work from the regular budget was commendable. His delegation noted the Advisory Committee's comments on subventions from the regular budget and urged that the future arrangements should provide a firm basis for the functioning of the Institute.

20. Mr. HAMIDA (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that his delegation hoped that UNIDIR and its Director would continue their efforts, in light of the recommendation in paragraph 6 of the ACABQ report, to ensure that in future the Institute would not have to request subventions from the regular budget.

International Computing Centre: 1991 budget estimates (A/C.5/45/9 and A/45/7/Add.3)

21. Mr. MSELLE (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) said that, in accordance with past practice, the 1991 budget estimates for the International Computing Centre (ICC) had to be approved by the General Assembly. The Advisory Committee's report (A/45/7/Add.3) discussed the estimates described in the report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/45/9).

22. The 1991 estimates amounted to 16,930,000 Swiss francs. The United Nations share, computed at an exchange rate of SF 1.61 to the United States dollar, amounted to \$4,952,700, in excess of the current appropriation of approximately \$4.3 million in the 1990-1991 programme budget. On the basis of present projections that share might rise to \$5.1 million. However, in the light of past experience, the Secretary-General was not requesting any additional appropriation. Any adjustments required at the end of the biennium would be reflected in the second performance report.

23. The Advisory Committee therefore recommended that the ICC budget estimates of SF 16,930,000 should be approved. No additional appropriation was required at the present stage in respect of the United Nations share.

24. The Advisory Committee had also drawn attention, in paragraphs 4 to 10 of its report, to a number of issues relating to the management of ICC. It trusted that the current management review would go a long way towards resolving some of those issues.

25. The CHAIRMAN proposed that, on the basis of the report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/45/9) and the recommendations of ACABQ (A/45/7/Add.3), the Committee should recommend to the General Assembly that it should approve the 1991 budget estimates for the International Computing Centre in an amount of SF 16,930,000.

26. It was so decided.

Review of translation and interpretation services for all official languages in the Economic Commission for Africa (A/C.5/45/26)

27. Mr. MSELLE (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) said that the note by the Secretary-General (A/C.5/45/26) had been prepared in response to the request made by the General Assembly in resolution 44/201 B; the details of the request were given in the note. The Advisory Committee was completely dissatisfied with the note: it could not understand why it had taken so long to produce a three-page document which said nothing.

28. Some of the problems were identified in the Secretary-General's note, but the conclusion was that action should be postponed. Some of the reasons given for that conclusion were not convincing. Moreover, if the shortcomings referred to in paragraph 10 existed, then solutions should have been proposed. The Advisory Committee did not feel in a position to make any recommendation on the basis of the note. Subject to guidance from the Fifth Committee, it would take the issue up again in 1991 in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993.

29. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) said that the Secretary-General's note indicated that the ECA Translation Services Unit had 16 Professional and 4 General Service posts but gave no specific information about the use of those posts, their distribution among the languages, or the vacancy rates per language. At the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly his delegation had pointed out that the Arabic language was the worst served and had called for special attention to be given to it. Yet the note said nothing about any individual language. His delegation would like to know what the current situation was, especially with regard to the distribution of occupied posts among languages. Paragraph 5 of the note stated that the major obstacles in delivering timely and quality translation services resulted from a high vacancy rate in the Unit. Despite a small decline in the rate, the situation remained very worrying.

30. Paragraphs 8 and 9 stated that ECA did not have a permanent staff for interpretation and that the establishment of a core interpretation unit was considered uneconomical. Once again, the note gave no specific information on needs or the pattern of meetings, for example, but merely offered a general statement.

31. The Chairman of the Advisory Committee had raised the question of the efficiency of ECA conference services. That was of course another problem requiring attention. His delegation would like to consult with other members of the African group before the Fifth Committee took any decision in the matter.

32. Mr. MONTHE (Cameroon) said that the report before the Committee was a bad one because it was superficial, artificial and inconsistent. It was superficial because, as the representative of Morocco had pointed out, it contained no specific information. As far as paragraph 5 was concerned, his delegation doubted whether the high vacancy rate was the real problem. The lengthy description of examinations given in paragraphs 6 and 7 really said nothing about the actual

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situation of the ECA language services; it was an artificial description. The report was inconsistent because, having identified the problems, it should have proposed solutions. Instead it recommended waiting for a further review.

33. In fact the problems were familiar and had been under discussion for many years. They were interrelated and should be tackled all at once instead of piecemeal. Postponement of action would solve nothing. The persons who had provided the material for the Secretary-General's note were the opposite of what was called for in Article 101 of the Charter. His delegation would, of course, take into account the views of other members of the Committee, but it thought that the note constituted no response at all to the General Assembly's request.

34. Mr. RAMADAN (Egypt) asked why the vacancy rate indicated in paragraph 5 of the Secretary-General's note was so much higher than that mentioned by the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management at an earlier meeting of the Committee. Noting that it was impossible to take a decision on the basis of the information provided in document A/C.5/45/26, he associated himself with the remarks made by the representatives of Morocco and Cameroon and suggested that informal consultations should be held on the subject.

35. Mr. YOHANNES (Ethiopia) said that the vagueness of the Secretary-General's note was most disappointing to his delegation. By failing to address the issues at stake, it tended to marginalize an important body of the United Nations system. Informal consultations were required to produce an appropriate recommendation.

36. Mr. DANKWA (Ghana) said that the Secretary-General's note was less a report than a skimpy statement of preferences. His delegation was extremely disappointed that the Secretariat should have taken over 12 months to produce such shoddy work. Those who drafted the note had chosen to ignore the clear terms of reference stated in General Assembly resolution 44/201 B: in what in the past would have been called a neo-colonialist attempt to perpetuate the "underdog" status of ECA, they were suggesting that the Commission should continue to depend on temporary assistance for its translation and interpretation services. Simply to invoke the pattern of distribution of meetings was unacceptable; the Committee required details of that pattern, which was surely not secret.

37. The document, indeed, reeked of bias and prejudice. Paragraph 6 indicated that translators who passed the competitive examinations could be assigned to vacant posts at all United Nations duty stations. Since that practice enhanced the international character of the Organization, there was all the more reason to re-establish the training programme. He could not understand why re-establishment of the programme should be made contingent on the results of examinations and felt that the Fifth Committee was better placed to pass judgement on that issue. The implication, in the last sentence of paragraph 7, that the authors of the note reserved the right to decide whether proposals would be submitted to the General Assembly was also unacceptable. His delegation moved that the note be rejected and that the Secretariat be instructed to re-establish the translator training programme at ECA.

38. Mrs. EMERSON (Portugal) asked which were the official and working languages of the Commission.

39. The CHAIRMAN said that the Commission's working languages were Arabic, English and French.

40. Ms. SHITAKHA (Kenya) joined the representatives of Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana and Morocco in expressing her distaste at what she considered a disgraceful and illogical document. In view of the high vacancy rate indicated in paragraph 5, it was impossible to understand why immediate remedial action should be considered "premature". Noting the intention to assign revisers from Headquarters, Geneva or other duty stations to ECA to train successful candidates, she asked whether the Commission did not itself have sufficiently qualified staff to undertake that training and, if not, why the assignment of such personnel had not already been recommended. The implication was that ECA - which her delegation believed should be seen as equal to other major offices of the United Nations - was still to be accorded second-rate treatment. Like the representative of Ghana, she would appreciate further information on the pattern of distribution of meetings, particularly in relation to the corresponding patterns at other major offices.

41. Mr. GUPTA (India) associated himself with the remarks made by other delegations and said that the issues raised, including the problem of retention of staff, required detailed examination by the Secretary-General, who should submit specific proposals to Member States in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993.

42. Mr. BENNETT (United States of America), said that while his delegation shared many of the concerns expressed by other delegations, the course of action proposed in the Secretary-General's note represented a step in the right direction. It was indeed premature to re-establish a training programme which, when operational, had been very costly and yet produced only a few trained translators. He would appreciate receiving accurate information in that respect before a decision was taken.

43. His delegation strongly supported the intensification of efforts to recruit translators and hoped that the high vacancy rate would be reduced. It hoped, too, that qualified candidates would be accepted not only from the ECA region but also from other countries which were underrepresented at the Commission. Noting that only one post at ECA was held by a United States national, he asked whether current recruitment guidelines prevented the employment of nationals of the United States or, indeed, of any other country. Finally, his delegation supported the Secretary-General's proposal to maintain current arrangements for interpretation services and hoped that the shortcomings mentioned in paragraph 10 would be addressed, *inter alia*, by the use, if approved, of a new advanced computer system.

44. Mr. WU Gang (China) shared the views of many delegations, including, in particular, those expressed by the representatives of Egypt, Ghana and Kenya. He wondered whether the Secretariat had really given serious consideration to the possibility of re-establishing the translator training programme, instead of simply paying lip-service to the General Assembly's request. The Secretary-General should

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propose a practical solution to the urgent language service problems of the Commission.

45. Mr. BELHAJ (Tunisia) endorsed the concerns expressed by various delegations in connection with the note of the Secretary-General, which he considered incomplete and superficial. His delegation did not feel it deserved consideration, let alone a decision.

46. Mr. EKRA (Côte d'Ivoire) said that there was a glaring contradiction between the information provided in paragraph 5 and the last sentence of paragraph 6 and expressed the hope that ECA was not being treated simply as a point of transit for other duty stations. He endorsed the comments made by other delegations and said that the document was entirely unacceptable.

47. Mrs. EMERSON (Portugal) said she understood that vacancy rates at the regional commissions had improved somewhat. She therefore requested further explanation of why the problem had become more acute in the Translation Services Unit of ECA.

48. Mr. BAUDOT (Director, Programme Planning and Budget Division) said that he had been pained to hear the suggestion that the note of the Secretary-General flouted Article 101 of the Charter. While the note did show that the Secretariat was fallible, he hoped that there was no doubt as to its integrity.

49. In response to the question of the representative of Portugal concerning vacancy rates in all of the regional commissions, the Committee would be given an overview of that situation in the near future. He believed that the vacancy rate at ECA was now somewhat less than 10 per cent. The much higher rates in the note were for translation posts only. Moreover, those figures included posts that, while technically vacant, were actually filled by short-term free-lance translators.

50. Responding to the question put by the representative of Morocco concerning the distribution of vacant posts among the official languages, he said that most of the vacancies were for French translators. There was one English translator's post vacant and another Arabic.

51. As a matter of policy, Secretariat documents gave the view of the Secretariat as a whole. ECA did not disagree with the conclusions in the note concerning the establishment of a translator training programme and a core interpretation unit. The Secretariat fully recognized the problems of ECA, such as the high vacancy rate for translation posts and the shortcomings in Conference Services referred to in paragraph 10, and it was already attempting to respond to them. The full scope of those efforts was not reflected in the note because the mandate of the Secretariat had been limited to the review of ECA translation and interpretation services. As mentioned in paragraph 10, ECA had general problems other than those specifically relating to translator training and to interpretation services. For example, it currently had no editor, and various other editing-related posts were not filled by Professionals.

(Mr. Baudot)

52. In response to the call by the representative of Cameroon for a comprehensive solution, he said that the Secretariat had no intention of postponing development of such a solution indefinitely and was at that very moment grappling with the problem as it prepared the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993. The Committee's recommendations concerning ECA translation and interpretation services, as well as the broader issues discussed in paragraph 10, would be taken into account in those preparations. He therefore hoped that the Committee would give serious consideration to paragraph 10, in spite of its defects. Meanwhile, if the Committee wished to pursue the matter in informal discussions, the Secretariat would be willing to share what additional information it had.

53. Mrs. CESTAC (Director, Translation Division), responding to the request of the representative of the United States, said that she had information on the status of candidates accepted for training in 1988, 1989, 1990 and 1991, and on giving the duty stations to which they had been assigned and their progress since recruitment. If that information would be useful in informal consultations, she would be happy to provide it in writing. However, since translation posts were not subject to geographical distribution, it would be inappropriate to give a breakdown by nationality.

54. Mr. BAUDOT (Director, Programme Planning and Budget Division) said that, in response to the question of the representative of the United States, he could not give exact figures on the cost of the Training Centre when it had been in operation, but that he believed that it had been around \$500,000 per biennium. If he remembered correctly, some 15 or 16 people had been trained per biennium.

55. Mr. DANKWA (Ghana) said that he was very gratified to learn that there was one United States national in ECA. He would appreciate details on the composition of all the regional commissions, as it would be interesting to learn if there were any Africans outside ECA.

56. He found it hard to believe that ECA shared the views contained in the note by the Secretary-General with respect to the establishment of a training programme and a core interpretation unit. Perhaps as a subordinate organ, it had not wished to disagree. The main consideration of the Committee should be to determine whether or not those measures would be useful. The original Training Centre had been closed because it had not lived up to expectations, when the more appropriate response would have been to review its operations and to propose remedial action. In the view of his delegation, the reinstatement of the Training Centre would at least make it possible to retain staff for more than the current two years, and the establishment of a core interpretation unit would be helpful in planning meetings and conferences. It was even possible that, given a good working atmosphere, the core unit might occasionally lend a hand in translation.

57. The original request for reinstatement of the Training Centre had been made in 1989, and action on it had already been postponed for one biennium. It should not be necessary to delay any longer. The overwhelming majority of the speakers had expressed the view that the Training Centre should be restored. What was

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needed now was information on the programme budget implications of that measure for inclusion in the revised estimates.

58. Mr. KINCHEN (United Kingdom) said that he had the impression that the vacancy rate and temporary staffing problem might affect bodies other than ECA. He had a vague recollection of reference during the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly to a similar problem at Vienna. If further review was in order, it would be useful to have more general information on vacancy rates and the utilization of temporary staff in the translation and interpretation services. The document in question had obviously not given rise to general and universal satisfaction. Although further discussion was needed, it was not clear, in any event, that an immediate decision could be taken on the matter.

59. The CHAIRMAN suggested that, in view of the discussion so far, action on the note should be deferred in order to allow for further consultation.

60. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.