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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1978-1979

Provision of Arabic translation services to the
General Assembly and its Main Committees

Note by the Secretariat

1. During recent sessions of the General Assembly questions have been raised in the Fifth Committee regarding the timely production of documentation in the Arabic language, in particular, summary records of the Main Committees.
2. The present paper is submitted with a view to explaining the main reasons of this situation in reference to the present structure of the Arabic Translation Service, as well as to suggest some possible remedies.
3. According to the administrative and financial implications contained in document A/C.5/1564 dated 29 November 1973, which formed the basis for the provision of Arabic language services to the General Assembly and its Main Committees under resolution 3197 (XXVIII), the yearly volume of translation work envisaged for the Arabic Translation Service as a result of the inclusion of Arabic among the official and working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees was to be 22,500 pages. A staffing table with 30 permanent translation posts (22 translators and 11 revisers) was established to undertake this task. In addition, provision was made for six temporary Professional staff during sessions of the General Assembly to handle the heavier concentration of documents and summary records as well as to publish the United Nations Journal in Arabic. This temporary assistance could be expected to translate an additional 750 pages besides the Journal workload, thus bringing the total yearly volume of translations to 23,250 pages.
4. Accordingly, the capacity of the Service amounts to some 1,840 pages a month in the nine-month period from the end of the General Assembly session around mid-December to the beginning of the session about mid-September and some 2,230 pages in each of the three months of the session, when additional staff is available.

5. The actual flow of work, however, does not correspond to this fairly even pattern. The input of new documentation is light and much below capacity from the end of the session to the end of April. In the period from the beginning of May to mid-September, when the bulk of pre-session documentation is received, the input starts to increase rapidly, presently catching up with and then exceeding the capacity of the Service by a substantial margin, most particularly towards the end of July and throughout the months of August and September. During the regular session of the General Assembly, when some 6,000 to 7,000 pages of summary records are received, the total volume of in-session documentation amounts to more than twice as much as the capacity of the Service. As, under these circumstances, the Service cannot be expected to translate the total workload on a current basis, priority is usually given to those categories of documents that are indispensable to the discussion of the various agenda items, and the bulk of summary records and a number of reports are translated later, in the periods when the input falls below capacity.

6. Besides this uneven flow of input, which is the single most important factor preventing the timely production of documentation, there are several other factors of imbalance that deserve to be considered.

7. First, the Service must translate reports dealing with activities of such bodies as the International Law Commission or the Special Committee of 24 which do not themselves use Arabic, but whose reports to the General Assembly are required in Arabic. Although every attempt is made to handle such documents before the very heavy input of the last quarter of the year, the volume involved is so huge and the time-limits in which they are required to be translated are so short that it becomes impossible to produce each and every document on time.

8. Secondly, the Service is often assigned the translation of certain documents, sometimes very substantial in size, which are included in its mandate at a very short notice. In 1976, for example, only a short while before the special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament (in which Arabic was an official and working language), the report of its Preparatory Committee (in which Arabic was not an official or working language), was requested to be translated into Arabic in its entirety (seven volumes involving a total of 1,750 pages of Arabic translation) for the said session. Similarly, in both 1977 and 1978, the Yearbook on Disarmament, totalling some 500 pages, was received for translation and is now expected to be part of the regular yearly workload.

9. Thirdly, the Service has been frequently called upon to service conferences held away from Headquarters. In 1978, for example, it provided full translation services to the Conference on the Carriage of Goods by Sea, the Conference on the Law of the Sea and the Conference on Technical Co-operation among Developing Countries. This has reduced considerably the number of translator-days available to the Service.

10. At any event, if account is taken only of the regular workload of General Assembly documentation, the total volume assigned to the Service on an average year amounts to more than 24,500 pages, of which only about 2,000 pages are received from the end of the session to the end of April. From the beginning of

May to mid-September, the volume of material received climbs to some 7,000 pages, about half of which are accounted for in the period August-mid-September alone. Since the capacity of the Service during the latter period, as is clear from paragraph 4 above, is only about 2,700 pages, the translation workload in excess of capacity amounts to some 800 pages. Finally, during the three months of the session from mid-September to about mid-December, the approximately 8,500 pages of documents received exceed the Service's capacity of 6,700 pages by 1,800 pages. At the same time, the volume of summary records received, amounting to some 6,500 pages, is totally in excess of capacity.

11. It is clear, then, that if the Service is to complete the total volume of the required translation within the specified time-limits, a sufficient number of additional staff must be recruited. Since experience has proved that the pattern indicated by the foregoing figures remains substantially the same from one year to another, these figures can safely be used as a basis for any measures that might be envisaged to rectify the situation. Accordingly, to deal with the excess workload of pre-session documentation in the period from the beginning of August to mid-September, provision must be made for the recruitment of an additional nine short-term staff (six translators and three revisers). The services of this staff should be retained for the duration of the session to deal with excess documentation, while an additional complement of 27 short-term staff (18 translators and 9 revisers) should be recruited with effect from 1 October to deal with the excess workload of summary records. It is to be noted, however, that if such a measure is adopted, and the total volume of pre-session and in-session documentation is completed on time, more than half the capacity of the present permanent establishment of the Service would remain unoccupied in the period from the end of the session to the end of April since there would be no backlog to engage its efforts as at present.

12. Meanwhile, it should be stressed that the Arabic Translation Service is making every effort to meet all the claims on its services in the most effective manner possible under the prevailing circumstances, and its performance compares favourably with that of the other Translation Services.