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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

PERSONNEL QUESTIONS

Rotation of staff within the United Nations

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Rotation of staff within the United Nations" (A/46/326 and Corr.1).

Addendum

Comments of the Secretary-General

Introduction

1. The report deals with an important component of the human resources management system within the United Nations and contains a number of plausible recommendations most of which, with further review and refinement, would assist in setting the parameters within which a viable staff rotation system would be developed. Particularly important is the Inspector's first recommendation which reinforces the need to establish a staff rotation mechanism as an integral part of a career development system.

2. However, there are significant differences between the operational requirements of the Secretariat of the United Nations and those of the three specialized organizations - UNDP, UNHCR and UNICEF - on whose rotation policies the Inspector has commented. All three are essentially field-oriented, with the structure and functions of each field office essentially duplicating those of the others, with variations in size and programme requirements. One UNICEF country programme is much like another, adapted to local and regional conditions. Staff rotation, under these circumstances, is a matter of devising incentives and opportunities to move and of adopting policies requiring movement every few years.

3. Relatively few of the jobs in the Secretariat are interchangeable in the same way as in those of the field organizations. As the Inspector notes in paragraph 16, 95 per cent of the jobs in the areas of electronic data processing (EDP), legal, library, politics, and publication are in New York, Geneva and Vienna. It would be neither economically feasible nor practical to decentralize most of these functions, and staff whose specialities are in these occupations cannot have the same rotation opportunities as the more generalist occupations, such as administration, finance, economics. A comprehensive and compulsory rotation policy applying to virtually all operational staff, such as practised by UNHCR or UNICEF, is simply not feasible given the diversity of functions required of the Secretariat and the location at Headquarters duty stations of the major General Assembly and conference-servicing operations.

4. Although the report notes that the distribution of staff among the regional commissions and Headquarters in certain occupations (EDP, LEG, LIB, POL, and PUB) "is inequitable" it does not discuss the reasons why this is so. The regional commissions are economic commissions; their mandates, established by the Economic and Social Council, are all exclusively in the area of promoting socio-economic development and regional economic cooperation. They require economists, engineers, scientists - the occupational groups that already are widely dispersed and that the report notes "are expected to cause less problems in staff rotation". Their need for lawyers, political scientists, publishing and library specialists are minimal.

5. The main objectives of any rotation policy is to expose staff to the wide range of conditions and circumstances in which the Organization operates, to broaden experience and to fill vacancies in challenging locations, in order to implement the economic, social and humanitarian programmes of the United Nations. Where functions are interchangeable, rotation is appropriate. Where the functional requirements of the particular programme are highly specialized or location-specific, rotation is not appropriate.

#### Omissions

6. The report omits mention of the Secretariat's major programme of entitlement specifically designed to encouraging mobility, the Mobility and Hardship Allowance, which became effective 1 July 1990. This programme assigns percentage points on a matrix to staff who have been reassigned to different duty stations, with progressively higher percentages depending on the hardship level of the duty station. 1/ The report also omits mention of the various special entitlements offered to staff serving at hardship duty stations, such as accelerated home leave, special shipment entitlements, additional education grant travel and additional reimbursement of boarding costs. These special entitlements are listed in ST/AI/280, which is revised periodically to indicate changes in the hardship level of various duty stations.

7. The report would have benefited from a fuller examination of the financial implications of a comprehensive rotation policy versus the present incentive-based system.

8. The report does not explore the obstacles to mobility between members of the common system. Given the very different mandates of the United Nations Secretariat and those of the field-oriented agencies which practise rotation, movement between organizations may be the only route available for certain occupational groups.

#### Vacancy situation

9. The report is quite correct in recognizing that the vacancy situation at regional commissions is no longer an issue. This can indeed be demonstrated further by the vacancy position as at 31 August 1991 depicted in table 1. As can be observed, at ECA, despite its recent evacuation, the vacancy rate is below 10 per cent. The high vacancy level at ESCWA is probably caused by its peculiar situation. This is expected to drop once the situation stabilizes.

Table 1Vacancy rates of Headquarters and regional commissions for posts in the Professional category as at 31 August 1991

Organization	RB established posts	Vacant posts	Vacancy rate (%)
Headquarters	1 894	102	5.39
ECE	114	4	3.51
ESCAP	182	8	4.40
ECLAC	176	2	1.14
ECA (31/3/91)	214	17	7.94
ESCWA (31/1/91)	98	17	17.35

Career development

10. The Inspector's mentioning of efforts being made by the Office of Human Resources Management towards the establishment of a comprehensive career development system of all staff is appreciated. A career development system is a component of an integrated personnel management system aimed at developing a versatile and mobile staff to enable the United Nations to effectively discharge its mandates while at the same time providing rewarding and satisfying careers to staff. The system places a premium on people. To attain this goal, a number of sub-systems are being developed or upgraded to reflect up-to-date management practices. Efforts towards this include current reviews of the appraisal system and the promotion policy, systematic training of supervisors, and the development of a career counselling system. It is the intention of the Administration to integrate the concept of staff mobility into these proposals.

Recommendations

11. Recommendation 5 (a) is that staff members assigned "to the field from Headquarters should be granted a special post allowance (SPA) immediately instead of having to wait six months as at present". Limiting an immediate SPA to those assigned "from Headquarters" seems too restrictive; what about those assigned from one duty station to another where living conditions are harsher? At the same time "to the field" seems too broad; conditions vary enormously in the field. At present, ST/AI/338/Add.5 of 2 November 1988 provides that staff members selected for a higher-level post at a type III

duty station are granted an SPA immediately upon moving to that post. Also PD/1/84/Rev.1, of 28 September 1990, provides that an SPA is payable after three months in a higher-level post, not six months as the report indicates.

12. Recommendation 5 (b) is that staff selected to a higher-level post "in the field" should be promoted within six months, the implementation date differing for difficult or hardship duty stations, "provided they have met all the requirements mentioned in his/her letter of assignment" (sic). This criterion is rather vague. If the Inspector means the requirements of the job description, it does not allow for performance. The present provision, for type III duty stations, is an immediate special post allowance followed by a review for promotion at six months, which is more consistent with staff regulation 4.2.

13. Recommendation 5 (c) again refers to General Assembly resolution 44/30, which has nothing to do with incentive for mobility.

14. Recommendation 3 (and also para. 31) is to create a special unit within OHRM, with appropriate personnel and financial resources, to manage and implement the policy governing rotation. Creating a further bureaucratic structure could have the effect of making even more cumbersome the recruitment and promotion operations which, as the report notes, are already the "most time-consuming responsibilities of the Office of Human Resources Management".

### Conclusion

15. As indicated earlier, the report highlights a number of important issues, some of which are already in our plans of action. Staff rotation is an important personnel management policy. If it is well conceived and implemented with consistency, it could be a powerful tool for staff motivation. However, if it is ill-conceived it may acquire the rigidity that would turn it into an abhorred and discredited instrument. The work in progress is aimed at setting up a system with built-in flexibility.

### Notes

1/ Para. 21 of the report says that the General Assembly, in its resolution 44/30, "approved an important number of measures and incentives for staff servicing in hardship areas". Resolution 44/30 was about the "progressive development of the principles and norms of international law relating to the new international economic order". Possibly the Inspector meant resolution 44/198 E, in which the General Assembly approved the introduction of the mobility and hardship allowance along with some other recommendation of ICSC.

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