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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

**Management of interpretation services in the
United Nations system**

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Management of interpretation services in the United Nations system" (A/41/648).

ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The organizations of the United Nations system found the subject report to be a comprehensive, realistic and balanced study of the management of interpretation services in the system. Particular appreciation was expressed for the inspectors' sensitivity to the interpretation profession, their recognition of the positive role played by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) in shaping working conditions and fixing uniform rates of pay by agreement with the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (CCAQ), and the avoidance of radical proposals in favour of pragmatic suggestions for a further exploration of the complex issues involved.
2. Although the recommendations were focused primarily on the situation of the United Nations, it was considered that the analysis made and conclusions drawn were valuable also for the other organizations with interpretation services, in such areas as the use of cost-benefit analysis in determining the optimum strength of a permanent interpretation establishment or the difficulty of finding local free-lance interpreters for the Chinese, Russian and Spanish (with the demand of the European Economic Community for that language) booths. Moreover, many of the issues raised, such as the desirability of establishing even levels of meeting activity to minimize reliance on additional recruitment at peak periods and of eliminating the concurrent scheduling of major simultaneous meetings of different organizations can usefully be pursued by organizations both internally and in an inter-agency context.

II. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

3. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) wished to point out that from the mention of Japanese together with German and Portuguese as additional languages of interpretation (e.g. in paras. 10 and 22 of the report), the impression might be given that Japanese was regularly used in more than one organization. In ILO, however, interpretation into Japanese is provided only for the annual International Labour Conference and at the request of the Japanese Government, which covers the cost of the service. In contrast, German is one of the normal working languages of ILO; it is used in about 80 per cent of its meetings and financed through its regular budget. Portuguese is used on the same basis as in the other specialized agencies.

Recommendation 1: The biennial Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications should include a regular agenda item to jointly consider the organizations' perceptions of current and emerging demand and supply problems and trends for interpretation and other language services

4. The organizations of the United Nations system that participate in the inter-agency meetings warmly endorse the proposal. It is considered that not only interpretation but also other language services, such as editing, translating, précis-writing and verbatim reporting, could benefit from such regular, joint scrutiny, in particular by the adoption of a co-operative rather than a potentially competitive stance in regard to free-lance language staff.

Recommendation 2: The organizations with significant use of regular staff interpreters - FAO, IAEA, UNESCO, UNIDO and especially the United Nations for each of its four major interpretation staffs - should regularly present to the appropriate oversight committee of their governing bodies summary data analysing actual staff interpreter workloads, and consider actions to better attract and utilize local free-lance interpreters

5. Although interpretation workload statistics are invariably maintained by organizations of the system, it was generally considered that these should more appropriately go to senior management for analysis and corrective action, if required, rather than to governing bodies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considered it essential that a uniform accounting system and a joint standardized approach to the processing of data (e.g., number of interpreters, number of meetings and number of assignments) be developed.

6. On the question of the most cost-effective ratio of regular to free-lance interpreters, the organizations reported various approaches. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) had experimented with recruiting fixed-term interpreter-translators and had found that more costly than the recruitment of free-lance interpreters for specific meetings. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), ILO, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reported satisfaction with an arrangement that enabled the same staff, reliably available and familiar with the specialized terminology of the organization, to be assigned to translation, editing or other duties when they were not needed for interpretation. Interest was expressed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in the contrat cadre system mentioned in the report (para. 79) and in fact a like arrangement was employed by ITU. Because of the unavailability of local free-lance interpreters in sufficient numbers at Vienna, both the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations Office at Vienna found it essential to have a core establishment of permanent interpreters (an arrangement that also ensured a high standard of services), supplemented by temporary assistance when necessary. In fact, the United

Nations Office at Vienna, like the United Nations Office at Geneva and United Nations Headquarters, considered it more economical, in the light of its meeting programme, to make use primarily of staff interpreters.

7. The complete reliance of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) on free-lance interpreters had been costly when the staff members had had to be brought from Europe. It was increasingly possible, ECA had found, to recruit interpreters domiciled at or near meeting venues in Africa, which made possible economies in meeting servicing costs. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which also depended entirely on free-lance interpreters, was able to recruit complete teams of 24 to 27 interpreters for sessions of the Commission only in Mexico City or Buenos Aires; teams of 6 to 8 interpreters could be found, however, in Lima, Caracas, Sao Paulo, Havana, Jamaica and Santiago. The optimum use of free-lance interpreters therefore appeared to be a function of the organizations' interpretation requirements and to a lesser extent on headquarters or meeting locations.

Recommendation 3: Each organization should regularly provide the appropriate oversight committee with summary statistics on the proportion of late, cancelled and unscheduled meetings - grouped by major subsidiary organs and organizational units - to identify problem areas and consider needed actions to improve the efficiency of conference resource use.

8. As indicated in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Secretary-General's comments on the JIU report (A/42/95, annex I), data on the use made by United Nations bodies that are allocated interpretation services are regularly conveyed to the Committee on Conferences, a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly which has a particular expertise and interest in the calendar of conferences and meetings. Other organizations considered that the time lost to late or cancelled meetings was not significant, or that a conceptual framework would be required to ensure the data were comparable and significant.

Recommendation 4: The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the General Assembly, in their current review of the financial crisis of the Organization, should consider certain review, control and scheduling measures to improve conference resource use and cut costs

9. Since this recommendation and the proposals contained in paragraph 110 of the JIU report (to which it refers) concern the United Nations for the most part, reference is made to paragraphs 10 to 17 of the comments of the Secretary-General on that report.

Recommendation 5: The Secretary-General of the United Nations should:

- (a) Reassess the latest cost factors and technical developments in the videoconferencing area to determine whether it has now become financially feasible to begin using remote conference interpretation servicing

10. The organizations of the United Nations system consider that it would be useful to keep under review developments and experience in teleconferencing or videoconferencing (multilateral conferences in which the representatives remain in their usual work environment and confer over an international television and audio hook-up, using associated word-processing or facsimile machines for exchange of documentation) and in the remote servicing of conferences (in which participants travel to the conference site and servicing staff, linked by sound, image and text transmission to the venue, remain at their duty stations), including the cost implications thereof.

- (b) Attempt to develop and apply, using the recent experience of other organizations, computer-assisted management processes for at least the most time- and cost-consuming interpretation management functions, which are now often performed on a laborious manual basis by senior interpretation staff

11. The Secretary-General intends to equip the Interpretation Services in New York and Geneva with computers as soon as funding is approved, as described in the report to the Committee on Conferences entitled "Use of computers in interpretation management" (A/AC.172/123). Computer-assisted management processes have been introduced or are soon to become available in ILO, UNESCO and WHO (and at ITU for short-term payrolls and contracts).

- (c) Review the low grade levels of staff interpreters in ESCAP and their differing translation/interpretation status and duties

12. Paragraphs 20 to 23 of the comments of the Secretary-General on the JIU report (A/42/95, annex I) respond to this point. ESCAP would support extension, particularly for the understaffed Chinese and Russian language services, of the informal arrangement by which French interpretation is provided by volunteers from the French translation section. This would correct the underutilization of the Chinese and Russian interpreters, relieve the understaffed translation services and represent a flexible and cost-effective solution. The English interpreters could, it is suggested, be given editorial duties when not assigned to meetings (there is no English translation unit at ESCAP). If this were done on an informal, voluntary basis, the dual function could indeed be recognized, for example, by the granting of accelerated within-grade steps, an arrangement that would be terminated when the staff members concerned returned to their initial single duties or were transferred. It should be noted that in addition to the translator/interpreters at ICAO, ILO and WMO, there are now four language posts in the Registry of the International Court of Justice whose incumbents are responsible for translation, revision, interpretation and the preparation of minutes and glossaries.

- (d) Consider gradually increasing the number of passive languages required of Arabic, Chinese and other interpreters to increase interpretation service versatility

13. The organizations of the system concur in supporting this recommendation. It is considered that the resulting avoidance of relay interpretations would be desirable.
