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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 10th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. AMNFUS (Sweden)

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

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 120: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES: REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
(continued) (A/42/32)

1. Mr. FIGUEIRA (Brazil) emphasized the importance of the role of the Committee on Conferences in harmonizing the activities of the Organization. The Group of 18 had recognized that importance and had recommended that the Committee's responsibilities should be broadened. It was hard to understand why the members of the Committee had been unable to agree on the future status and composition of that body. The Committee would be able fully to discharge its responsibilities only when it became a permanent subsidiary organ of the General Assembly, with an elected membership and with a clear and comprehensive mandate. Having said that, his delegation agreed that the Committee's mandate should be extended for one year, on the understanding that the Committee would submit its final recommendations to the General Assembly at its forty-third session.

2. Having read the report, his delegation noted that the problems concerning conferences and documentation remained the same. Rules had been established, specifically in resolution 40/243, but they were not always complied with. The Assembly should take advantage of the review of the mandate and status of the Committee on Conferences to establish some direction and limits. The General Assembly was the body which had prime responsibility for planning meetings and for questions of documentation. Accordingly, intergovernmental organs should refrain from taking decisions which were not consistent with resolutions 39/88 D, 40/243 and 41/213, especially with reference to the venue and duration of their sessions. All departures from the rules should be carefully considered by the Fifth Committee; its recommendations should be adopted in light of the comments and proposals of the Committee on Conferences and, as required, of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. His delegation would therefore welcome a report of the Secretary-General, submitted through the Committee on Conferences, on complementary measures which should be adopted to fully enforce the existing rules relating to conferences and meetings.

3. A second major and related problem was the extent to which the Economic and Social Council was empowered to act on those questions. Articles 60 and 62 (4) of the Charter unequivocally recognized the primacy of the General Assembly. Logically therefore, such issues as the calendar of conferences and meetings of the Council, or the discontinuation of summary records for some of its subsidiary organs, should be decided upon only by the General Assembly. As a result, his delegation basically accepted the recommendation contained in draft resolution B, paragraph 4, as a provisional arrangement.

4. A third question was the fact that the United Nations provided conference services for agencies or programmes financed from extrabudgetary resources, sometimes at the expense of organs which were financed from the regular budget. The Organization should ask to be reimbursed for such services and should inform Member States of the reimbursement procedure.

(Mr. Figueira, Brazil)

5. In order to ensure that the General Assembly was recognized as the indisputable central authority, it might be advisable to amend the rules of procedure of the Economic and Social Council so as to enable the Committee on Conferences, as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, to fully perform its advisory role. It should be pointed out in that connection that the agreement reached with the Council, which had been referred to in the previous report (A/41/32), was not proving satisfactory.
6. The recommendations of the Group of 18, which had been adopted in resolution 41/213, would certainly enhance the efficiency of the Organization. His delegation therefore noted with satisfaction that, at its first regular session the Economic and Social Council had been able to conclude its work in 45 meetings instead of the 114 meetings which it had required in the past. The Fifth Committee might consider merging several items of its programme of work - items 41 and 117, for example, or items 123 and 124. It might also consider certain issues, such as the administrative and budgetary co-ordination in the United Nations system, on a biennial basis. Finally, it was essential that United Nations bodies should meet at their respective headquarters. While there was a need for flexibility in some cases, such as the regional commissions, the exceptions listed in resolution 40/243 seemed far too numerous. Accordingly, that issue should be reviewed periodically.
7. Mr. JEMAIL (Tunisia) noted that the measures taken by the Committee on Conferences to implement resolution 40/243 had borne fruit, particularly with respect to the scheduling of meetings and the rationalization of documentation. That had resulted in savings of time and resources for the Department of Conference Services, which worked hard every day to meet the needs of delegations. He stressed the dedication and co-operation demonstrated by officials of the Department and paid tribute to Mr. Wyzner and his colleagues for the great competence they had demonstrated in their respective areas of activity. His delegation felt that at a time when the Department, which worked unrelentingly, was bearing the full brunt of the financial crisis and being forced to dispense its services parsimoniously, it must not be deprived further of very valuable resources by having its budget further reduced. The Department should be encouraged rather than hampered in its work, as might well happen if its temporary assistance funds were taken away. It would therefore be desirable, in the interest of all Member States, to re-examine that step.
8. Despite the progress made in certain areas, the Committee on Conferences had been unable to settle the issue of its future status. The stumbling block seemed to be the issue of the Committee's composition and the implementation of recommendation 1 of the Group of 18. His delegation felt that the composition of the Committee should be amended so as to ensure more equitable geographical distribution. That would no doubt mean enlarging it: the Committee should, however, remain fairly small so as to preserve its effectiveness. Making it a permanent body should not raise major problems once the Committee's terms of reference had been clearly defined. However, Member States should first agree on how recommendation 1 should be interpreted. The Group of 18 had certainly never intended to turn the Committee into a budgetary organ. The "resources" referred to

(Mr. Jemail, Tunisia)

in recommendation 1 (d) should therefore not be interpreted as meaning that the General Assembly would determine a pre-established amount for conference services but as a reference to the overall level of the budget, in the meaning of resolution 41/213. Clarifications to be made on this point should enable the Committee on Conferences to use the extra time given to it as a result of the extension of its current mandate to define its new mandate.

9. One of the questions which remained outstanding and which must be considered before the next session was that of communications from Member States, which were distributed as official documents. It was a very useful practice, which made it possible to distribute information speedily and simultaneously, and therefore rationalization of the practice should be based on the criterion of the importance of a given document not simply its length. Generally speaking, his delegation felt that efforts to economize should not be pursued to the point of preventing the Organization from carrying out crucial tasks that were incumbent upon it under the Charter.

10. Mrs. FRIESSNIG (Austria) said it was unfortunate that, after long debate, the Committee on Conferences had been unable to submit any recommendation on its future status. It was to be hoped that the extension of its mandate would enable it to resolve the outstanding issues. One of the Committee's principal tasks was to review the draft calendar of conferences submitted by the Secretariat for the forthcoming biennium, to make sure that the resources of the Organization were used as rationally and economically as possible - a matter of prime concern in difficult times. Among the progress the Committee had made could be mentioned the staggering of meetings throughout the year, allowing limited recourse to temporary staff and better use of conference services by some subsidiary bodies. Even if they found it difficult to forecast exactly how many meetings they would need, in part because of the effects of any informal consultations, all United Nations bodies should avoid wasting the conference services made available to them.

11. If the Organization was to make best use of all its conference facilities it must have the necessary permanent staff because, over the long term, frequent use of temporary staff was more costly. It should be recalled that, at the fortieth session, the Committee had decided to strengthen conference services in the United Nations Office at Vienna by establishing a permanent team of interpreters. The 20 posts created in the interpretation section should therefore be filled as soon as possible.

12. Care should also be taken that all subsidiary bodies respected the 32-page rule for their reports. Finally, her delegation had listened with the greatest interest to Mr. Wyzner's account of the continuing effort to modernize and computerize conference services. The use of new technology could not but facilitate conference and documentation activities and enable the Department to accomplish its tasks more rapidly and efficiently.

13. Ms. HAGA (Norway), speaking on behalf of the five Nordic countries, said that the United Nations was first and foremost an international forum for discussion and

(Ms. Haga, Norway)

debate, a place where conference activities were very important. The cost of conference and library services currently made up almost one fifth of the regular budget, and it was therefore more important than ever to maintain strict control over the use of the resources devoted to such activities.

14. Better meeting scheduling, allowing recourse to temporary personnel to be restricted, was already a step forward. Much still had to be done, however, to reduce the frequency and duration of sessions. The fact that some bodies had adopted a two-yearly meeting cycle was welcome. She was also glad the Committee had decided that, in future, the draft calendar of conferences would include a synoptic table indicating, especially, which meetings or activities in the same sector would take place at the same time. A number of bodies, including the Main Committees of the General Assembly, had used their allotted conference resources better. In cases of routine underutilization, the bodies concerned should be asked to supply more realistic forecasts of their needs. Broadly speaking, all bodies ought to be capable of a 75 per cent utilization rate. Efforts by the Committee to achieve that target should be highlighted.

15. The Nordic countries believed that the cost of conference services for certain bodies and programmes supported by extrabudgetary funds should continue to be met from the regular budget of the Organization. On the other hand, they were glad that the number of special conferences planned for 1988 did not exceed the figure set in resolution 40/243. Further efforts should be made to enforce the limit of 32 pages for reports of subsidiary bodies, and 24 pages for documents issued by the Secretariat, while not forgetting that the volume of documentation largely depended on Member States.

16. It was disappointing that the Committee on Conferences had been unable to reach agreement on its future status. It therefore seemed advisable to extend its mandate by one year so that it could make definitive recommendations at the forty-third session. In view of the Committee's pivotal role, which was emphasized in the report of the Group of 18, the Nordic countries would favour its transformation into a permanent body of the General Assembly with responsibility for the calendar of conferences.

17. Mr. TETTAMANTI (Argentina) thanked Mr. Wyzner and his collaborators for their leadership of the Department of Conference Services. Broadly speaking, his delegation supported the two draft resolutions submitted by the Committee on Conferences in its report.

18. Regarding the calendar of conferences, he was disturbed to see that meetings devoted to activities in one sector were still being held simultaneously. Many delegations were not able to attend or take an active part in meetings if they were not better distributed over the year. Efforts had, of course, been made to improve the situation, but overlapping persisted in many cases which the Committee did not always mention. As stated in paragraph 13 of the report, it would be desirable for subsidiary bodies to bear the calendar of conferences in mind when they planned the dates of their future meetings. Yet the Committee itself received the draft calendar very late. Improvements could, therefore, be made in that regard.

(Mr. Tettamanti, Argentina)

19. In the use of conference services, progress was evident. The statistics on utilization rates should still be treated with caution. The bodies with the poorest records generally used a large proportion of the time allocated to them for informal consultations. If their meetings were curtailed, there was a risk of compromising their work. One solution, as recommended in paragraph 39 of the report, might be to ask subsidiary bodies to indicate, in addition to the total length of their sessions, the number of meetings at which they would need conference services.

20. His delegation, like many others, was sorry that the Committee on Conferences had been unable to reach a definitive conclusion on its mandate. A number of points remained outstanding, including the question of the composition of the Committee, which would benefit from more equitable geographical distribution. It was, therefore, logical to extend the Committee's current mandate, thus enabling it to submit to the General Assembly a proposal commanding the broadest possible support.

21. Mr. MARTIRE (Canada) thanked the Chairman and members of the Committee on Conferences for the work they had done since the previous session, and the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services for his introduction of the Committee's report.

22. The General Assembly, in resolution 41/177 B, and the Group of 18, in its report, had each recommended changes in the mandate and status of the Committee on Conferences. While, therefore, the Committee's agreement on the question of its mandate was to be welcomed, he could only regret that no understanding had been reached on the question of its status. His delegation warmly supported the recommendations of the Group of 18, but believed that the Group's intention had not been to give the Committee a budgetary function but to extend its responsibilities in order to ensure optimum use of conference services. Complete agreement on the problem implied, of course, that certain questions associated with the budget must be resolved elsewhere. The Committee should thus continue its efforts to provide the Organization with a permanent, functionally and financially efficient body. His delegation looked forward with interest to the recommendations that the Committee would submit to the General Assembly at its forty-third session.

23. He was pleased that the number of bodies using at least 75 per cent of the conference-servicing resources placed at their disposal had increased by 10 per cent between 1985 and 1986. However, he noted that those bodies still accounted for only 58 per cent of the total and that the percentage of bodies using less than 54 per cent of their conference-servicing resources had risen from 13 to 18 per cent. Document A/AC.172/88/Add.5 showed that several bodies, which were also listed in paragraph 31 of the Committee's report, continued to show a very low utilization rate, irrespective of the value of their work. That was particularly true of the Committee on Information (25 per cent), the ad hoc Committee on the World Disarmament Conference (30 per cent) and the ad hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean (39 per cent). The Committee on Conferences should be encouraged to urge those bodies to make an effort, despite the fact that some of them had not deemed it necessary to respond to the Chairman's letters.

(Mr. Martire, Canada)

24. Drawing attention to the not inconsiderable costs of servicing the meetings of the UNICEF Executive Board, Committee on Administration and Finance, and Programme Committee, on the one hand, and the UNDP Governing Council on the other (\$1.5 million and \$3.4 million respectively), he emphasized that those costs should be the subject of full and transparent financial reports such as to allow verification of their cost-effectiveness.

25. He was pleased by the more even distribution of meetings and the reduction in the use of temporary staff, in accordance with resolution 41/213, but remarked that the draft calendar had once again been issued too late to allow members of the Committee to examine it in detail before the beginning of their session. Furthermore, as stated in document A/AC.172/1987/CRP.4, the draft could be completed only following the second regular session of the Economic and Social Council; greater co-ordination was therefore necessary among that body, the Committee on Conferences and the Secretariat. His delegation fully supported paragraph 4 of draft resolution B. The Economic and Social Council could, for example, circulate its draft calendar to members of the Committee after its second regular session, even if they then had to be informed of any subsequent changes during the Committee's formal session.

26. His delegation was also pleased by the Committee's action to control and limit documentation and particularly its consideration of the feasibility of instituting abbreviated summary records, a proposal which had merit despite problems relating to the accuracy and timely issuance of such records.

27. His country, like the European Economic Community, believed that the additional costs incurred by regional commissions in respect of meetings held away from their headquarters should be borne by the host country. His delegation looked forward to the recommendations to be made by the Committee on all those questions for consideration by the Assembly at its forty-third session.

28. Miss WILLBERG (New Zealand) recalled that her delegation, a member of the Committee on Conferences, had advocated the establishment of that body, with the essential task of streamlining the Organization's conferences and documentation.

29. The General Assembly had addressed the question of the Committee's responsibilities not only in its resolution 41/213, relating to implementation of the recommendations of the Group of 18, but also in resolution 41/177 B, in which it had expressly requested the Committee to consider the possibility of changing its terms of reference. Her delegation very much regretted that the Committee had been unable to do so. It found it difficult to accept that the Committee was unable to come to a final decision on the draft mandate (para. 74 of the report), at a time when the text, although far from satisfying her delegation, reflected a genuine desire to accommodate all the views expressed in the Committee. Having recognized that the questions of mandate, status and composition were interrelated, the Committee had decided to address the latter two once the first had been settled; there had therefore been no reason to delay consideration of the mandate. Her delegation, which was ready to take up consideration of the whole problem once

(Miss Willberg, New Zealand)

again on the same basis, also believed that the Committee's work on that subject should not have been made dependent on developments in other forums. Having reached an agreement on a revised mandate, the Committee was under an obligation to comply with the Assembly's resolution.

30. There was unfortunately no alternative other than to accept the proposal whereby a further year should be granted to the Committee, in the hope that the skill of its Chairman and members, and their commitment to reform, would permit a successful conclusion of its work. The view, mentioned by the Chairman of the Committee in his introductory statement, that the Fifth Committee might provide some guidelines to the Committee on the subject, could give rise to unduly prolonged consideration of the question: unless the Fifth Committee were to decide otherwise, the Committee should have until 1988 to adopt a mandate revised in accordance with resolution 41/213. The uncertainties associated with the implementation of new budgetary procedures, which her delegation hoped to see resolved within the year, did not provide justification for the Committee's inability to settle questions of mandate and status relating to a management function which, while vital, was of an essentially technical nature. The necessity of sound financial management and a better utilization of resources would ensure a leading role for the Committee in enforcing the discipline called for by the General Assembly.

31. Turning to various other points considered by the Committee, she warmly welcomed the proposal for a closer relationship between the Committee on Conferences and the Economic and Social Council in the preparation of the latter's calendar of conferences, thus formalizing co-operation which already existed on an informal and irregular basis. She hoped that the Committee would, in 1988, secure further improvements not only by distributing meetings throughout the year but also by reducing their number and length, in accordance with the recommendations of the Group of 18.

32. With regard to the utilization of conference services by United Nations bodies, her delegation believed, as did the Chairman of the Committee, that the bodies concerned could and should do more to reduce the underutilization of resources. As for documentation, it hoped to see further progress in implementation of the 32-page rule and noted in that connection that the setting of clear goals could have beneficial effects. With regard to the question of communications from Governments circulated as official United Nations documents, a degree of self-restraint was necessary, given the cost of producing those documents. Consideration should be given to the various other management techniques mentioned in the course of the debate, such as the "user pays" principle and the circulation of summaries of communications, the full text being available only in the original language.

33. In conclusion, her delegation fully supported the two draft resolutions submitted by the Committee on Conferences at the beginning of its report.

34. Mr. MELTKE (German Democratic Republic) paid tribute to the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments, Mr. Wyzner, and his colleagues for the valuable support they had provided to the work of the Committee on Conferences. That body bore a vital responsibility, which went far beyond so-called "technical" issues. Everything must be done to achieve the optimum utilization of available resources without jeopardizing core activities.

35. His delegation endorsed draft resolution A in the Committee's report, even though it only marked a beginning. Unfortunately, the Committee had been unable to carry out the task assigned to it in General Assembly resolutions 41/177 B and 41/213. There was a need, in particular, to change the Committee's mandate and status so that it would have the means of ensuring the efficient utilization of conference services. That did not mean authorizing the Committee to interfere in programme planning and budgeting, but rather involving it in decisions on the pattern of appropriations for conference services under the regular budget. The Committee's decisions should still be taken by consensus, and although the Committee had been unable to discharge its mandate fully, the text proposed in paragraph 74 of its report was a first step in that direction.

36. His delegation also favoured adoption of draft resolution B. There was some value in the statistical data on the utilization of conference-servicing resources, as there was in the correspondence which the Committee Chairman had exchanged with the Chairmen of other bodies. But it must be emphasized that figures did not give a picture of the work methods and the individual problems of each body. Each Committee must decide how it would function. The growing tendency to adopt decisions by consensus, even if it increased the length of sessions and meetings, was positive none the less, and the arbitrary reduction of meeting time was not necessarily a sign of greater efficiency. In that connection, his delegation endorsed the recommendation in paragraph 3 of draft resolution B.

37. In conclusion, the proposal to adjust the duration of the sessions of certain bodies on the basis of their past utilization of conference-servicing resources was unacceptable.

38. Mrs. SHEAROUSE (United States of America) thanked the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences for his statement on the work of his Committee and expressed her delegation's appreciation to Mr. Wyzner, Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments, for his statement, for the work he had accomplished as head of the Department and for the manner in which he had administered conference-servicing resources.

39. Regrettably, the Committee had been unable to take on the more prominent and influential role mandated by the General Assembly. The Committee must adopt a more assertive posture in effectively and efficiently managing conference-servicing resources. Recognizing that the Committee on Conferences must be strengthened, the Assembly, in its resolution 41/177 B, had requested it to consider, as a matter of priority, the possibility of changing its terms of reference and becoming a permanent body. In addition, in its resolution 41/213, the Assembly had decided

49. Mr. GITSOV (Bulgaria) believed, like almost all the previous speakers, that the Committee on Contributions should continue to be guided in its work by the principle of capacity to pay, based on national income and adjusted by a special relief formula for the low per capita income countries. He welcomed the positive developments in regard to statistical data, as a result of the co-operation between the Committee and the United Nations Statistical Office. The use of statistical data from private sources should be avoided and further efforts should be made to improve the United Nations data base.

50. Regarding the price-adjusted rates of exchange (PARE) method, Bulgaria concurred with those countries which considered that it could lead to distortions and that it was somewhat controversial from a political and methodological point of view, which made it rather impractical. On the question of the external debt factor, his delegation had already cautioned at the fortieth session against the risk of confusing the various types of debt and had stressed that the mere existence of debt, or even its size, might not be indicative of a country's real economic problems.

51. In that context, the Committee's suggestion that the external debt-service burden was a better index of capacity to pay deserved attention. Some delegations, however, had expressed concern at possible double counting of that factor, since interest payments on external debt were already deducted from national income. The matter should be studied further and his delegation hoped that at its forty-eighth session the Committee on Contributions would elaborate on appropriate recommendations for submission to the Fifth Committee.

52. The developing countries were, however, faced with another problem: that of securing the currency needed, among other things, to pay their assessment to the United Nations. Most of them did not enjoy the privilege of being able to pay their assessment in their national currency. The deterioration of the terms of trade thus forced them to export an increasing share of their national income to pay their debts and finance their economies. The problem also affected more developed countries whose currencies were not convertible and which must sacrifice a sizable portion of their export earnings in order to pay their contributions.

53. The Committee had been sound and realistic in deciding to retain the current method of assessment: the 10-year statistical base period, the low per capita income allowance formula, the scheme of limits to avoid excessive variations of individual rates of assessment between successive scales, and the ceiling and floor rates. The Chinese delegation had already pointed out that the method was fair and reasonable; his delegation would add that it was also reliable. He believed that the Fifth Committee would be able to work out and develop a consensus resolution on the scale of assessments.

54. Mr. MAKTARI (Yemen) said that the social and economic situation of all States should be taken into account in calculating assessments, as well as technological developments in agriculture and industry, and, in particular, the gap between the developed and developing countries in that regard. Account should also be taken of the special difficulties of countries whose income depended on the export of a

(Mr. Maktari, Yemen)

single non-renewable raw material. The criterion applied should therefore be the level of development and not the level of income.

55. The Committee should not base its calculations on the data supplied by the Statistical Office, which were not uniform because of the differences in the various countries' social and economic systems. Nor should it use the information provided by the IMF, since not all States were members of that agency. Only the official data provided by Governments should be utilized.

56. His delegation was also opposed to increasing the assessment of non-permanent members of the Security Council since it would prevent poor countries from joining that body. It was, however, in agreement with the proposal to retain the per capita income limit of \$2,200 and the 50 per cent gradient applied as part of the low per capita income allowance formula, and endorsed the formula for limiting variations in assessments between successive sessions.

The meeting rose at 5 p.m.