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New York

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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 43rd MEETING

Chairman: Mr. DINU (Romania)

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

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Progress report on the optical disk project

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\* Items considered together.

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The meeting was called to order at 12.50 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 108: ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY COORDINATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS WITH THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY (continued) (A/47/443, A/47/593 and Corr.1 and A/47/746)

AGENDA ITEM 109: JOINT INSPECTION UNIT (continued) (A/46/34 and A/46/219; A/47/16 (Part I), A/47/34, A/47/119, A/47/276, A/47/373 and A/47/755)

1. Mrs. DAES (Joint Inspection Unit) said that the Joint Inspection Unit would analyse the Committee's recommendations on how to improve its work, including recommendations relating to the subjects on which the Unit should report. In practice the Unit based its programme of work on matters of concern to delegations and specialized agencies, in addition to its reports prepared on the initiative of its Inspectors.

2. The General Assembly, in its decision 46/446, had requested the Advisory Committee to examine the functioning of the Joint Inspection Unit, and a joint JIU/ACABQ meeting had been held in June 1992. It was regrettable that little reference had been made, in the report of the Advisory Committee (A/47/755), to the results of that meeting. For its part, the Unit had welcomed the meeting as a means of improving its relations with the Advisory Committee. She regretted the delay in issuing the Advisory Committee's report on JIU, which had not left adequate time for consideration. With regard to the content of the Advisory Committee's report, the Fifth Committee would appreciate the fact that the bodies inspected by JIU were not an unbiased source of information regarding its activities, since the more efficiently the Unit worked, the more unpopular it was. Concerning the recommendation for reports that were more action-oriented, the Unit was already moving in that direction, as evidenced by its report on peace-keeping operations.

3. The Advisory Committee had failed to endorse the recommendations in the Unit's 1991 report (A/46/34) that its staffing and resources should be increased. Yet the lack of adequate resources was a problem for the Unit in terms of increasing its productivity. In that connection the General Assembly, in its resolution 45/237, had requested the Secretary-General to review the research and analytical capacity of the Unit in order to enhance its performance.

4. The Advisory Committee's recommendations were far-reaching, and in some cases coincided with the Unit's own assessment, in particular regarding the preparation of the programme of work of the Unit and the format and content of its reports.

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AGENDA ITEM 104: PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1992-1993 (continued)

Status of technological innovations in the United Nations (A/47/7/Add.8; A/C.5/47/18)

Progress report on the optical disk project (A/47/7/Add.8; A/C.5/47/18/Add.1)

Integrated management information system project (A/47/7/Add.8; A/C.5/47/27)

5. Mr. BOIN (France) said that the optical disk project was the poor relation in the technological innovations programme, and that the picture presented by the Secretary-General in his report (A/C.5/47/18/Add.1) was somewhat pessimistic. While there had been some increases in management costs, they had been offset by maintenance costs lower than the original estimates, while the cost of the project as a whole was some \$300,000 less than the original estimate approved at the forty-sixth session.

6. His delegation regretted the delays in linking missions to the optical disk system, as well as the meagre description in the report of the Secretary-General of the advantages offered by the system. In fact using optical disks would lead to an immense reduction in the storage capacity required for documents, which, in the case of Geneva alone, would mean a reduction of shelf space from some 42 kilometres to less than 1 kilometre.

7. In contrast, the fourth progress report of the Secretary-General on the integrated management information system (IMIS) (A/C.5/47/27) contained a long list of benefits. While not denying the validity of those benefits, there was, to say the least, a lack of balance between the reports on the optical disk and IMIS projects. In addition, his delegation noted with regret the scant attention paid to training staff in the new technologies; they could hardly be expected to succeed without a serious training component. Indeed, the amount allocated for training in 1993 was less than for 1992.

8. With regard to the allocation of IMIS expenditures, the percentages referred to by the Advisory Committee (A/47/7/Add.8, para. 23) had been determined before the expansion of peace-keeping activities, so that in effect there was a disproportionate charge to the regular budget. The matter should be addressed at the resumed session of the Committee early in 1993, and a higher percentage charged to peace-keeping operations. That would release resources in the regular budget which could then be used to expedite the optical disk project, particularly the linking of missions to the system, and the training of staff in the use of the new technologies.

9. Mr. MICHALSKI (United States of America) regretted the Advisory Committee's recommendation that the report on the status of technological innovations should no longer be issued, since it provided a useful overview. With regard to the optical disk project, he asked whether the contract had been open to competitive bidding. With respect to IMIS, he asked how many posts would be eliminated as a result of the introduction of the new technology, which should lead to substantial savings. It might, for example, no longer be necessary to have a Deputy Controller.

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10. Mr. DUVAL (Officer-in-charge, Programme Planning and Budget Division) said that, in response to questions about the optical disk project, any appropriations could be applied to the upgrading of hardware. The delay in linking missions at Geneva to the system was due to a problem with the Swiss telecommunications system. In New York, the connection of missions was anticipated for early 1993. In reply to the representative of France, he remarked that the optical disk system would have major advantages, but so far it was difficult to calculate the savings. More specific data would be available when phase III was implemented in 1994-1995. Training for the optical disk project and the integrated management information system (IMIS) would receive high priority in the 1994-1995 budget, and if the appropriations were not sufficient, he would ask ACABQ for an adjustment.

11. He informed the United States representative that no specific reference had been made to staff reductions resulting from IMIS. It was difficult so far to quantify savings on staff costs but they were anticipated and would be reported as soon as possible.

12. Mr. PATTERSON, (Chief Editor, Office of Conference Services) said that, in respect of contracts for the optical disk project, standard international competitive bidding procedures had been followed. In November 1990, a request for proposals had been sent to 16 firms which met the technical requirements. Replies had been received from three, then reviewed by an international departmental committee. The contract had been awarded to the firm making the lowest bid and meeting the technical requirements.

13. Mr. BOIN (France) inquired whether the cost-sharing formula for IMIS was feasible from the budgetary standpoint, and whether the revised distribution of expenditure by budget categories would be available for examination at the resumed session in February.

14. Mr. DUVAL (Officer-in-charge, Programme Planning and Budget Division) said that the distribution of expenditure by budgetary category was under study. Before submitting that information to ACABQ, the amount of change over the previous year had been studied. The provisional conclusion was that the share to be provided from peace-keeping had tripled, which had been compensated by a significant decline in extrabudgetary financing. The share from the regular budget had remained virtually unchanged. A detailed report would be submitted to ACABQ, and the new information should be available before the resumed session.

15. Ms. SJOLANDER (Sweden), speaking on behalf of the five Nordic countries, said that they were satisfied with the progress achieved in the report of the Secretary-General on the integrated management information system project (IMIS) (A/C.5/47/27). They were encouraged to learn that the project was on the right track and would meet its high expectations. It would replace the many individual systems developed over the years. Other organizations within the United Nations system had expressed interest in IMIS, which could lead to common standards of accounting. The benefits would depend, however, on

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(Ms. Sjolander, Sweden)

installation, management and technical support. The Nordic countries agreed with ACABQ on the importance of training and the transfer of knowledge. The allocation of adequate resources for training was a good investment, and it was encouraging that it would be given high priority.

16. The CHAIRMAN suggested that the Committee should recommend to the General Assembly that it should take note of the report of the Secretary-General on the status of technological innovations in the United Nations and the progress report on the optical disk project.

17. It was so decided.

18. The CHAIRMAN suggested that the Committee should recommend to the General Assembly that it should take note of the report of the Secretary-General on the integrated management information system project (IMIS) and should endorse the recommendations of ACABQ thereon.

19. It was so decided.

Honoraria payable to members of organs and subsidiary organs of the United Nations (A/C.5/47/45)

20. Mr. MICHALSKI (United States of America) said, with regard to the payment of honoraria payable to members of United Nations organs, that over the years his delegation had opposed such payments in principle as unjustified. It could not accept that such payments should be adjusted for inflation, since the per diem granted to members was frequently adjusted. Further, his delegation saw no linkage between the workload of a member of an organization and honoraria. While many treaties establishing those organizations provided for payment of honoraria to members, they did not set any rate. Therefore, he proposed that the Committee should reduce such payments to the symbolic amount of one dollar per year in order to ensure that treaty requirements were met without undue expenditure.

21. Another issue in the report concerned the payment of spousal benefits to members of ACABQ. In recent years, members had endured lengthy separations from their families, and that serious issue must be given consideration. However, his delegation had some questions regarding paragraph 55 of the Secretary-General's report. In paragraph 13 of its report (A/47/7/Add.10), ACABQ had refrained from comment, since the matter involved the Advisory Committee itself. His delegation believed that to be the proper course of action, and hoped that, in future, all matters regarding the financing of the Advisory Committee would be dealt with directly in the Fifth Committee. Given the interest of delegations in that question, it should be addressed in informal consultations.

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22. Mr. MSELLE (Chairman, Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) said that the Secretary-General had discussed the payment of honoraria for members of six committees/organs in his report (A/C.5/47/45). Travel and subsistence allowances were also paid to members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and upon its entry into force, they would be paid to members of the Committee established by the International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. The Advisory Committee had noted that there were no consistent criteria for the payment of honoraria, and that the Secretary-General's report was not comprehensive to the extent of including whether other bodies in the United Nations system warranted such payments. However, the Secretary-General had not been involved in the development of the decisions or the rationale for payments. The General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to keep those levels under review. He had recommended a 25 per cent increase in honoraria, since they had remained unchanged since 1981, and ACABQ agreed with that recommendation.

23. Turning to paragraphs 54, 55 and 57 of the Secretary-General's report, he said that there were examples of payment of travel for family members of persons other than Secretariat staff working for United Nations organs, therefore, the proposal did not break new ground. The amount of money involved was small and it was unlikely that additional appropriations would be required. The interest of members of delegations in that question was not related to the amount but to the question of principle and the fear of establishing a precedent that might widen the application of such payments.

24. The problem of the conditions under which some members of ACABQ were forced to work must be addressed sympathetically. Currently, ACABQ required its members to be away from their families for over eight months per year, and during 1993 that period of time could be even longer. The members would appreciate a speedy solution to an increasingly unbearable sacrifice. Comments had been made that any member of ACABQ who could not attend meetings should resign and allow another to take the position and that appointees should be made aware of what to expect. That was not the best solution, nor was it fair, however. No one could have anticipated that ACABQ would be meeting for over eight months per year. It had also been said that all members should be based in New York, but it was not proper for members to serve on their mission staffs in addition. Over the years, it had been found that a mix of New York-based and overseas members was best for providing a balance. Therefore, he respectfully requested the Fifth Committee to consider a small human rights measure to ensure that such a balance could be maintained.

25. Mr. BOIN (France) said that, while he was not unsympathetic to the situation of ACABQ members, he would like to know the daily and monthly per diem rate granted to the members and whether it declined over the course of their stay in New York. The financial situation of the members coming from their capitals did not appear to be critical, and he objected to the linkage of their situation with the many serious human rights situations with which the United Nations was currently dealing.

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26. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) shared the opinions and concerns expressed by the Chairman of the Advisory Committee. On a related matter, he noted that the Chairman had been asked to coordinate the informal consultations on travel expenses for members of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) from developing countries. Even if a decision could not be reached on the comprehensive study of the question of honoraria, a decision should be taken as soon as possible to allow reimbursement of travel expenses, on an exceptional basis, for UNCITRAL members from the developing countries.

27. Mr. FONTAINE (Cuba) pointed out that the decisions concerning the honoraria payable to members of subsidiary organs were not taken by the Secretary-General, who was only communicating the decisions of the bodies concerned. Careful consideration should be given to that arrangement and the procedures followed, and the question could be discussed in exceptionally informal consultations.

28. With regard to the Advisory Committee, he fully endorsed the remarks made by the Chairman of ACABQ and agreed that the matter should be discussed further in informal consultations. In addition, the requests for information made by a number of delegations should also be dealt with during those consultations.

29. Mr. BOIN (France), speaking on a point of order, said that the Committee was faced with an ethical problem, since it could not at the same time be both the judge and the judged, and the Advisory Committee had been right to refrain from commenting. As the Committee was not in a position to consider the matter objectively, it should defer all discussion on it for the time being.

30. Mr. CHUINKAM (Cameroon) welcomed the remarks of the representative of Morocco, but pointed out that two other related matters needed to be taken into consideration during the informal consultations concerned, namely confidence-building in Central Africa and the denuclearization of Africa.

31. Ms. SHENWICK (United States of America) agreed that, in view of its sensitivity, the matter should be referred to informal consultations. The decision of the Advisory Committee not to comment on the provisions in paragraph 55 of the report (A/C.5/47/45) represented a step in the right direction, in that it would avoid any appearance of impropriety. The principle that individuals who could benefit from a decision should not participate in such a decision was extremely important. She hoped that it would set a precedent for dealing with other matters which came before the Advisory Committee in future, such as compensation for the Chairman and other members. However, she wondered how that concern could be reconciled with the remarks made by the Chairman of the Advisory Committee.

32. Her delegation did not believe that, in such cases, the Secretary-General's recommendations should be simply accepted without question, but rather that procedures should be established allowing for dialogue and debate, so as to ensure that adequate controls were exercised and decisions implemented responsibly. The Fifth Committee could play an increased role in that regard.

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33. Mr. BAUDOT (Acting Controller) pointed out that the proposals under consideration were those of the Secretary-General put forward in a report of the Secretary-General. They had been submitted because the Secretary-General believed that everything possible should be done to facilitate the work of a committee which was of crucial importance to the functioning of the Organization. He further pointed out that no link had been made between the defrayment of costs for spouses and the level of the emoluments or per diem allowances received by members of the Advisory Committee. Such per diem allowances were not exceptional and were comparable to those paid to various other bodies.

34. Mr. BOIN (France) wondered whether the Acting Controller could give the figure in dollars for the monthly per diem allowance paid to members of the Advisory Committee. He also wondered whether the same amount was paid each month for eight months or whether the payments were degressive in nature. The information should be made public and not merely provided in informal consultations as suggested by the representative of Cuba.

35. Mr. STITT (United Kingdom) asked whether there was any difference in the position of expert members of the Advisory Committee and that of individuals appointed to other expert bodies in the system.

36. Mr. INOMATA (Japan) said that, in his understanding, the honoraria provided to the various treaty bodies, such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, were paid on an exceptional basis and were not intended to set a precedent. Unfortunately, the exception seemed to have become the rule. He wanted to know whether any other bodies referred to in the report of the Secretary-General were receiving honoraria on an exceptional basis. In addition, the Chairman of the Advisory Committee had referred to a review of the modalities for financing the costs of treaty bodies chargeable to the regular budget. The Advisory Committee had not yet submitted any report on that matter to the General Assembly and he wondered what progress had been made. He agreed that the question as a whole should be referred to informal consultations for further consideration.

37. The CHAIRMAN suggested that, since it was clearly not possible to take a decision at the present juncture, the matter should be referred to informal consultations for further discussion.

38. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 3 p.m.