

Third session

PROPOSAL FOR THE ADOPTION OF SPANISH AS ONE OF THE
WORKING LANGUAGES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLYReport of the Fifth Committee

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1. The General Assembly, at its second regular session, adopted on 15 November 1947 resolution 154 (II) requesting the Secretary-General to study all aspects of the proposal for the adoption of Spanish as one of the working languages of the General Assembly and to report to its next regular session. In pursuance of this request, the Secretary-General, on 27 August 1948, presented a report (A/624) setting forth the legal position of the General Assembly and other organs of the United Nations in this matter, certain observations on the practical evolution of the present rules of procedure concerning languages, the financial implications of the proposal and certain of its administrative consequences. The view was expressed by the Secretary-General that the adoption of Spanish as a regular working language would involve, for the General Assembly alone, additional costs amounting to \$347,466 while if the other organs of the United Nations, under the terms of the Charter and in continuance of the uniformity hitherto observed, were concurrently to modify their rules of procedure, the additional cost for staff and facilities would be increased by a further \$888,565. The Secretary-General was further of the opinion that technical and administrative difficulties consequent on the adoption of the proposal would adversely affect the efficient organization and functioning of the Secretariat.

2. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions informed the General Assembly, on 27 September 1948, in its third report of 1948 (A/657), that it concurred in the views expressed by the Secretary-General and endorsed, in particular, the opinion that, in the present circumstances of financial stringency, it would not be advisable to impose upon the Members of the United Nations the additional burden which the adoption of the proposal would represent.

3. Following upon instructions given by the General Assembly on 24 September 1948, the Fifth Committee reviewed, at its 118th, 119th and 137th meetings, the political, legal, administrative and budgetary aspects of this problem in the light of the reports submitted by the Secretary-General and the Advisory Committee. In the course of the general discussion, the Secretary-General was requested to furnish additional data concerning the position of Spanish, not as a working, but as an official, language of the Organization. Specific questions addressed to the Secretary-General related to the following: the effect which the reduction recommended by the Advisory Committee (second report of 1948, A/598, paragraph 146) in the estimates for 1949 of the Translation Division would have on the production of documents in the Spanish language; the extent to which reductions made in the budget estimates for 1948 had influenced the use of Spanish; the number of documents published in 1947 and 1948 in the five official languages; the extent to which the Secretariat was in a position to satisfy requests made by any delegation for translation of documents under rule 51 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly; the extent to which documents in Spanish would be provided during 1949 and the liquidation of the backlog. Answers to these questions were furnished by the Secretary-General in a further report to the Fifth Committee on 14 October 1948 (A/C.5/237).

4. Delegations supporting the proposal expressed serious dissatisfaction with the de facto status which Spanish at present enjoyed as an official language of the United Nations, having regard to the fact that it was the language spoken by eighteen Member States, or approximately one-third of the total membership of the Organization. There was no assurance, moreover, that requests made under rule 51 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly could, in fact, be met without adding to the already large backlog of documents awaiting translation, while any new reduction in the amount to be appropriated for translation services was bound to have, in the opinion of those delegations, a seriously adverse effect on the output of documents in the non-working languages. The view of such delegations, therefore, was that the situation could be satisfactorily resolved only by the formal adoption of Spanish as a working language. The matter, moreover, was one which transcended mere budgetary considerations. By denying Spanish its rightful place among the working languages of the United Nations, the future work and effectiveness of the Organization itself was liable to suffer. On the other hand, by affording to the largest language group within the Organization the possibility of working in its own language, the truly international character of the United Nations would be more permanently

assured and the spirit of international goodwill and co-operation, on which its success must ultimately depend, would be strengthened.

5. Delegations opposing the proposal were unanimous in paying tribute to the cultural contribution which the Spanish-speaking peoples had made to the United Nations and the ideals for which it stood. They did not feel, however, that the measure of the participation of any one country or group of countries in the work of the United Nations was in any way directly dependent on the use of the language of such countries as a working language of the Organization. The question of adding to the working languages should therefore be considered and decided primarily from the practical and budgetary point of view. In the opinion of these delegations, the formal adoption of Spanish as a working language would not be conducive to greater administrative efficiency, particularly if the same status were to be accorded to the remaining non-working official languages - Chinese and Russian. In this connection, the representatives of China and of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics stated that, while supporting the maximum exploitation of all facilities within present rules and practices that enable each and every Member of the United Nations to participate in the Organization's work with the greatest possible efficiency, they could not agree to the adoption of Spanish as a working language unless Chinese and Russian were also adopted as such. Several delegations, while of the opinion that there were no valid reasons why any modifications of existing rules and practices should not apply equally to all non-working official languages, felt, nevertheless, that the technical and administrative problems this would involve and the heavy financial burden it would entail did not warrant such a departure from established practice at the present time.

6. At the conclusion of the discussion, the Chairman ruled that, since no specific motion had been presented to the Committee, the only question to be decided was whether or not the Committee approved the conclusions set forth in the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/657). This procedure having been accepted by the Committee, a vote by roll-call was taken with the following results:

In favour: Australia, Belgium, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Canada, China, Denmark, France, India, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Union of South Africa, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United Kingdom, United States of America, Yugoslavia.

Against: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Uruguay, Venezuela.

Abstaining: Afghanistan, Brazil, Burma, Ethiopia, Greece.

The conclusions contained in the report of the Advisory Committee were thus approved by 21 votes in favour to 20 against, with 5 abstentions.

7. The Fifth Committee decided therefore to recommend to the General Assembly the adoption of the following resolution:

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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

RESOLVES that the conclusions set forth in the third report of 1948 of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/657) be approved.