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PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1980-1981

Arabic language services for the General Assembly and its Main Committees

Report by the Secretariat

1. This report summarizes the present situation with regard to the provision of Arabic language services to the General Assembly and its Main Committees under General Assembly resolution 3190 (XXVIII). It should be read in conjunction with documents A/C.5/33/L.49 and A/C.5/34/L.9. 1/ A separate report, as required by the General Assembly resolution 32/205, is being submitted on Arabic language services for UNCTAD.

Interpretation

2. The Arabic Interpretation Section is located at Geneva and is expected, strengthened by free-lance recruitment as required, to service the General Assembly and its Main Committees during General Assembly sessions. The manning table provides for 17 posts; 11 are filled and one is in the course of being filled. Efforts continue to fill the 5 remaining posts and, in spite of difficulties that persist in securing qualified staff, it is hoped that the Section will be at full strength early next year.

1/ Further background references are:

1973: A/C.5/1564 and Add.1; A/9008/Add.29; A/9464;
1976: A/C.5/31/60 and Corr.1; A/31/8/Add.26; A/31/470, paras. 83-89;
1977: A/C.5/32/9; A/C.5/32/42/Rev.1; A/32/8/Add.17; A/32/490,
paras. 59-75.

3. The Section, together with the free-lance recruitment it has arranged, has been able to meet its commitments to the General Assembly, including short-notice requests. 2/

4. It is recognized that the quality of Arabic interpretation is uneven. This results from:

(a) The insufficient number of interpreters on the permanent staff;

(b) A shortage of qualified interpreters who can work both into and from Arabic. This shortage is due in part to the element of competition. Many organizations try to obtain the services of free-lance Arabic interpreters, often during the same period they are needed by the United Nations. To the extent that other users can predict their needs further in advance, and with more assurance than the United Nations, or can recruit more flexibly, the United Nations is sometimes left with less qualified or experienced interpreters.

Continuing efforts to remedy this situation are directed, as stated above, to filling all existing vacancies and to give intensive training to staff interpreters as required. The possibility might also be envisaged of having a small high-quality Arabic interpretation section in New York. Of course, any help from Arabic-speaking countries in locating and training candidates (through more United Nations-oriented interpreters' schools, for example) would be welcome.

Verbatim reporting

5. As regards the General Assembly, verbatim records are provided in Arabic (as in other languages) for plenary meetings and meetings of the First Committee. Under a decision taken each year by the General Assembly, the Special Political Committee may, on specific request, obtain transcriptions of the debates of some of its meetings or portions thereof.

6. The Department of Conference Services has no permanent Arabic Verbatim Reporting Unit but, instead, recruits temporary reporters and revisers for the periods during which they are required.

7. Arabic verbatim records are produced in the same general conditions and under the same deadlines as records in other languages. Each meeting is covered by a relay team of 8 verbatim reporters who take notes during the meeting and then produce a record which is checked for accuracy, edited for grammar and syntax and compared to the record in the original language by two revisers. Each team can

2/ The Section at Geneva provided 479 interpreter-weeks of service at Headquarters during 1978. Also in that year it provided 372 interpreter-weeks of service in Geneva and at other locations other than New York; this figure represented an increase of 122 interpreter-weeks over 1977. In 1979, the requirements of the eighth session of the Conference on the Law of the Sea - at Geneva and at Headquarters - and of UNCTAD V at Manila substantially increased the workload for Arabic interpreters.

cover 2 consecutive meetings a day, so that 2 complete teams, i.e., 16 reporters and 4 revisers, are required during sessions of the General Assembly, when there are usually 2 simultaneous meetings requiring verbatim records both mornings and afternoons.

8. Reporters and revisers are usually linguists who, for the most part, have successfully passed the United Nations competitive examinations that have been held these past few years. New examinations are envisaged in the near future to develop the roster of qualified temporary assistance upon which the Organization can draw when necessary. It might be noted, in this connexion, that the production of verbatim records in Arabic is somewhat more exacting than in other languages since an Arabic record usually contains a very high proportion of statements delivered in other languages, which entail the need to check a higher proportion of texts against the original version, and since Arabic reporters and particularly revisers are quite frequently called upon to check also the accuracy of the rendition in other languages of statements originally delivered in Arabic.

Translation 3/

9. According to the administrative and financial implications contained in document A/C.5/1564 dated 29 November 1973, which formed the basis for the provision of Arabic language services to the General Assembly and its Main Committees under resolution 3190 (XXVIII), the yearly volume of translation work envisaged for the Arabic Translation Service as a result of the inclusion of Arabic among the official and working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees was to be 22,500 pages. A staffing table with 34 permanent translation posts (23 translators and 11 revisers) was established to undertake this task. In addition, provision was made for six temporary Professional staff during sessions of the General Assembly to handle the heavier concentration of documents and summary records as well as to publish the United Nations Journal in Arabic. This temporary assistance could be expected to translate an additional 750 pages besides the Journal workload, thus bringing the total yearly volume of translations to 23,250 pages.

10. Thus, the capacity of the Service amounts to some 1,840 pages a month in the nine-month period from the end of the General Assembly session around mid-December to the beginning of the session about mid-September and some 2,230 pages in each of the three months of the session, when additional staff is available.

11. The actual flow of work, however, does not correspond to this fairly even

3/ This text deals with the subject of this note - that is, provision of Arabic language services to the General Assembly and its Main Committees. The requirement to provide Arabic language services to special conferences and to translate certain specific material into Arabic - e.g. The United Nations Disarmament Yearbook - has had an effect on the ability of the Arabic Translation Service to constrict its work to the needs of the General Assembly. This has arisen as a result of the often very short deadlines for the material involved which have dictated reliance on available resources.

pattern. The input of new documentation is light and much below capacity from the end of the session to the end of April. In the period from the beginning of May to mid-September, when the bulk of pre-session documentation is received, the input starts to increase, catching up with and then exceeding the capacity of the Service by a substantial margin, most particularly towards the end of July and throughout the months of August and September. During the regular session of the General Assembly, when some 6,500 pages of summary records are received, the total volume of documentation - "pre-session" still being submitted, "in-session", and records - amounts to more than twice as much as the capacity of the Service. As, under these circumstances, the Service cannot be expected to translate the total workload of a current basis, priority is usually given to those categories of documents that are indispensable to the discussion of the various agenda items, and the bulk of summary records and a number of informative reports are translated later, in the periods when the input falls below capacity.

12. The total volume of General Assembly work assigned to the Service in an average year now amounts to more than 24,000 pages, of which only about 2,000 pages are received from the end of the session to the end of April. From the beginning of May to mid-September, the volume of material received climbs to some 7,000 pages, about half of which are accounted for in the period August-mid-September alone. Since the capacity of the Service during the latter period, as is clear from paragraph 10 above, is only about 2,760 pages, the translation workload in excess of capacity amounts to some 740 pages. Finally, during the three months of the session from mid-September to about mid-December, the approximately 8,500 pages of documents received exceed the Service's capacity of 6,690 pages by 1,800 pages. At the same time, the volume of summary records received, some 6,500 pages, is totally in excess of capacity.

13. It is clear, then, that if the Service is to complete the total volume of the required translation within the specified time-limits, a sufficient number of additional staff must be recruited. Document A/C.5/34/L.9 indicates the number of translators (20), revisers (7) and typists (20) estimated to be required to deal with summary records alone. The problem of the peaking of the pre-session documentation workload from August could be met by increasing the strength of the short-term complement referred to in paragraph 9 above, from 6 to, say, 9 (6 translators and 3 revisers) and to advance their recruitment dates - and those of some of the short-term typists - to 1 August.

Conference typing

14. No substantial difficulty has been experienced in filling the permanent Arabic conference typist posts with competent staff, and the establishment has been able to deal effectively with the output of the Arabic Translation Service.

15. Similarly, it has been possible to obtain the necessary number of conference typists to support the short-term verbatim reporters and additional translators and revisers recruited during the General Assembly. The roster of non-permanent staff used for this and other short-term needs has, however, become tight, and it will be necessary to hold, in due course, another testing campaign to replenish it.

Printing and reproduction; distribution

16. The approved manning table includes three Professional posts and one General Service post for the Arabic team of the Copy Preparation Unit. This represents a total capacity of 12,000 manuscript pages for copy preparation and 4,800 printed pages for proofreading. This represents an average amount of General Assembly meeting records, supplements and annexes which require to be typeset and printed.

17. The actual volume of work submitted for typesetting and printing in the Arabic language has been below that amount and, for the time being, one Professional proofreader/copy-preparer staff member, with temporary strengthening on occasion, have been able to deal with requirements. The departure of a Professional officer in May of this year created serious, but temporary, difficulties; recruitment of his replacement is under way.

18. The Reproduction Section has been able to deal effectively with the reproduction of Arabic documentation, as has the Distribution Section with regard to its obligations.

Library services

19. The Library has 7 Professional and 4 General Service staff members of Arabic mother-tongue. Post grades range from P-2 to P-4 for Professionals and from M-2 to G-4 for General Service. Most of the staff are either on permanent or extended fixed-term contracts.

20. An active acquisition and dissemination programme for Arabic materials is maintained, in consultation with a number of Arabic-speaking States. Arabic newspapers from 17 countries are received and displayed in the Periodicals Reading Room, as are 17 periodicals and a large number of permanent mission releases and information sheets. A total of 46 periodical titles are checked in and routed. Official government documents and gazettes are received as part of the general obligation of Member States to furnish such materials to the Library. In 1979, about 700 monographs and serials were received and processed, with 210 titles on order.

21. Twenty-four Arabic titles of periodicals are searched regularly for articles to be indexed for Current Bibliographical Information, CBI, a current awareness list which also includes monographic titles received in Arabic. In 1978, 480 articles were selected and cited in the publication. In addition, since 1974, the Library has compiled and issued in Arabic the indexes to proceedings of the regular and special sessions of the General Assembly. Document and regular reference services are provided in Arabic on an ongoing basis.
