



General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/44/221
18 April 1989

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Forty-fourth session
Items 129 and 130 of the preliminary list*

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Representation of organizations of the United Nations system
at conferences and meetings - Part A. The United Nations

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Representation of organizations of the United Nations system at conferences and meetings - Part A. The United Nations" (A/43/586).

* A/44/50/Rev.1.

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the management of representation of organizations of the United Nations system at conferences and meetings (A/43/586) is a useful and well-considered review of the complex issue it addresses. In particular, the report brings out clearly and supports with statistics, the variety of factors that must be balanced in order to achieve proper representation of the United Nations at meetings and conferences, namely, substantive responsibilities and interests, the value of ceremonies and celebrations, costs - both direct and from officials' services - lost to sending offices and the total number of United Nations officials appropriately present at any event. On the whole, the Secretary-General welcomed the report, which is timely and relevant given his efforts to ensure maximum restraint in official travel in the light of the serious financial situation of the Organization.

2. As noted in paragraph 5 of its introduction, the report is based in large part on experience in implementing the guidelines contained in the Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/207 of 5 December 1984 and, to a considerably lesser extent, on initial implementation of the revised version of that bulletin, ST/SGB/207/Rev.1 of 16 December 1987. This divided basis for the report is important because the latter bulletin greatly strengthened the control of travel to conferences and meetings that had already been conferred by the earlier bulletin on the Representation Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. ST/SGB/207/Rev.1 does so by requiring that all requests for such travel be submitted for approval by the Director of the Representation Unit on a standard form (SG.30). It also stipulates that tickets can be obtained only if the travel authorization form (PT.8) certifies to the financial and travel offices that the authorization of the Representation Unit has been obtained.

3. With the help of this procedure, the Representation Unit has been able to monitor and control conference and meeting travel much more effectively than in the past. As noted in the report, the form and the attachments usually submitted with it provide much more information than in the past. This is important both for the immediate decision on approval and for comparison and analysis. Thus, this information is of great help in determining all the proposed United Nations attendees at a given meeting who may come from several different offices and duty stations. The form and the information also permit for the first time the analysis and presentation in standard formats of costs, number of travellers, and type and location of meetings. The Representation Unit is now computerizing this analysis and presentation.

4. The early experience with ST/SGB/207/Rev.1, partially described in the report, suggests that, if properly administered, the new procedures can do much to control and monitor effectively United Nations travel to conferences and meetings. However, any control of travel must finally rest on the good judgement and self-restraint of the Organization's officials. Thus, any form of travel control can succeed ultimately only if it encourages and achieves a rational and restrained attitude towards attendance at meetings among potential participants and their supervisors.

COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC PARAGRAPHS OF THE JIU REPORT**Paragraph 19**

5. The Secretary-General concurs with the report on the need for all departments to provide internal instructions or written guidelines specifically on representation with emphasis on its quality and purpose.

Paragraph 23

6. The Secretary-General concurs that greater efforts should be made by concerned departments to submit their requests for travel to the Representation Unit in accordance with the time-limits specified in paragraphs 3 and 8 of ST/SGB/207/Rev.1. This is necessary to avoid delays and to ensure effective and useful participation by United Nations representatives.

Paragraph 52

7. The Secretary-General takes note of the comments concerning travel by representatives of the regional commissions to attend meetings held within their region and organized by themselves. A substantial part of the regular budget is obligated for these meetings and many of them are attended by officials from other departments and offices in the Secretariat. They cannot therefore be exempted from the approval required by ST/SGB/207/Rev.1. On the other hand, a very large number of these meetings do require special procedures, suited to the individual needs of the respective regional economic commissions, to ensure the timely exchange of requests and responses. The commissions and the Representation Unit are working these out together through consultations and experience.

Recommendation 1

8. The Secretary-General agrees in general with the recommendation. In early 1989, he will communicate to all United Nations departmental officers the results and findings of the first full year of experience in implementing ST/SGB/207/Rev.1. The request suggested by this recommendation will be included.

Recommendation 2

9. The Secretary-General agrees with the report that the work-load already created by the implementation of ST/SGB/207/Rev.1 has indeed overburdened the Representation Unit. This overload is likely to increase as all departments and units become familiar with this directive and its procedures. The Unit in particular will need more clerical support. Given the Organization's financial crisis and overall reduction in posts, increasing the staffing of the Representation Unit can be neither easy nor immediate. However, this will be reviewed at the beginning of 1989, when the results of the first full year of implementing ST/SGB/207/Rev.1 are available and analysed.

Recommendation 3

10. Although, indeed, passive participation often has limited value, there are occasions when it is more than the purely ceremonial or courtesy attendance suggested in the report. It is frequently valuable for a single, knowledgeable United Nations official to observe a meeting and obtain documentation on behalf of a number of interested offices and departments, rather than for them all to send representatives. The Representation Unit does, however, carefully monitor all types of participation in meetings.

11. While the Secretary-General approves the purpose of recommendation 3 (b), it is not practical to establish a fixed general limit on participation. Departments have wide ranges of responsibilities. On the one hand, general meetings (e.g. those of the Economic and Social Council) and technical meetings on broad topics (e.g. women, statistics) may very well require more than one representative from a department. On the other hand, careful reporting on a meeting by one official can often serve the needs and interests of many other offices and departments. The Representation Unit strongly encourages this practice. Thus here, as in recommendation 3 (a), the most important consideration is not a fixed limit, but rather effective co-operation and good understanding among the department(s) concerned and the Representation Unit as they consider jointly the appropriate qualifications and number of participants at a particular meeting.

12. As noted in the report, the Organization already makes broad use of the directors of the United Nations information centres, resident co-ordinators of the United Nations Development Programme and other officials of the United Nations system already on the scene, to represent it in meetings. The Representation Unit strongly encourages this practice. However, in addition to the question of technical qualifications, those officials may not be of appropriate rank for certain kinds of meetings (e.g., at those at the ministerial level).

Recommendation 4

13. The Representation Unit, in close co-operation with the Programme Planning and Budget Division of the Department of Administration and Management makes every effort to assist in holding down travel and per diem costs through taking early action to take advantage of discount fares, encouraging the holding of meetings at Headquarters, discouraging attendance at meetings in remote locations and promoting the "bunching" of meetings, to avoid repeated trips to the same location.

Recommendation 5

14. As regards recommendation 5 (a), both travel officers and approving officers should, as a practice, double-check that the executive and/or administrative officers have properly exercised their responsibility. This should not constitute, however, a justification for the certifying officers not to perform their functions properly. In view of the above, the assertion of the Inspectors that approving officers do not usually look into the details of the code number unless there are obvious mistakes, is too sweeping. The distinction between objects of expenditure codes 222 and 242 is not left entirely to the discretion of administrative and

certifying officers. The approving officers have, in many cases, brought to the attention of the responsible administrative and/or certifying officers, the inappropriate use of objects of expenditures in cases when the object code utilized did not correctly reflect the specific purpose of travel.

15. Travel subject to review by the Representation Unit may be recorded either under object code 222 (see recommendation 5 (b)), if it refers to technical servicing, or 223 if it is of a representational nature. Travel that is not subject to the approval of the Representation Unit should be either coded under object of expenditure 242, or under common staff costs (home leave, representation, etc.), as appropriate. As indicated in paragraphs 6 and 7 of ST/SGB/207/Rev.1, it is the responsibility of the executive and/or administrative officers to determine whether or not the travel should be submitted to the Representation Unit for approval, and in the affirmative case to indicate on the PT.8 that it has been approved.

16. A specific object of expenditure code for "representational travel" currently exists, namely code 252 (see recommendation 5 (c)). This code, however, is not commonly utilized by certifying officers. In order to consolidate both "representational travel" and "travel for technical support" under the same heading of "travel of staff to official meetings", it is proposed that object of expenditure code 223 be utilized for "representational travel". Certifying officers will determine whether to utilize object 222 or 223 on the basis of the definition of the travel in question provided in form SG.30. It is hoped that this measure will facilitate identification of the expenditures for "representational travel" and eliminate the miscoding cases referred to by the Inspectors in paragraph 91 of the report.

Recommendation 6

17. The Secretary-General supports this recommendation, which is already being implemented by the Representation Unit and some departments. The Unit is co-operating to this end with the remaining departments. The question of the most effective form of monitoring will also be a subject of the early 1989 review of the experience in 1988.

Recommendation 7

18. Limited experiments with technological innovations are already under way. So far, the use of facsimile machines to permit control and translation of documents at Headquarters for meetings at locations away from Headquarters and other forms of off-site conference support services, have proved more immediately useful than vanguard techniques such as teleconferencing. However, teleconferencing for representation clearly has important future potential for meetings that are largely for the exchange of information or expertise and that do not require informal personal discussions among the participants outside of the formal sessions. The Secretary-General will continue to explore that potential.