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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1976-1977

Arabic language services in the United Nations

Twenty-seventh report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on Arabic language services in the United Nations (A/C.5/31/60 and Corr.1).
2. The Committee recalled that the General Assembly decided, in resolution 3190 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973, to include Arabic among the official and the working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees. In the fourth preambular paragraph of the resolution the Assembly noted "with appreciation the assurances of the Arab States Members of the United Nations that they will meet collectively the costs of implementing the present resolution during the first three years". Arabic language services for the General Assembly have been financed in pursuance of the Assembly resolution under the Trust Fund for Arabic Language Services. As at 1 January 1977, the related expenses will be met from within the programme budget for the biennium 1976-1977. 1/
3. In the introduction to his report (paras. 2 and 3), the Secretary-General points out the difficulties encountered in the first three years of operation of the Arabic language services.
4. In view of the fact that initially Arabic interpretation was needed at Headquarters only during sessions of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General decided not to establish a permanent service but to rely on hiring free-lance Arabic interpreters for the duration of the Assembly. There is now only one established

1/ The proposed programme budget for the biennium 1976-1977 included as net growth the amount of \$1.9 million for 1977 to implement General Assembly resolution 3190 (XXVIII) (Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirtieth Session, Supplement No. 6 (A/10006), vol. VII, para. 23.4).

post (at the P-5 level) for Arabic interpretation ^{2/} and provision has been made for 18 free-lance interpreters. In paragraph 4 of his report the Secretary-General states that the Organization has never been able to recruit the full complement of Arabic interpreters. The problem has been compounded by the fact that during the three-year period since the adoption of resolution 3190 (XXVIII) the General Assembly took decisions to provide Arabic interpretation for certain special conferences.

5. In paragraph 6 of his report, the Secretary-General refers to the high cost of providing Arabic interpretation on a temporary assistance basis as compared with the cost of a permanent service. He includes a table showing the cost of providing free-lance Arabic interpretation versus estimated cost of permanent staff.

6. The Secretary-General describes the problems of the Arabic Translation Service in paragraphs 7 to 9 of his report. According to him the Service lacks the capacity to meet all requests within the required deadlines. At the same time, the Secretary-General indicates that output rose from 3,419 standard pages in 1973 to 6,443 in 1974 and 18,748 in 1975. In 1976 it is expected to reach 23,500 pages.

7. In section III of his report (paras. 10-13), the Secretary-General refers to the additional need to provide Arabic language services to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) pursuant to resolution 86 (IV) of 28 May 1976, in which the Conference recommended that the General Assembly "take the necessary steps to include Arabic among the official and working languages of the machinery of UNCTAD, particularly all sessions of the Conference, the Trade and Development Board and the main committees". On the assumption that full Arabic language services would be provided to UNCTAD in Geneva, the financial implications of the resolution have been estimated, in a document submitted to the Trade and Development Board, at \$2.1 million in 1977 and \$3.4 million for 1978-1979. In paragraph 12 of his report, the Secretary-General recommends, however, "that the most realistic approach would be to establish an initial target level of Arabic workload that could feasibly be provided, based on the experience of the past three years".

8. The Secretary-General has assessed the requirements to provide Arabic language services at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva. In section IV of his report he proposes an integrated system of organizational arrangements for the Arabic language services for the three-year period 1977-1979 as follows:

(a) A permanent Arabic interpretation service would be established and based in Geneva. Arabic interpreters would be assigned temporarily to Headquarters for the General Assembly and special conferences as needed. For the rest of the year they would service primarily UNCTAD.

(b) The Arabic Translation Service at Headquarters would be expanded. It would use the pouch service and the existing facsimile link between Headquarters and the Geneva Office for the dispatch of translated material to Geneva.

^{2/} Ibid., Supplement No. 6 (A/10006), table 23-14.

The rationale for the two parts of the proposal is explained in paragraphs 15 to 21 and 22 to 25 under the headings "Interpretation" and "Translation", respectively.

9. The related staff resources requested by the Secretary-General for 1977 and for the biennium 1978-1979 are summarized as follows (sect. V).

(a) Seventeen Professional posts for a new Arabic Interpretation Service at the United Nations Office in Geneva (1 P-5, 5 P-4 and 11 P-3). This would include the one P-5 post now provided at Headquarters for the Arabic interpretation service which would be transferred to Geneva. Provision is also requested for temporary assistance for the initial phase of the plan for 1977 and 1978 on the assumption that one half of the permanent interpreters at the junior level would not have attained the standard necessary for interpreting during the General Assembly. No provision for such temporary assistance is foreseen for 1979 as it is expected that all the permanent interpreters will have become fully proficient by then.

(b) Nineteen posts for the Arabic Translation Service at Headquarters (four revisers at the P-4 level, seven translators at the P-3 level and eight General Service) for 1977 and 1978, and a further P-3 post for 1979. One reviser would be outposted from Headquarters to Geneva on a two to three-year assignment to oversee the facsimile transmission of texts translated at Headquarters and to supervise the work of temporary assistance staff to be engaged for the Arabic translation of limited in-session documentation at Geneva. One additional General Service post for a bilingual secretary would be needed in the Geneva office to assist the outposted reviser.

10. According to the Secretary-General's estimate, the financial implications of the proposed organizational arrangements for Arabic language services during the period 1977-1979 would be \$4,738,500, distributed as follows (table 2):

	<u>Headquarters</u>	<u>Geneva</u>	<u>Total</u>
	\$	\$	\$
1977	711 600	840 000	1 551 600
1978	677 200	827 500	1 504 700
1979	675 000	1 007 200	1 682 200
Total	<u>2 063 800</u>	<u>2 674 700</u>	<u>4 738 500</u>

11. According to the Secretary-General's report, the additional requirement of \$1,551,600 for 1977 (\$1,344,800 for conference servicing costs under sect. 23 and \$206,800 for general services costs under sect. 22) would be offset by total savings of \$429,600 (\$383,900 under sect. 1 and \$45,700 under sect. 23). Thus the net additional appropriation requested by the Secretary-General for the biennium 1976-1977 would amount to \$1,122,000 (paras. 29 and 31).

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12. Under general services costs, the Secretary-General's estimates include a total of \$108,000 for 1977 for rental and operating costs. Bearing in mind the requests for additional office space in New York and Geneva already submitted by the Secretary-General (see, for example, A/C.5/31/37, paras. 22.95, 22.99 (c) and 22.108), the Advisory Committee does not concur in the request for \$108,000.

13. In connexion with the question of Arabic language services in the United Nations, the Advisory Committee recognizes the problem arising from competition among international organizations to secure the services of the limited number of available qualified language staff, particularly interpreters. The Committee notes that the Secretary-General envisages developing the Arabic language services to a level at which the Organization could make Arabic interpretation services available to other United Nations bodies on a reimbursable basis (para. 18). The Advisory Committee is of the opinion that the Secretary-General should take steps towards co-ordinating efforts among the specialized agencies and the Organization in developing Arabic language services.

14. The Advisory Committee understands that the experience to be gained from the organizational arrangements proposed by the Secretary-General would be reviewed at the end of the three-year period 1977-1979. The Committee trusts that a report thereon will be submitted by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly.

15. Bearing in mind the reduction of \$108,000 recommended in paragraph 12 above, the Advisory Committee recommends that, should the General Assembly approve the Secretary-General's proposals regarding Arabic language services, an amount of \$1,014,000 net be appropriated under the programme budget for the biennium 1976-1977 as follows:

	\$
Section 1: Over-all policy-making, direction and co-ordination	(383,900)
Section 22: Administration, management and general services	98,800
Section 23: Conference and library services	1,299,100
Section 25: Staff assessment	255,500
Total (gross)	1,269,500
Income section 1: Income from staff assessment	255,500
Total (net)	<u>1,014,000</u>