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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

PERSONNEL QUESTIONS: OTHER PERSONNEL QUESTIONS

Competitive examinations in the United Nations

Comments of 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 "Competitive examinations in the United Nations" (A/39/483).

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on competitive examinations in the United Nations deals separately with the two related questions of competitive examinations for the entry of young candidates from outside the Secretariat to posts at the junior Professional P-1 and P-2 levels and of competitive examinations for promotion to these two levels of staff already serving in the Secretariat in other categories. Other comments on these two procedures will be found in the report of the Secretary-General on personnel policies (A/C.5/39/9, paras. 30-34 and 48-58).

A. External competitive examinations

2. In his review of external examinations the Inspector focuses on some of the problems encountered in the implementation of these examinations. While not disagreeing with the general thrust of the comments made, it appears that there may be some misunderstanding with regard to the implications of the figures presented. In particular the figures quoted in paragraphs 13 and 14 of the report represent staff at the P-1/P-2 levels on board in 1982 and 1983 and as such they reflect to a large extent the result of many recruitment actions taken in 1981 and 1982 under the previous directives of the General Assembly. These two years constituted a transitional period when in accordance with General Assembly resolution 35/210 of 17 December 1980 the method of competitive examination which should apply as a rule to posts at the P-1 and P-2 levels was to be applied progressively. Given the lack of experience in large-scale examinations at that time and the scarce resources available, it was not possible to cover all P-1/P-2 posts by competitive examinations. While the problems encountered were real and many have been correctly identified in substance by the Inspector, the Secretary-General considers that implementation of the method was consistent with the new directives of the Assembly.

3. While not agreeing with all of the Inspector's criticisms, the Secretary-General generally is in agreement with recommendations 1 to 5 contained in paragraph 56 of the report. However, in a few instances, while not in disagreement with the basic objectives pursued by the Inspector, the Secretary-General considers that the procedures proposed by the Inspector to achieve such objectives may have to be modified.

1. Wholesale application of the competitive examination procedures

4. The Secretary-General agrees that it is necessary to take further steps to ensure that the rule of recruitment by competitive examinations of candidates entering the Secretariat at the P-1 and P-2 levels be applied with only the minimum number of exceptions. Recommendation No. 1 is fully acceptable and action has already been taken to recruit the maximum number of staff at the P-1/P-2 levels through the competitive examination system. While appreciating the importance of

limiting the number of exceptions, the limit of 5 per cent of established posts would not give the Secretary-General the flexibility necessary for his administration of the Secretariat. The limit should not be less than 10 per cent of established posts but could be reduced from 30 to 25 per cent for other posts. The General Assembly would be informed of the number of exceptions in the Secretary-General's annual report on the composition of the Secretariat.

5. As to the use of ad hoc written tests for candidates considered for the posts exempted from the examination procedure, research has already begun on practical and effective ways to prepare and organize such tests. However, it will not be possible to implement this immediately and the Secretary-General proposes that 1985 should be treated as a trial period with full implementation in 1986.

2. Reserve lists

6. As regards Recommendation No. 2 that a list of successful candidates should be prepared, no difficulties are foreseen in systematically establishing lists of successful candidates for all occupations in which examinations have been held and drawing from these lists to fill new vacancies as they arise until another examination is arranged for the same occupation. It should be noted that all vacant posts in an occupation are reserved for the following examination, which may be either internal or external, as soon as the occupation is selected. The full co-operation of all departments and offices will be necessary to ensure that those on the list who are available are accepted. However, it will not be possible to make any commitments in advance as to the availability of posts which cannot be identified as projected vacancies. In this connection it should also be noted that, in order to shorten delays, the release of members of specialized boards of examiners on a full-time basis for up to 10 working days is under consideration.

7. The Secretary-General agrees with Recommendation No. 3 that a plan for external competitive examinations for different Member States should be established within the framework of the long-term recruitment plan. The current programme of examinations will be applied systematically and an effort will be made to extend the examinations to Member States that are within their desirable ranges. The co-operation of Member States will be crucial in the establishment of this plan.

8. As regards Recommendation No. 4, the Secretary-General has taken steps to ensure to the extent possible that new posts are proposed at the lower or entry levels of the Professional category and to apply the utmost restraint with regard to proposals for the reclassification of posts from the P-2 to the P-3 level. Action has also been taken to ensure that the classification of any post at a higher level has no automatic impact on the authorized staffing table of the unit concerned.

3. Extension of the competitive examination procedure

9. As indicated in his report on personnel policies (A/C.5/39/9, paras. 30-34), the Secretary-General has himself reached the conclusion that the competitive examination procedure laid down as a rule for recruitment to P-1 and P-2 levels

could be extended to the P-3 level. The Secretary-General therefore agrees with Recommendation No. 5 that the competitive examination method should be broadened and objective methods should be applied to recruitment up to the P-3 level. As to the modalities and procedures involved, the proposals in paragraphs 37 (a) to (c) would appear acceptable but it would appear less desirable, as proposed in paragraph 37 (d), to have an additional examination procedure for filling P-3 posts. On the basis of the experience gained in the past four years, it seems possible to adjust the existing competitive examinations for the purpose by asking specific questions concerning areas of specialization required for the P-3 posts that are available. In the interview, more emphasis would be placed in probing the candidates' experience and potential. Although provision of necessary resources will be a problem, recruitment to P-3 posts through competitive examinations under the above conditions could begin in 1985 and be fully implemented in all applicable occupations, as a rule, in 1986.

10. With respect to Recommendation No. 6 that the General Assembly consider the possibility of recommending the extension of the applicability of competitive examinations to UNDP, UNICEF, WFP and UNHCR, the Secretary-General is preparing an evaluation of the external national competitive examinations for presentation to the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) which proposes to examine it at its next session early in 1985 in the context of its ongoing review of the use of competitive examinations. In its latest annual report, 1/ ICSC has requested the Assembly not to pronounce itself on this issue until ICSC has examined it.

B. Competitive examinations for promotion to the Professional category

11. The Inspector, in considering the question of competitive examinations for movement to the Professional category from other categories, does not make any recommendations on the examinations themselves but looks at them in the larger context of the personnel policy governing the General Service and related categories, which he finds ill-defined. A crucial question relates in his opinion to the nature of the movement resulting from the examinations. Is the movement in the nature of a recruitment or a promotion? For the Secretary-General the movement clearly is in the nature of a promotion as the career of the staff member is continuous and the staff member's appointment does not change as a result. This promotion exercise is parallel to, but distinct from, recruitment by competitive examination from outside the Secretariat. It thus needs to be generally similar with regard to the standards on which it is based but it is quite different in character.

12. The Inspector notes the progress made in developing these examinations and supports the idea that different types of examinations may be appropriate, on the one hand, for staff at the highest General Service levels or at least 15 years of service whose experience would be tested and, on the other hand, those General Service staff members with academic qualifications and at least 5 years service whose technical and general qualifications would be tested. Whatever improvements may be introduced into the procedures for the examinations, particularly with regard to the selection of posts to which the successful staff members are to be assigned, it is quite clear that the G to P examinations are now generally accepted and applied in practice.

13. As to the personnel policy governing the General Service and related categories, the Inspector is correct in stating that the ruling principle in the administration of this group of staff is the principle of recruitment from the locality of the duty station, which is inferred from paragraph 7 of annex I to the Staff Regulations. The Staff Regulations and Rules otherwise refer as much to General Service staff as to other staff and the normal practice in all duty stations is to ensure recruitment at the junior level, applying strict qualifying requirements. The Secretary-General does not consider that there are no objective methods of recruitment or that there are no principles which apply to the proportion of staff to be recruited at the beginner levels, etc. As a result of the JIU report on General Service staff of the United Nations and the Geneva-based specialized agencies (A/32/327) which recommended that a general examination be given to candidates for General Service posts such as they are given in New York, the use of tests has become more general.

14. The establishment of occupational groups is being developed through job classification exercises in conjunction with the common classification of occupational groups established by ICSC. While data is available for the General Service staff at Geneva and Vienna, and will soon be available for New York, data will not become available from other duty stations until the classification of the jobs in these duty stations, a time-consuming procedure which is very demanding in human resources, is complete. Special job classification systems are envisaged for Addis Ababa, Santiago and other large offices and a combined scheme for smaller duty stations is now being discussed on an inter-agency basis. Work on a career development system for the General Service staff is reported on in the Secretary-General's report on a system of career development for all categories of staff (A/C.5/39/11). Until these actions are complete, the Secretary-General does not consider that it would be timely to prepare any further general report on the General Service and related categories as recommended in the Inspector's Recommendation No. 7.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-ninth session, Supplement No. 30 (A/39/30), Summary of recommendations, paras. 219 and 220.
