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Chair: Mr. Tommo Monthe (Cameroon)
*Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative
and Budgetary Questions:* Mr. Kelapile

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Agenda item 137: Pattern of conferences (A/66/32, A/66/118 and Corr.1 and A/66/397)

1. **Ms. Woldegiorgis** (Chair of the Committee on Conferences), introducing the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2011 (A/66/32), said that, for the first time, the Committee had conducted its substantive session in a paper-smart fashion: documents had been posted on a dedicated website and the Secretariat had provided laptops, technical support and print-on-demand services.

2. The calendar of conferences and meetings for 2012-2013 was discussed in chapter II of the report. Concerning the Secretary-General's proposal that new legislative mandates should include information on meetings and documentation to enable the Secretariat to assess conference-servicing needs that could have programme budget implications, the Committee was of the view that Member States and the Secretariat should make meetings planning a collaborative exercise. The proposed draft resolution contained in annex I to the report reflected the Committee's recommendations on the issue.

3. Two of the three intergovernmental bodies that had failed to meet the 80 per cent benchmark for utilization of conference-servicing resources from 2008 to 2010 had met that goal in 2011. She had therefore met only with the Chair of the third body, the Committee on Contributions, to suggest ways of improving its utilization factor. Having explained that the Committee often conducted its deliberations in informal consultations for long hours and that the discussion of the scale of assessments to take place in 2012 would likely be more difficult than in previous years because of the economic crisis, the Chair of the Committee on Contributions had undertaken to bring the matter to the attention of the Bureau and members.

4. Concern at the decrease in the utilization rate of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa from 76 per cent in 2009 to 70 per cent in 2010 had led the Committee on Conferences to recommend that the Secretary-General should continue to explore ways of increasing utilization.

5. With respect to integrated global management, the Committee recommended that the General Assembly should request information on financial savings and updated information on the development of

harmonized amendments to the Secretary-General's bulletins on the principle of accountability and shared responsibility between the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General of the three other duty stations; on measures to continue to seek evaluation by Member States; and on the flex-time pilot project.

6. The Committee had discussed the proposal to amend the document processing time frame so that manuscripts would be submitted 10 weeks before a meeting and issued four weeks in advance, with a six-week processing time rather than the four weeks currently allotted. The change, which would allow for sequential rather than parallel processing, would yield cost efficiencies and improved quality. As no consensus had been reached, the question was referred to the Fifth Committee.

7. To ensure the timely submission of documents, the Committee on Conferences recommended that the Assembly should request more rigorous enforcement of the slotting system and urge author departments to meet the goal of 90 per cent compliance with deadlines.

8. The United Nations Office at Nairobi had been providing paper-smart meetings servicing to the United Nations Environment Programme, and in Vienna, the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space was pioneering the use of digital audio files to record debates. In Geneva, finding alternatives to written official records was urgent since there was a large backlog of summary records of the Human Rights Council. The draft resolution requested the Secretary-General to report on lessons learned from meetings that would implement the paper-smart concept on a trial basis with the consent of the relevant intergovernmental bodies.

9. Having considered the Secretary-General's proposal to produce summary records in the original language (French or English) only, supplemented by alternative systems, the Committee had felt it more appropriate to refer the matter to the Fifth Committee.

10. With regard to translation and interpretation, members of the Committee on Conferences had welcomed the outreach and training initiatives undertaken to address the replacement of retiring staff in the language services. They had expressed concern at the shortage of qualified language applicants, however, and had found it dismaying that no

memorandums of understanding had been signed with Latin American institutions, while only two such memorandums had been signed with universities in Africa. The Secretary-General was requested in the draft resolution to make further efforts to address the situation.

11. Regarding the proposal on limiting the length of treaty body documentation, it had been pointed out that the Committee did not have a legislative mandate over human rights treaty bodies and that there should be greater flexibility in word limits for reports submitted by Member States and intergovernmental bodies than for those submitted by the Secretariat. The Committee reiterated its request for information on the waiver process.

12. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/66/118 and Corr.1), expressed the hope that the successful experience of the Committee on Conferences in holding a paper-smart meeting would prompt other bodies to emulate it. He said that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management stood ready to comply with requests for meetings made in General Assembly resolutions. However, a lack of accompanying information on modalities impeded the assessment of conference-servicing needs that could have programme budget implications. Collaboration between Member States and the Secretariat in planning meetings would ensure predictability and the efficient use of resources. Noting that the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions had addressed the issue in its report (A/66/397), he urged the Committee to support the Advisory Committee's position.

13. He welcomed the outcome of the consultations by the Chair of the Committee on Conferences with the one intergovernmental body that had used less than 80 per cent of its allocated conference-servicing resources for three consecutive years and the Committee's request that intergovernmental bodies should review their meeting entitlements and plan their programmes of work in the light of their actual utilization of resources.

14. In order to conduct business in a smarter fashion with a reduced budget in the next biennium, the Secretariat proposed several initiatives that would introduce a paradigm change in the provision of

conference services. The related measures were also set out in section 2 of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013. The proposals were to produce summary records in English or French only, supplemented by systems such as on-demand production in other languages and digital recording; to introduce a pay-as-you-go arrangement for the documentation needs of the funds and programmes; to request treaty bodies to enforce the page limits for documentation; and to change the document processing time frame.

15. Lastly, it was proposed to align the reporting lines in the Department to afford the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management the authority required to fulfil General Assembly mandates. The aim was to delineate and codify a model of dual responsibility for conference management in which policies, regulations, procedures and standards — including for global information and communications technology systems — were set by Headquarters. The head of a substantive division or office away from Headquarters would be accountable to the head of department or office at Headquarters for the implementation of those policies and regulations, and would be accountable to the head of department or office at the local level for all other activities.

16. **Mr. Kelapile** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/66/397), said that the Advisory Committee was of the opinion that the General Assembly should consider, bearing in mind the provisions of rule 153 of its rules of procedure, the proposal to include in new legislative mandates all relevant information on meetings and documentation in order to enable the Secretariat to fully assess conference-servicing needs.

17. Concerned by the negative trend in the utilization of the facilities allocated to intergovernmental bodies, the Advisory Committee supported the Secretary-General's proposal that such bodies should review their meeting entitlements and plan their work programmes based on their actual utilization of conference-servicing resources. It also welcomed the measures proposed to improve overall utilization.

18. On integrated global management, the Advisory Committee welcomed the application of the proximity rule as a means of achieving efficiency in travel

arrangements. The information provided in the Secretary-General's report (A/66/118) had not, however, been detailed enough to determine the efficiencies realized. The Advisory Committee was concerned that insufficient attention was given to ensuring that travel arrangements were made with a view to achieving savings.

19. Concerning the Secretariat's review of efficiency and accountability mechanisms across the four main duty stations, the Advisory Committee reiterated that the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management should have authority and accountability in the management of all resources under section 2 of the programme budget, including conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. It supported the review of the Secretary-General's bulletins on the three Offices aimed at codifying the responsibilities of the Under-Secretary-General and the respective Directors-General.

20. Noting the low response by Member and observer States to global surveys on conference services, the Advisory Committee underscored that client surveys were an important means of determining whether quality services were being delivered.

21. The Advisory Committee welcomed the progress made in the implementation of the slotting system for documentation. The Secretary-General had indicated that, while the overall rate of timely submission of documents continued to improve, there was significant variation in submission rates from author department to author department: the Advisory Committee was of the view that the matter merited further examination. While the proposal to amend the documents submission rules to a 10-6-4 time frame had potential benefits, an important consideration was the need to allow Member States sufficient time to review documents.

22. The discussion of translation and interpretation had focused on the shortage of language staff and the measures being implemented to attract and retain staff. The Advisory Committee welcomed the review of the competitive examination process being undertaken in cooperation with the Office of Human Resources Management and the introduction of more robust and automated initial screening. It also welcomed the consultations undertaken with the International Association of Conference Translators with a view to

incorporating off-site translation into the agreement between the Association and the United Nations system so that translation services could be provided by freelancers working anywhere in the world.

23. While the Advisory Committee applauded the outreach efforts aimed at creating a stream of young professionals to fill vacancies, it remained concerned about the lack of dedicated resources for the internship programme and language training activities and reiterated its suggestion that extrabudgetary funding should be sought.

24. On the proposal for the production of summary records only in the original English or French, the Advisory Committee recommended that, in considering the proposal, the General Assembly should take into account the opinions of the bodies entitled to such records. It was for the General Assembly to decide on the proposal that Member States should be requested to respect the word limit for treaty body reporting.

25. Lastly, the Advisory Committee supported the proposed "pay-as-you-go" arrangement for the provision of conference services to funds and programmes, which would translate into reduced requirements of \$8 million in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013.

26. **Mr. Di Luca** (Argentina), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that the Group attached great importance to the delivery of quality conference services. Noting that the overall utilization rate of conference services at the four main duty stations was 85 per cent, he expressed the hope that further efforts would be made to standardize reporting across the duty stations to ensure that data was comparable. It should be a priority to reverse the downward trend in the utilization rate in Nairobi, which had decreased from 100 per cent in 2008 to 90 per cent in 2009 and again to 88 per cent in 2010. Further noting that the utilization rate for the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa had declined from 76 per cent in 2009 to 70 per cent in 2010, he said that, despite the competition from other conferencing facilities in Addis Ababa, more innovative and proactive marketing was certain to increase the centre's utilization rate.

27. He welcomed the increased timeliness in the submission of slotted documents, which had reached 87 per cent for the first five months of 2011. He also commended the Department for General Assembly and

Conference Management for its timely processing of compliant submissions. Additional measures should be considered to ensure compliance with submission deadlines by author departments; those departments should also comply with the format of reports prescribed by the General Assembly, particularly in section IV of its resolution 63/248. While the Group would study the proposed change to the document processing time frame, it was not convinced that the measure would address the core problem — the late submission of documents — and was concerned that extending the deadline might exacerbate the problem of late issuance.

28. To achieve the highest standards of quality in translation and interpretation, it was critical to implement a proactive succession management plan in the language services, including through outreach to universities in all geographic regions and streamlining of the competitive examination.

29. While contractual translation could result in cost savings, quality must not be compromised: adequate internal capacity for quality control was required. The Group welcomed the proposal in the programme budget submission for 2012-2013 to reclassify a number of P-4 posts in translation and interpretation to the P-5 level, which would enhance quality control and help to recruit and retain language staff in the United Nations Office at Nairobi.

30. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should take measures to ensure that the implementation of the capital master plan had no negative impact on the quality and availability of conference services or on the equal treatment and working conditions of language services for all six official languages. Use of United Nations premises for meetings, special events and exhibits should be authorized in accordance with the relevant administrative instructions; such events must be consistent with the purposes and principles of the Organization.

31. Noting that the integrated global management initiative was intended to integrate information technology into conference services management in order to facilitate a balanced division of labour among Headquarters and the other duty stations, he cautioned that the unique aspects of each duty station and the principle of equal grade for equal work must nevertheless be respected.

32. Lastly, he recalled that the General Assembly, in its resolution 61/236, had recognized the importance of meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States and that interpretation was necessary for their smooth functioning.

33. **Mr. Coffi** (Côte d'Ivoire), speaking on behalf of the Group of African States, said that the Committee on Conferences was to be commended for its balanced report. While the overall utilization rate for conference services in 2010 had fallen by one percentage point, it had remained above the established benchmark of 80 per cent. Continuous efforts should be made, however, to improve the rate. In particular, steps must be taken to reverse the continued downward trend in utilization at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The Group would also like to know what measures had been taken to address the continued decline in the utilization rate of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and would welcome additional information on the ECA construction project in relation to Africa Hall and Conference Room 1.

34. The large number of language staff retiring in the near future was a matter of concern, especially in view of the high vacancy rates in language services across the four main duty stations in general, and the Nairobi Office in particular. That problem was compounded by the lengthy recruitment process for language staff. It was therefore imperative to implement the succession planning programme, which focused on outreach to universities and streamlining of the competitive examination for language services. Recalling that, according to information provided at the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly, only one African university had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, he requested an update on that situation, as well as on the progress of the "Africa Project", aimed at building up conference-servicing capacity within African countries.

35. In line with its long-standing position that every effort should be made to ensure parity between the Nairobi Office and the other three main duty stations, the Group welcomed the Secretary-General's proposal to upgrade 11 language posts in Nairobi from the P-4 to the P-5 level and expected that the Secretary-General would ensure that all initiatives to strengthen the Nairobi Office were implemented.

36. **Mr. Yamada** (Japan) said that, while it was essential to maintain an appropriate quality of conference services in the United Nations, those services should be provided in the most efficient and effective manner. Consequently, the Secretariat should continue to seek efficiencies in delivering conference services through the introduction of new cost-saving measures, while Member States should refrain from adding unnecessary conference resources when deciding the modalities of new meetings.

37. In order to reverse the negative trend in utilization rates at the four headquarters duty stations, Member States should clearly recognize that non-utilization of conference services was a waste of resources and should make further efforts to hold meetings as scheduled and on time. His delegation supported the measures proposed by the Committee on Conferences in that regard.

38. His delegation had noted the Advisory Committee's concern about travel arrangements in the context of the proximity rule and would be seeking further explanation concerning its recommendation on the matter. As for the review of conference management efficiency and accountability mechanisms across the four duty stations undertaken pursuant to General Assembly resolution 65/245, his delegation concurred with the Advisory Committee that sustainable efficiency gains could be realized through improved reporting lines within the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. In particular, it hoped to see improved management of the resources provided under section 2 of the budget.

39. His delegation welcomed the Secretary-General's intention to seek further efficiencies by instituting a sequential workflow on the basis of an increase in the document processing time from four to six weeks, and believed that the Committee should consider that proposal. It also considered that the Secretary-General's intention behind the proposal on summary records was commendable and, noting that a description of possible savings to be achieved through that proposal had been included in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013, urged the Committee to consider the proposal from all the angles.

40. Lastly, his delegation welcomed the Advisory Committee's recommendation to reduce the requirements under section 2 of the proposed

programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013 by \$8 million and looked forward to discussing that matter in the context of the proposed programme budget.

41. **Mr. Bame** (Ethiopia) said that, while his delegation commended the Secretary-General's continued marketing activities aimed at increasing the utilization rate of the conference centre at ECA, and congratulated the Commission's management for establishing partnerships with various stakeholders to promote Addis Ababa as a conference and tourism destination, it was concerned at the significant decline in the utilization rate for the conference centre between 2008 and 2010. Clearly, much remained to be done in order to reach the 80 per cent utilization benchmark. It was also regrettable that the facilities were not appropriately maintained, which was likely to make them less competitive. The construction boom in Addis Ababa, including the development of state-of-the-art conference facilities, made it more important than ever to pursue aggressive and innovative marketing strategies and ensure the timely maintenance of the centre. His delegation called on the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, in collaboration with ECA, to continue to explore all available options for increasing the utilization of the conference centre and maintaining its competitiveness, since it believed strongly that such options had not yet been exhausted. Achieving those objectives would require both clear strategies and sufficient resources. Important lessons could also be drawn from the management experience of other United Nations conference centres located in cities with a large number of alternative conference facilities.

42. With regard to the need to renovate Africa Hall, which occupied a unique place in Africa's political history, his delegation looked forward to considering the Secretary-General's annual progress report on the construction of additional conference facilities at ECA, which should contain an assessment of the status of the Commission's existing facilities, in particular Africa Hall and Conference Room 1, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 65/259.

43. **Mr. Maina** (Kenya), stressing the importance of ensuring that the United Nations Office at Nairobi was on a par with the other three duty stations in terms of resource allocation and staffing levels, said that the perennial problem of high vacancy rates must be resolved without further delay. The Division of Conference Services in Nairobi should therefore

continue to consider all options for filling its current and future vacancies. In that connection, his delegation noted with appreciation the programme launched by the Nairobi Office to provide practical training for young translators and interpreters who had yet to pass the United Nations examination. It also welcomed the Africa project and wished to know what progress had been achieved in implementing the recommendations of the first pan-African conference on the training of translators, conference interpreters and public service interpreters in Africa, the key output of which had been a commitment to develop a master's degree programme in translation and interpreting. Convinced that developing partnerships with universities would provide a long-term solution to the issue of high vacancy rates in the language services, and particularly the Nairobi Office, her delegation would also appreciate an update on progress made by the Department in signing memorandums of understanding with universities participating, or wishing to participate, in the Africa project.

44. Lastly, his delegation strongly urged the Secretary-General to take the necessary steps to increase the utilization rate of conference facilities at ECA, which remained a matter for concern.

45. **Mr. Cumberbatch** (Cuba) said that his delegation reiterated its objection to the use of United Nations facilities by certain States for activities hostile to other Member States. Such actions, which violated the Charter and all relevant rules and procedures of the United Nations, damaged the Organization's reputation and credibility. Cuba would continue to monitor the situation carefully and reserved the right to take any action that it deemed appropriate to address that situation.

46. While it was important that the resources made available for conference services should not be wasted, his delegation was concerned at recent trends to put pressure on various intergovernmental bodies in that regard. The utilization rate, although a useful tool for analysis, should not become an obstacle to intergovernmental deliberations. An excessive emphasis on utilization could end up politicizing the issue. It was, for example, incomprehensible that the Committee on Contributions should be pressurized to improve its utilization rate when the sensitivity of the issue with which it dealt clearly required it to hold frequent informal consultations, including late at night.

47. It was also worrying that some proposals presented in the report of the Secretary-General (A/66/118) did not appear to take account of the need for Member States to have a reasonable period of time to analyse documentation produced by the Secretariat. The initiative to amend the document submission rules should be considered with extreme caution. Other proposals, such as those relating to the production of summary records and to word limits for Member States' submissions to treaty bodies, were also controversial and would only lead to a repetition of the icy discussions that had taken place in previous years, in response to similar Secretariat proposals.

48. His delegation would continue to follow closely the Committee's deliberations on other issues of particular significance for the work of the Organization, including the support given to regional and other groupings, such as the Group of 77 and China and the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, and the impact of the capital master plan on conference services.

49. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), responding to the questions raised by delegations, said that the decrease in the utilization factor at the Nairobi Office had been attributable to an ongoing capital improvement project affecting all conference facilities there. Now that the project was almost complete, there had been a marked increase in conference activity at the Nairobi Office and the downward trend in the utilization rate was expected to be reversed.

50. With regard to the succession management plan for language services, it had repeatedly been brought to the attention of Member States that the Examinations and Tests Section of the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) was underfinanced and understaffed. Bearing in mind that each of the six official languages of the United Nations had six disciplines, the Organization should ideally hold 36 different competitive language examinations every two years, or 18 examinations annually; however, OHRM had the resources to hold only a fraction of that number each year. Rosters of successful candidates, from which the regional commissions also drew, were consequently depleted. Unless the Examinations and Tests Section was better funded and better staffed, the succession management plan would not be a success.

51. Concerning the proposal to amend the rules governing document processing to a 10-6-4 time frame, it should be understood that because of time pressures arising from late submission by some author departments, the parallel processing of documents, involving simultaneous editing, referencing and translation, was currently unavoidable. If, however, the Department's processing time was increased to six weeks, it would be possible to maximize sequential workflow, a more efficient process that would allow financial savings to be made. It was his experience that delegations, particularly those from smaller missions, often did not, in any case, have the capacity to read reports until one or two days prior to the meeting at which they were to be discussed.

52. The Department had no dedicated resources for outreach to universities; savings made in other areas were allocated to such efforts. In 2008, he had sent a letter to permanent missions requesting them to inform universities in their countries about the outreach programme, but had received a very limited number of replies. However, the Department had now signed 19 memorandums of understanding with universities, covering interpretation and translation programmes in all six official languages. It also engaged in informal cooperation with interested universities that were not yet qualified to sign a memorandum of understanding, including by providing advice and authorizing senior translators and interpreters on home leave to offer ad hoc training at local universities. Such informal cooperation had, for example, been established with universities in Argentina and Mexico.

53. With regard to the project to develop a pan-African master's programme in translation and interpreting, the expected support from the African Development Bank had not materialized, following a change in leadership at the Bank. However, the European Commission was providing professors to lecture on the programme, and United Nations translators and interpreters at the Nairobi Office were contributing to the project by teaching at the University of Nairobi. A second pan-African conference on the training of translators and interpreters would be held in Cairo from 21 to 23 December 2011.

54. **Mr. Coffi** (Côte d'Ivoire), speaking on behalf of the Group of African States, said that the Group would be seeking more information in informal consultations on the question of financing for the outreach programme to African universities. With regard to

succession planning, especially in the areas of translation and interpreting, the concerned services should specify whether the resources requested in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013 were adequate to address the human resources concerns highlighted.

55. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), responding to the points raised by the representative of Côte d'Ivoire, said that, regrettably, it had not been possible to request additional budgetary resources for the forthcoming biennium, given the current need for budgetary restraint. With regard to succession planning in the areas of translation and interpreting, he reiterated that United Nations translators and interpreters at the Nairobi Office were preparing university students to sit the Organization's competitive language examinations. Internships were another means of helping students to prepare for such examinations. Although the United Nations was unable to assist interns with their travel expenses, a number of students from Herzen University in St. Petersburg had undertaken internships at United Nations Headquarters; two of them had subsequently passed the Organization's competitive language examinations.

56. **Mr. Rosales Díaz** (Nicaragua) recalled, in response to the Under-Secretary-General's comments about the proposed change to a 10-6-4 time frame, that the General Assembly had mandated the distribution of documents at least six weeks before meetings, and had done so for a reason. It was not the Committee's role to discuss the internal functioning of the permanent missions. Delegations had the sovereign right to decide when they read the documents distributed, but that decision should not be affected by delays in publication. While his delegation acknowledged the large volume of work processed by the Department and the huge efforts that it made to meet the six-week rule, the rules established by the General Assembly should be respected.

The meeting rose at 12.20 p.m.