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Summary record of the 18th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 18 November 2013, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Taalas (Finland)
Chair of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Ruiz Massieu

Contents

Agenda item 131: Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors (*continued*)

Agenda item 132: Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations (*continued*)

Agenda item 142: Report on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (*continued*)

Agenda item 134: Proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 (*continued*)

Revised estimates resulting from the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Flexible workplace at the United Nations Headquarters

Other matters

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 131: Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors (continued) (A/C.5/68/L.4)

Draft resolution A/C.5/68/L.4: Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors

1. *Draft resolution A/C.5/68/L.4 was adopted.*

Agenda item 132: Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations (continued)

Agenda item 142: Report on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (continued) (A/C.5/68/L.5)

Draft resolution A/C.5/68/L.5: Report on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

2. *Draft resolution A/C.5/68/L.5 was adopted.*

Agenda item 134: Proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 (continued)

Revised estimates resulting from the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (A/68/7/Add.5 and A/68/385)

3. **The Chair** drew attention to the report of the Secretary-General on the revised estimates relating to the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 resulting from the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (A/68/385).

4. **Mr. Ruiz Massieu** (Chair of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/68/7/Add.5), said that the report further clarified the assumptions underlying the estimates for the volume of additional activities expected to arise from the entry into force of the Optional Protocol. The Advisory Committee recommended that the General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to accommodate any additional requirements to support activities relating to the Optional Protocol from the resources provided for in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 and to report on any additional

requirements in the relevant performance report. It also recommended that the requirement to establish a new P-4 post should be considered in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2016-2017, taking into account actual workload requirements and levels of activity in 2014-2015.

5. **Mr. Daunivalu** (Fiji), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, reaffirmed the Group's position that adequate resources must be provided to ensure the fulfilment of mandates arising from the decisions of intergovernmental bodies and said that the Group would carefully examine the Secretary-General's proposals and the Advisory Committee's recommendations in informal consultations.

Flexible workplace at the United Nations Headquarters (A/68/387 and A/68/583)

6. **Mr. Takasu** (Under-Secretary-General for Management), introducing the Secretary-General's report on implementation of a flexible workplace at the United Nations Headquarters (A/68/387), said that "flexible workplace" denoted arrangements of physical space, information and communications technology, human resources and other programmes that supported a flexible and mobile way of working. The most common components of flexible working were telecommuting, which involved working at an alternative worksite; desk-sharing, in which a common desk or workstation was shared; hotelling, which involved working in multiple buildings depending on availability; and hot-desking, which increased the number of staff supported by a given building through the use of non-dedicated workstations. Best practices derived from international trends and lessons showed that the necessary holistic arrangements could not be achieved quickly but required a prudent phased approach to implementation, and gradual adaptation to work practices and needs. That should be accompanied by internal communications, consultation and training using a work arrangement review, focus groups and the deployment of test environments.

7. The successful implementation of flexible working could increase productivity and efficiency, improve collaboration, interaction and teamwork in the workplace and reduce real estate requirements and costs. However, a mechanical non-phased approach that ignored the specific circumstances of staff performing different functions might damage staff

morale, productivity and efficiency and could pose a reputational risk for the Organization. Prudence was particularly important in an organization like the United Nations, where staff had diverse job functions and cultural backgrounds.

8. A limited space utilization study had been conducted in July 2013 in order to determine how staff made use of their workspaces throughout the work day. The results had shown that individually assigned workspaces were used at an average rate of 50 per cent, ranging from a high of 70 per cent to a low of 30 per cent at certain times — rates that were typical of organizations that had not adopted flexible working policies. The study had concluded that the sampled floors could accommodate a greater population density. It was not certain that that utilization rate was representative throughout the Secretariat; staff that supported intergovernmental or expert committees might be absent from the office for most of the day, but other functions might be performed more consistently at a specific workspace. If a more comprehensive study confirmed an hourly utilization rate of approximately 50 per cent across all office space, then space could be utilized more efficiently by implementing a flexible workplace. Industry practices suggested that space savings of up to 25 per cent could be achieved.

9. Two significant factors were likely to affect the overall potential for space savings at Headquarters. First, with respect to the physical environment, a flexible workplace programme must be implemented holistically by designing a range of spaces better suited to flexible working. It would take time and resources to implement those changes, particularly in existing premises. Second, the actual space savings would depend on the specific organizational context of the Secretariat. Detailed assessments would be required on the extent to which flexible arrangements — particularly teleworking — could be applied, based on operational needs, the necessary information technology investment, staff populations and organizational entities.

10. In the light of the current information, the Secretariat was revising its planning target for long-term accommodation needs at Headquarters by assuming 20 per cent space savings with respect to the workspace planning figure of 220 square feet per person. The speed and extent of implementation of that target would be determined after careful consideration

of the work practices of different groups of staff and the specificities of the buildings involved.

11. The next steps would be to initiate a programme of communication and consultation with staff and management aimed at achieving acceptance of the initiative and to develop a business case for the implementation of flexible working at the United Nations. A comprehensive study would be required in order to observe space utilization at different times of year and within all departments and offices; such a study would take six to nine months to complete. The business case would address many dimensions of work at Headquarters, including the human resources policy framework, information and communications technology requirements, and the set-up of physical facilities. Industry best practices would be considered and a data set would be established that reflected current realities and future opportunities.

12. The Assembly was invited to take note of the report and, given the complexity of the undertaking, to request the Secretary-General to submit a further report containing a detailed business case at its sixty-ninth session. The Secretariat would report in due course on its assessment of the potential impact of the Umoja enterprise resource planning initiative and a future service delivery model in the context of the flexible workplace; it would be premature to expect such an assessment at the sixty-eighth session.

13. **Mr. Ruiz Massieu** (Chair of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/68/583), said that the Advisory Committee had found that the Secretary-General had provided a useful introduction to the subject of a flexible workplace and concurred that a more detailed study was needed. He reiterated that all relevant factors should be taken into account during the planning phase of construction projects in order to accurately estimate space allowance and the most efficient use of office space. Since the Assembly would consider proposals at its sixty-eighth session on long-term accommodation needs at Headquarters, the Advisory Committee recommended that the proposed business case for a flexible workplace should be submitted no later than at the first part of the resumed sixty-eighth session. The Advisory Committee considered that flexible working principles were applicable throughout the Secretariat and therefore recommended that the Assembly should request the

Secretary-General to assess the potential for such arrangements at the Geneva-based offices in the context of his next report on the strategic heritage plan for the Palais des Nations.

14. With regard to the links between flexible working and other business transformation initiatives, the Advisory Committee noted the Secretary-General's statement that Umoja was conducive to flexible working because it would allow Secretariat staff to execute many functions in a harmonized manner regardless of their location. The streamlining of business processes was also expected to have an impact on staffing and skills requirements. The Advisory Committee recommended that the Assembly should request the Secretary-General to reflect in his business case report the expected impact of current management improvement initiatives on space requirements at different Secretariat locations.

15. Since the implementation of a flexible workplace would have a significant impact on the working environment, workplace communication and working methods, it would be crucial for the Office of Human Resources Management to participate in the formulation of the business case study. Secretariat departments and offices should have an opportunity to provide input and any proposals for flexible working arrangements should be well adapted to the specific requirements of staff performing different functions in different departments, work groups and locations. Furthermore, such proposals should not focus solely on reducing space requirements but should also enhance the productivity of the Organization and its staff.

16. **Mr. Thomson** (Fiji), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that careful consideration was needed before embarking on new organizational transformation initiatives. While the Group acknowledged that a flexible workspace offered potential benefits in terms of staff satisfaction and productivity, enhanced cooperation and reduced real estate needs, it also noted the significant risks to staff morale and productivity and the Organization's reputation.

17. He concurred with the Advisory Committee that the focus should be not only on reducing space requirements but also on enhancing human resources management. Human resources policies and departments' specific requirements must be considered in determining whether such an initiative could be

successful at the United Nations. The Group wished to have further information about what would be required — particularly in the area of information technology — to successfully implement a flexible workspace. Other requirements, such as robust internal communications and training programmes, must also be considered. The Group would examine the elements presented to determine whether the preparation of a business case was advisable, bearing in mind that the implementation of a flexible workplace would represent a significant shift in the organizational culture of the United Nations and the working methods of its staff.

18. **Mr. Safronov** (Russian Federation) said that applying the latest developments in the efficient use of resources, including workspace, might enable the Organization to reduce its leasing costs in New York and, in the long term, to change its approach to the use of the available workspace. It was unfortunate that the proposals were being made too late to be implemented as part of the renovations at Headquarters. He wondered why the issue of a flexible workplace had not been discussed in conjunction with the capital master plan, as the question of adopting such measures had first been raised in that context and they could have been taken more effectively while all the subcontractors were in place and the buildings were empty of staff, equipment and furniture. The capital master plan was in its final stage and many aspects of the current proposals still required additional development. The projected 20 per cent reduction in work space requirements must be justified further. The proposals involved a combination of design, construction, information and communications technology, and personnel aspects that would require effective coordination among many departments. It was crucial that any innovative measures should be implemented as efficiently as possible in terms of management, cost and time frame, and in strict compliance with the Staff Regulations and Rules. The lessons learned from previous projects of similar scope and complexity and with a similar time frame should be taken into consideration. His delegation would also seek information in informal consultations concerning the experience of other large organizations in implementing such measures. Lastly, the Board of Auditors should provide oversight.

Other matters

19. **The Chair** drew attention to the letter dated 11 November 2013 from the President of the General Assembly to the Chair of the Fifth Committee transmitting a letter from the Chair of the Sixth Committee on the administration of justice at the United Nations, contained in document [A/C.5/68/11](#), which would be considered under agenda item 143.

20. He also drew attention to the letter dated 12 November 2013 from the President of the General Assembly to the Chair of the Fifth Committee transmitting a letter dated 11 November 2013 from the Secretary-General regarding the reform of the operational arrangements for the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, contained in document [A/C.5/68/13](#), which would be considered under agenda item 134.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.