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QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Review of United Nations public information networks -
United Nations Information Centres

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 "Review of United Nations public information networks - United Nations Information Centres" (A/44/329).

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. In his introductory comments related to the first part of the Joint Inspection Unit report on the review of United Nations public information networks, which dealt with the reorganization of the Department of Public Information (A/44/433/Add.1), the Secretary-General offered certain general observations about the process leading to the issuance of that report, which are also applicable in the present case. Accordingly, and with the continuing aim of facilitating the consideration of these reports by the General Assembly, the following comments are limited to those concrete recommendations which the inspector has addressed to the Secretary-General in the section following paragraph 166 of the report.

Recommendations I-III

2. A review of the report reveals an apparent misconception of the role played by local United Nations associations with regard to United Nations information centres. The United Nations associations can, and indeed do, play a valuable role in conjunction with the work of national committees, such as those for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) or the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They can certainly aid, supplement and strengthen the work of United Nations information centres, but under actual circumstances they cannot, as the Inspector suggests, replace them. United Nations associations necessarily have agendas and priorities that are quite different from those of the United Nations and of its Department of Public Information. All of them are national associations, not international organizations. Most of them are financed by foreign ministries and are thus constrained to publicize and support their countries' views of the United Nations.

3. Furthermore, the recommendations concerning the closing of some information centres seem to overlook or ignore the political implications of such moves. A clear example is the proposal to close the centre in Paris, the capital of a permanent member of the Security Council. The "obvious geopolitical reasons" that motivate the recommendations of the Inspector to close certain centres and to retain others are not recognized as such by the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General feels, for instance, that it is important to retain the centres at Prague and Lisbon, where no other United Nations presence exists, and does not agree with the recommendation that facilities at Algiers, Tripoli and Tunis should be limited to outposts of the Rabat centre.

Recommendation IV

4. This is a solid recommendation with which the United Nations would have no difficulties. It is, however, to be noted that a memorandum of understanding between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Department of Public Information has been agreed upon since November 1988. That understanding refers to various concrete situations that may arise in the field, and to the respective roles of the director of the United Nations information centres and the resident co-ordinator.

5. The understanding refers specifically to issues of mandate, of autonomy of action, of complementarity of programmes, of joint premises and other issues that have arisen over the past few years. Resident co-ordinators and directors of United Nations information centres, have specifically been requested jointly to discuss and review the understanding and to report back to their respective headquarters. The understanding is to be reviewed after one year, in the light of comments and views expressed by both concerned parties.
6. The present understanding should, therefore, be allowed to function as planned for one year before review, as it provides guidance for most events and situations discussed in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit.
7. It should be added as a general remark that the question of representation of the Secretary-General in the field is a matter that falls within the prerogatives of the Secretary-General.

Recommendation V

8. The Secretary-General appreciates the intent of the various items grouped under this recommendation - notably, under subparagraphs (b), (c) and (d) - which are aimed, as indicated by the Inspector, at improving the operation and management of United Nations information centres and services.
9. With regard to subparagraph (a), however, the Secretary-General would wish to clarify that there is no "mandatory limit of four years on a director's stay in the same information centre". While a system of regular rotation is considered highly desirable, the four-year period is merely a general guideline. Actual length of assignment in each case is determined following an assessment of the work of the particular centre, the needs of the Department, the performance of the director and local conditions, within the overall constraints of the financial and personnel policies of the Organization.
10. With regard to the recommendation contained in subparagraph (e), which calls for the "grouping [of] obligatory commemorations as indicated in paragraphs 107-110 of the report", the Secretary-General - strictly from the perspective of mobilizing media attention - would tend to support the Inspector's concern over the proliferation of United Nations observances. Clearly, it is not possible to obtain full media attention in all countries for each and every observance. On the other hand, it should be recalled that the designation of such observances is determined by various intergovernmental legislative bodies, which, in many cases, wish to attract the attention of specialized sectors of the media, of national legislative organs, non-governmental organizations and the public, and that it is not within the Secretary-General's prerogatives to alter the dates determined by the legislative organs.

Recommendation VI

11. The Secretary-General shares the Inspector's objective of simplifying the system for drafting and dispatching the reports that information centres submit to the Department of Public Information headquarters, although not necessarily in the manner suggested by the Inspector.

12. With the establishment of the Information Centre Division, work is proceeding on the revision of information policies and operational rules, to be reflected in a new manual along with General Assembly mandates and intergovernmental guidelines that have evolved since 1980, when the last manual was prepared. Reporting procedures are being streamlined to the maximum possible extent and a new procedure that has been developed during the year is to be tested and implemented.

13. With regard to subparagraph (b), which calls for "doing away with separate reports on each United Nations commemoration" and reporting thereon only on a six-monthly basis, it should be noted that in various cases separate reports are required in order to inform individual legislative organs and the timing of such reports is conditioned by the pertinent schedule of meetings.

14. The recommendation contained in subparagraph (c), which calls for the conversion of the current weekly report to the Office for Research and the Collection of Information into a monthly report, cannot be accepted in the present circumstances. Weekly reports to that Office are absolutely necessary in order to receive up-to-date information about ongoing political activities for the benefit of the Secretary-General. It should be noted that information from those reports is on political issues only and is being used for preparation of weekly notes to the Secretary-General.
