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AGENDA ITEM 66

Personnel questions (continued):

(a) Geographical distribution of the staff of the Secretariat: report of the Secretary-General (A/C.5/987, A/C.5/L.790 and Corr.1 and Add.1) (continued);

(b) Proportion of fixed-term staff (A/C.5/987) (continued)

1. Mr. ARBOLEDA (Colombia) said that the conditions of work of the Secretariat staff had become such that staff morale was seriously shaken. At the seventeenth session, his delegation had actively campaigned to show that such a state of affairs was in danger of seriously compromising the efficiency of the Secretariat and hence the proper functioning of the Organization. The Secretary-General was not alone responsible for the working conditions and well-being of the staff; it was also the responsibility of the General Assembly to express in practice the high regard in which it claimed to hold the Secretariat staff. He was fully aware of the interest taken in personnel questions by the Secretary-General, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Fifth Committee. But a thorough study of the facts showed how dangerous it would be not to give due heed to those considerations when budgetary or administrative decisions were being reached. His delegation had carried out such a study with the greatest concern for objectivity, well aware that some people would describe as alarmist the presentation of a truly alarming situation.

2. Of course, the financial difficulties facing the Organization justified a policy of austerity; however, there were costly economies, for a decision which produced an immediate saving could indirectly give rise to a regrettable crisis of confidence and efficiency which would ultimately lay an added burden on the Organization. The human aspect of the problem was no less important for being less obvious than the financial aspect. The Charter of the United Nations required staff members to maintain the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity, and in fact the Organization was served by a staff which

had at all times displayed incomparable efficiency and dedication in the performance of often difficult tasks. In his statement at the 1019th meeting of Committee, the Secretary-General himself had paid eloquent tribute to all his colleagues. Nevertheless, there were already signs of overwork, strain and even discouragement among the staff, and action must be taken without delay. Unfortunately, the Member States were doing nothing—quite the contrary—to improve the lot of the staff; they were apparently unaware that they were thus harming their own best interests.

3. An inquiry among the Secretariat staff would show that they had numerous causes for dissatisfaction: the scale of salaries and wages was unsatisfactory; the volume of work was excessive and the work poorly distributed; promotion prospects and career possibilities were poor; dependency allowances and education grants were inadequate; the periodic reports were unsatisfactory; the staff were gradually losing their rights and prerogatives; annual leave and home leave was sometimes postponed; transfers were sometimes abruptly cancelled, and staff members transferred to countries with a high cost of living did not receive adequate financial compensation; new staff members were appointed to posts senior to those held by older staff members; the number of fixed-term contracts was increasing; the Administration took decisions affecting the staff without consulting them; lastly, there was insufficient contact between the higher and lower echelons of the staff, which made the senior staff incapable of properly judging the qualifications and work of junior staff or understanding their personal and family problems or their fair demands.

4. A quick reading of the list of grievances showed that money was not the prime factor in the lowering of staff morale. Most of the causes of discontent enumerated had to do with the human aspect of the question, to the fact that insufficient account was taken of the personal and family problems of staff members, of their feelings, in a word, of the spirit which underlay all human acts. To eliminate those causes of dissatisfaction, it was necessary to show more humanity, more understanding—and that was what the staff was asking. What was important was to avoid measures which might adversely affect working conditions, create fear or anxiety among the staff, or in any way detract from the incentive to work, by favouring some staff members to the detriment of others or, what was worse, harming some to favour others. Some of the causes for dissatisfaction mainly affected the staff in the Professional category, others touched General Service employees, and some affected the morale of staff members in both categories.

5. It was a fact that the staff of the Secretariat had hardly increased since the beginning of 1956, despite the considerable growth in the membership of the

Organization, the number and length of meetings, the proliferation of committees and special commissions, the expanding activities of subsidiary organs and the multiplication of surveys, documents, translations, etc. The Secretary-General had recognized that the existing staff resources had been taxed to a point where it had become impossible to plan the work properly, to the inevitable detriment of its quality and effectiveness, and he had tried to offer some remedy to that state of affairs by proposing in the budget estimates for 1963^{1/} a "controlled expansion" of staff, representing a 5 per cent increase above the existing level. Although the Advisory Committee had recognized the need for an increase, it had rejected that modest proposal. By refusing, in good faith, to meet the Secretary-General's request, the Fifth Committee had, likewise in good faith, refused to allow a solution to one of the causes for sagging staff morale, namely, fatigue caused by overwork, further aggravated by the fatigue resulting from unsatisfactory distribution of the workload among the various departments. It was true that at the seventeenth session the Committee had asked the Rapporteur to study that problem (see 938th meeting), but less, unfortunately, with a view to finding a solution to the problem of staff demoralization than to correcting certain irregularities of an administrative nature.

6. The way in which ceilings were placed on salary scales constituted another serious cause of discontent; many veteran employees who were still many years from retirement had but slight chances of promotion because they had already reached their grade ceilings. That was particularly true for staff at the senior and principal levels in the General Service category (G-4 and G-5), and at the second and first officer levels in the Professional category (P-3 and P-4). His delegation considered that thought should be given to creating a more flexible salary scale whereby staff members could pass into the next grade after a certain number of years; such a scale would obviate a situation such as that now obtaining, in which excellent staff members had their salaries frozen and their promotion prospects reduced to nothing, consequently falling prey to feelings of disillusion and insecurity.

7. Having been a member of the Secretariat for almost ten years, he could testify that the present promotion system was expensive and unsatisfactory to the staff. For example, a staff member who had been recommended by a supervisor for promotion might find the following year that his name no longer appeared on the promotion register and had been replaced by the name of a person who was less qualified on grounds of competence and seniority.

8. The lack of promotion opportunities was particularly acute for staff members of the language services. Those employees, who did highly specialized work, who must keep themselves informed of the numerous topics dealt with in all United Nations documents, who must pass a very difficult examination at the time of recruitment and who, after two years' probation, became second officers (P-3), had half as many opportunities for promotion to first officer (P-4) as the staff of other departments. Promotion prospects were even more restricted for such employees who were first officers (P-4) or senior officers (P-5). In order to be promoted, a translator must obviously be competent; but an employee who had passed a difficult examination, who had survived two years' probation, and who had

performed his duties satisfactorily for six or ten years, could scarcely give any further proof of his competence. In the Translation Sections, moreover, seniority was not given full weight in the matter of promotion, and that was often demoralizing to the staff. Lastly, with rare exceptions, a translator could not be promoted until a vacancy arose in the next higher category, and when it did, promotion meant a change in the nature of his duties. Such a promotion system ignored the importance of continuity in the performance of duties that were so specialized. It was certainly curious that a staff member, who for years had proved his competence and efficiency in a highly specialized post could gain promotion only by devoting himself to duties different from those which he performed so well. It would seem more logical and just, for example, to set a special examination for translators with the necessary seniority, in order to give them the promotion they deserved.

9. The fact that the United Nations, especially since the policy of decentralization had gained momentum, was obliged more and more frequently to transfer staff members from one duty station to another often imposed far too heavy financial and other hardships on the staff. The assignment allowances they were given were usually only sufficient to pay for the cost of storing their furniture at the duty stations from which they were transferred, and were not enough to cover the added cost of renting furnished homes at their new duty stations, especially since in some areas the rentals they had to pay for decent housing sometimes amounted to 40 per cent of their total earnings. In addition, a staff member transferred in that way often had to sell his furniture at a loss before leaving and to purchase new furniture at a higher price at his new duty station, as well as incurring other expenses in many cases because he must break his lease. The present system of salaries and allowances was not calculated to enable staff members to meet all the extra costs arising from such transfers, which were becoming increasingly frequent.

10. The system of post adjustments, adopted in 1956 for the purpose of assuring staff members a uniform standard of living at the various duty stations, had not produced the expected results. The system had provided that changes would be made in the classification of a duty station whenever the cost of living, averaged over a period of nine months, increased by 5 per cent over the base figure. In fact, the application of the nine-months average rule had made it impossible to keep up adequately with changes in the cost of living. As a result, staff members transferred to areas where the cost of living was higher than was shown by United Nations statistics had found themselves faced with personal and financial problems which the Administration had refused to consider. He was glad to see that the United Nations now recognized that the nine-months average rule was not satisfactory, but he feared that the new rule proposed by the Expert Committee on Post Adjustments and accepted by the Administrative Committee on Coordination,^{2/} which would take account of any 5 per cent rise in the cost of living recorded for four consecutive months, might also fail to solve the problem. It would be fairer to average out the cost-of-living increase over the four-month period. That was a question which the Fifth Committee should study more closely.

^{1/} Official Records of the General Assembly, Seventeenth Session, Supplement No. 5, foreword, para. 13.

^{2/} See Official Records of the General Assembly, Seventeenth Session, Annexes, agenda item 70, document A/C.5/932, paras. 48 and 49.

11. The way in which periodic reports were at present prepared was a cause of discontent to the staff, since the report consisted merely of a few standardized headings, somewhat narrow in range, which permitted no allowance to be made for the personal qualities of the individual. As a result, supervisors might refrain from mentioning flaws in the characters of certain staff members. Thus, promotion was sometimes granted to employees less deserving of it than others working under more severe supervisors, who were stricter in making out the periodic reports.

12. The salaries of the United Nations Field Service staff, who had to perform very diverse functions in the most varied situations, were not commensurate with the importance of their work, and those employees had fewer chances of promotion than Headquarters staff because they were always far away from the centre. They should at least be given temporary promotions, so that their salaries would not be less than those of persons recruited only temporarily in the areas where they were stationed, whose work they had to supervise and even, at times, to perform.

13. Not least among the grievances of the staff was that, over the years, they had lost some of the rights which they had possessed. They had lost, for instance, the right to rental allowance and to ten extra days of home leave; Professional staff had lost the right to compensatory leave for overtime; the time allowed for leave and other travel had been reduced, and so had travel standards. At the seventeenth session, when the latter decision had been taken, the Colombian delegation—since the matter was one touching the welfare of the staff—had pressed the question whether the views of the Secretariat had been taken into account. However, the only explanation given for adopting that measure had been that it represented an economy for the Organization. That was a very flexible argument, which might lend itself to many abuses. During the second reading of the budget estimates at the 980th meeting, the Colombian delegation had requested the Committee at least to postpone the reduction in travel standards until the eighteenth session, in order to ensure that so serious a decision affecting the rights which the staff possessed by virtue of their contracts and of the Staff Regulations was not taken blindly. Unfortunately, the Committee had not acceded to the Colombian delegation's request.

14. It must be acknowledged in all fairness that, if some administrative decisions resulted in a lowering of the morale of the Secretariat, there were some supervisors who were truly concerned with the welfare of the staff, took an interest in their personal and family problems and displayed the greatest understanding towards them. He need only mention, in that connexion, the Special Fund and the Office of the Controller.

15. It was sometimes said that, in so vast and complex an organization as the United Nations, it was practically impossible to satisfy everyone and to avoid injustices, whether voluntary or not. While it was true that workers everywhere in the world were subjected to injustices, and while that might explain why injustices occurred in the United Nations, it could not justify their existence, for the simple reason that the United Nations, which had been founded, among other reasons, to "reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person" and which proclaimed that the universal and effective recognition and observance of those rights

were a common standard for all peoples and all nations, was in duty bound to set an example to the whole world. It was the duty of the United Nations to show that the Organization itself applied the principles which it advocated and which it asked others to observe.

16. Mr. SOARDI (Italy) asked whether the full text of the Colombian representative's statement might be reproduced as a Committee document.

17. Mr. BANNIER (Netherlands) observed that it was a principle of the Committee never to issue as an official document the text of statements made by representatives; by departing from that rule, it would set a bad example for the other United Nations organs. Moreover, the text of the Colombian representative's interesting statement had been distributed to the Committee members by the Colombian delegation. He would therefore ask the Italian representative to reconsider his proposal.

18. Mr. SOARDI (Italy) said that he would willingly comply with the Netherlands representative's request.

19. The CHAIRMAN thanked the representative of Italy for his co-operative attitude and explained that as a general rule only the statements which the Secretary-General and the Chairman of the Advisory Committee made every year on the presentation of the budget estimates were reproduced in full as Committee documents.

20. Mr. ARBOLEDA (Colombia) said that he appreciated the validity of the Netherlands representative's remarks, but wished to thank the Italian representative, whose proposal was an honour and an encouragement to the Colombian delegation.

21. Mr. WEI (China), referring to the suggestion he had made at the 1028th meeting that the Secretary-General should periodically review the staff resources of the Secretariat, said that his delegation hoped that, on the basis of such surveys and General Assembly resolution 1852 (XVII), the Secretary-General would be able to improve the geographical distribution of the staff so that the Organization could function in a manner truly representative of the aspirations of the peoples of all its Member States. There was no doubt that the Secretary-General had made earnest efforts to carry out the directives given by the General Assembly in resolution 1852 (XVII); the geographical distribution of the staff had improved, as was shown, for example, by the table in paragraph 10 of the Secretary-General's report (A/C.5/987), and by the fact that, between 1 September 1962 and 31 August 1963, 176 new appointments subject to geographical distribution had been made.

22. The situation of Chinese staff members, however, deserved more attention. According to table 4 of the Secretary-General's report on 31 August 1963 there were only 47 Chinese staff members and, taking into account the fact that 2 posts which had become vacant during the year had been filled through the promotion of Chinese General Service category staff members, it was evident that the total number of Chinese nationals employed in the Secretariat had even been reduced by 2, by comparison with the previous year. Furthermore, several Chinese staff members would soon be reaching the age of retirement, and the number of Chinese staff would thus be likely in the near future to fall below the desirable level, an eventuality which would be unwarranted since the Chinese staff had rendered commendable service to the Organization since its establishment. In recent years, a diminishing

number of Chinese staff members had been recruited; his Government hoped that no deliberate policy was involved, but the situation could not fail to cause it serious concern.

23. His delegation sincerely welcomed the recruitment of nationals from newly admitted Member States. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that a number of new posts had been created since 1960, and that some Member States were over-represented in the Secretariat: his delegation hoped that, if those factors were taken into account, it would be possible to hasten the application of Assembly resolution 1852 (XVII). His Government was ready to assist the Secretariat in its efforts by making available well qualified Chinese candidates for Secretariat appointments.

24. With regard to the proportion of fixed-term staff, his delegation had made its view clear during previous sessions: while fixed-term appointments offered certain advantages, the permanent staff members were still the backbone of the Secretariat. The appointment of staff members for short periods must inevitably affect the work of the Secretariat, particularly during the period of their adaptation, and furthermore, an increase in the proportion of fixed-term contracts would considerably reduce the promotion prospects of the career staff members, which would affect their morale and, in turn, the efficiency of their work. It was therefore advisable not to have too high a percentage of fixed-term appointments.

25. In conclusion, he paid a tribute to the Secretariat, without whose service the Organization would have been unable to realize its many achievements and earn the enthusiastic support of all peoples.

26. Mr. AHSON (Pakistan) said that his delegation, having voted for General Assembly resolution 1852 (XVII), had studied with interest the report on the composition of the Secretariat (A/C.5/987), which had convinced it that the Secretary-General had made solid progress in improving the geographical distribution of the Secretariat. It hoped that his efforts would continue and that the international character of the Secretariat would truly reflect the principle mentioned in Article 100 of the Charter.

27. As to the proportion of fixed-term appointments, his delegation believed that, while it might perhaps be desirable to increase that proportion in order to ensure a better geographical distribution of the staff, the matter should be left in the Secretary-General's hands. It was therefore glad to observe that definite progress had been made in that respect, and that on 31 August 1963 the number of fixed-term appointments to posts subject to geographical distribution was 413, or 29.7 per cent of the total. The Director of Personnel deserved congratulations for that.

28. Imbalances in the composition of the Secretariat had been mentioned by the Indonesian representative during the general discussion on the 1964 budget estimates (1027th meeting); the Pakistan delegation hoped that adequate steps would be taken to rectify any imbalances which might be found to exist.

29. He wished, in conclusion, to reiterate the views which his delegation had expressed during the seventeenth session of the General Assembly, in favour of the creation of an international career service; such a step would serve to give the proper perspective to the whole question. His delegation unreservedly associated itself with the compliments that had been paid to the Secretariat.

The meeting rose at 12.35 p.m.