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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 8th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. AL-MASRI (Syrian Arab Republic)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and
Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 128: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/44/32 and A/44/502; A/43/586, A/44/135 and Add.1 and A/44/221)

1. Mr. GEBREMEDHIN (Ethiopia) said that the Committee on Conferences had met in 1989 very much aware of its new status as a permanent subsidiary body of the General Assembly and of the role it could play in the context of the programme budget and the medium-term plan as well as in the review of the Department of Conference Services. The Committee's report to the General Assembly (A/44/32) contained a recommended draft calendar of conferences and meetings for the biennium 1990-1991. Conferences and meetings had as far as possible been staggered throughout the year with a view to producing a more even schedule and avoiding overlapping. The biennial calendar of the Economic and Social Council had also been reviewed for the first time and the Committee's recommendations on it submitted to the Council. Despite the reform process, and the great efforts made, the absence of agreement in the Special Commission of the Council on the in-depth study of the United Nations intergovernmental structure and functions in the economic and social fields had resulted in a draft calendar that remained much the same as ever. As the Secretary-General noted in his report on the work of the organization (A/44/1), the decrease in the demand for conference and documentation services envisaged by the Group of High-Level Intergovernmental Experts had not occurred and as a result, the calendar of meetings was not significantly different from that of 1986, before the reform process had begun.

2. Obviously, the calendar could not be constructed in a vacuum. Greater efforts and more understanding and co-operation were required from the States members of intergovernmental bodies and the Secretariat. Biennialization was only one approach, and efforts at reform and renewal could be hampered only by thinking solely in terms of schedules of meetings. More consideration should be given to the harmonization of interests and the common interpretation of objectives that accommodated the interests of all regions, in order to avoid the continued waste of resources and overloading of the calendar. It was important to take a global approach directed solely at strengthening the Organization and enhancing its effectiveness.

3. The Committee had devoted considerable attention to improving the utilization of conference servicing facilities by United Nations bodies. While his delegation agreed that the Committee should continue its practice of addressing letters to the chairmen of bodies that had failed to make adequate use of the conference resources provided to them, it concurred with the observation in paragraph 44 of the Committee's report that the utilization statistics did not always provide the full picture of the overall efficiency of a given body. The Committee's awareness of the shortcomings of the methodology used so far was encouraging and he welcomed its decision to refine it.

4. The late issuance of documentation was an increasing source of frustration for delegations. The Department of Conference Services reported a lack of co-operation from author departments, citing the late submission and length of manuscripts as

(Mr. Gebremedhin, Ethiopia)

the source of the problem. The Department should not wait for the 1992-1997 medium-term plan to make further efforts to improve co-ordination with author departments as paragraph 87 of the Committee's report seemed to imply. Interdepartmental co-operation, co-ordination and consultation should be encouraged and the machinery of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination might also be helpful in that regard. The importance of the next medium-term plan with regard to conference-servicing lay more in the use of new technologies to facilitate cost-effective and efficient procedures.

5. The report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 41/213 (A/44/222, para. 104) referred to the possibility of inviting a fresh outside look to determine whether the productivity and efficiency of the Department of Conference Services could be further enhanced. It was not clear, however, whether that meant using the expertise of a United Nations intergovernmental body or calling on an outside organization. The suggestion of a working group of the Committee on Conferences was one possible approach.

6. The Committee on Conferences should be able to go beyond a sterile debate on the format of the calendar of conferences and meetings. A major step in that direction would be to define the Committee's mandate and its role more clearly. Some of its terms of reference seemed to generate conflicting demands and expectations, particularly among Member States and some intergovernmental bodies. In the interest of efficiency, its role in deciding when and where meetings were to take place needed to be re-examined. While the General Assembly's decision on the established-headquarters principle remained in effect, the question of the equal treatment of conference centres was a matter of interest to many delegations. His delegation endorsed the draft calendar, but felt that the Committee's treatment and approval of the calendar itself, in the preparation of which the Secretariat had demonstrated commendable expertise and resourcefulness, left much to be desired.

7. Mr. BAZAN (Chile) said that it was the special responsibility of the Committee on Conferences to advise the General Assembly on all matters pertaining to the organization of conferences and meetings in the United Nations. That required not only a detailed knowledge of the requirements and of the means available but also a clear vision of the Organization. The Committee's function was to act as a guide and to offer suggestions and ideas to ensure the increasingly efficient use of conference-servicing resources. The Secretariat gave it valuable assistance in that regard but it was the Committee's task to provide the Secretariat with guidelines.

8. The calendar of conferences proposed by the Committee took into account the provision in its terms of reference that conferences and meetings should be staggered throughout the year and that to the maximum extent possible the overlapping of meetings related to the same sector of activity in the same conference location should be avoided. The calendar also complied with the General Assembly's recommendation that as far as possible meetings should be held at the headquarters of the bodies concerned, except that, as noted in paragraph 15 of the Committee's report, the meeting places of the sessions of the International Civil

(Mr. Bazan, Chile)

Service Commission (ICSC) and the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Board did not coincide.

9. His delegation was concerned that recommendation 2 of the Group of High-level Intergovernmental Experts on reducing the number and duration of conferences and meetings and on biennialization was not being put into effect. As the Secretary-General noted in his report (A/44/222), the calendar approved for 1989 and the proposed calendar for 1990 differed little from that for 1987.

10. One of the Fifth Committee's main tasks was to see that the best possible use was made of all resources. It was important, therefore, to follow the proceedings of the various bodies, to ensure that meetings started punctually and that conference services were utilized to the fullest extent. However, while the statistics presented every year showed that "the utilization factor" for most bodies was improving - although some of them were still utilizing less than 75 per cent of the services assigned to them - they did not indicate precisely whether the various bodies were functioning as well as they might. The progress made so far should continue and new mechanisms should be devised to complement those already in place. Statistics reflected only the form, and means should be devised to determine the real effectiveness of a particular body. Until then, it would be necessary to rely on the sense of responsibility of Member States. It would be helpful if, after they were elected and before meetings began, the chairmen of all committees could be given full information about the conference services assigned to them, and if they and the other officers would encourage a spirit of co-operation and shared responsibility among all the members of the body in question.

11. On the question of the application of new technologies to conference services, his delegation stressed the importance of ensuring that all Member States were able to take advantage of the proposed electronic communications links. The systems chosen should be universally applicable.

12. His delegation endorsed the views expressed in the Committee's report on the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 for conference and library services, especially the need to devote greater attention to dealing with such difficult and long-standing problems as the excessive length of documents and the delays occurring in their processing. The medium-term plan should also incorporate a strategy for making the most effective use of conference-servicing resources and facilities throughout the world. The Secretariat had worked on the hypothesis that the need for documentation and meetings services during the five-year period 1992-1997 would remain at the stable level of the biennium 1988-1989. Given recent world events and the growing importance and participation of the United Nations in those events, there was every reason to expect that the Organization's activities would increase. It would thus be advisable to revise the base period used by the Secretariat in preparing the medium-term plan.

13. Mr. KUBIZNAK (Czechoslovakia) expressed his delegation's satisfaction with the work of the Committee on Conferences, the draft calendar of conferences and the progress achieved in improving the utilization of conference-servicing resources. It believed that the current criterion for efficiency, namely, a "utilization factor" of 75 per cent, should be retained. On the other hand, the terms of reference of the Committee did not allow for investigation of the reasons why the factors of certain bodies were so low; those bodies might themselves suggest ways of resolving the problem.

14. Given the overloaded schedule of conference activity in New York and at Geneva, particular attention should be given to the need to ensure equal treatment of available conference centres in the United Nations, while according due recognition to the established-headquarters principle. The Committee was right to suggest that a careful assessment should be made of United Nations facilities, services and resources, on the basis of information provided by the Secretariat, and that subject should be duly reflected in the draft resolution.

15. His delegation was of the opinion that it was possible to arrange the central planning and co-ordination of all organizational aspects of conference servicing in the United Nations. It was also pleased to note the careful attention devoted by the Committee to the review of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 and supported the Committee's decision to bring forward its consideration of the draft chapter of the plan governing conference and library services to early 1990.

16. Mr. VAHER (Canada) said that, although the Committee on Conferences had in general carried out its work in accordance with the mandate given to it in General Assembly resolution 43/222, it had not been able to impart much more discipline or order to the pattern of conferences. His delegation would have preferred to see the Committee take a more active role with respect to the budgetary issues associated with the calendar and work within the available resources, in accordance with the recommendations of the Group of High-level Intergovernmental Experts and General Assembly resolution 41/213. The Chairman of the Committee on Conferences had rightly pointed out in her introductory statement that working on the basis of consensus required Member States to reach agreement and to build on that foundation. His delegation hoped that the Committee was now on such a course and would be able to continue on a consensus basis to build greater discipline and order into the calendar of conferences.

17. It was disappointing that United Nations bodies as a whole had not improved their rate of utilization of conference-servicing resources. The overall utilization rate of 76 per cent in 1988 represented a decline from the 77 per cent achieved in 1987 and was a troubling sign after a period of steady improvement, particularly during the current period of reform with its emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency. The utilization rate in New York in 1988 had been only 68 per cent, well below the criterion for efficiency set by the Committee on Conferences in 1983. His delegation regretted that the Committee had not taken a more active role in re-allocating services away from bodies which habitually under-utilized those assigned to them. Reversing the trend would, however, require the co-operation of Member States represented on bodies with chronically

(Mr. Vahe, Canada)

low rates of utilization. Improving the utilization of conference-servicing resources should be given high priority, particularly since the staff of the Department of Conference Services was currently being reduced.

18. It was unfortunate that the Committee's report was once again not sufficiently transparent to allow the Fifth Committee to judge how efficiently conference services were being used without consulting the limited distribution reports of the Committee on Conferences. The report should be self-contained and should include sufficient data to enable specific conclusions to be drawn. That need not materially increase the length of the report.

19. His delegation agreed that statistics did not always provide a full picture of the overall efficiency of a given body. It should be borne in mind, however, that it was not necessary to measure the efficiency of various Committees in reaching decisions in order to measure their efficiency in utilizing conference services. The Committee on Conferences should therefore be encouraged to develop an improved methodology for measuring the use of conference-servicing resources that would take into account such complicating factors as the use of informal meetings and other mechanisms.

20. The Chairman of the Committee on Conferences should continue the practice of writing to committees which were not utilizing adequately the resources provided. The Committee's report should, moreover, contain a list of those bodies that had failed to make adequate use of resources, including any explanation provided by them. A paragraph might also be included in the preamble of the resolution to be adopted by the Fifth Committee mentioning those bodies that had consistently shown low rates of utilization.

21. With regard to documentation, his delegation supported the extension of the discontinuation of summary records for all except seven of the subsidiary organs of the General Assembly and agreed that the Committee on Conferences should continue to consider the issue of recurrent publications. His delegation looked forward to further discussion of those and other issues related to the control and limitation of documentation - including the timely issuance of documents - in 1990, as envisaged in the Committee's biennial programme.

22. The draft calendar of conferences and meetings contained in annex III of the Committee's report was generally consistent with the requirements and guidelines covering the preparation of the calendar. His delegation would, however, like an explanation of the rationale behind the decision of ICSC to hold its summer session in Geneva, particularly since it was required to engage in consultations with the Joint Staff Pension Board on the comprehensive review of pensionable remuneration. The efforts of the Secretariat to reduce peaks and valleys and avoid overlapping of meetings in the same sector were commendable and should be continued. Since participants in intergovernmental meetings also had regular obligations outside the United Nations system there should be maximum consistency from one year to the next in the timing of meetings of United Nations intergovernmental bodies. Noting that some locations were not yet final and that some meetings were to be held away from

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the headquarters of the bodies concerned, he asked for an assurance from the Secretariat that in all cases the terms of resolution 40/243 would be honored with respect to the payment of any additional costs.

23. His delegation strongly endorsed the intention of the Department of Conference Services to intensify its efforts to apply new technologies as a means of improving methods and quality of work and offsetting the impact of staff reductions. The introduction of such innovations as the Documents Records Information and Tracking System, machine assisted translation programmes, communications links and computerized library systems was necessary to allow the Department to continue to provide high-quality services effectively and efficiently. Proper planning and co-ordination of such innovations would be needed, as well as staff training and equipment would need to be standardized to ensure an optimum return on the capital investment.

24. His delegation was glad that the Committee on Conferences had agreed to play a role in the review of the Department, as envisaged by the Secretary-General in paragraph 104 of his report to the General Assembly on the implementation of resolution 41/213 (A/44/222). It believed that even further improvements in efficiency could be achieved through an outside evaluation.

25. His delegation attached great importance to the full implementation of General Assembly resolution 42/207 C and noted with pleasure that the Secretariat shared the concerns of Member States with regard to the provision of full language services.

26. The representation of United Nations organizations at conferences and meetings was a timely and important issue and Inspector Kojic of the Joint Inspection Unit had made a commendable effort to come to grips with it in his report (A/43/586). It was unfortunate that the absence of any studies on the subject and the lack of precise information had required him to carry out his study without a reliable data base. His delegation, however, supported the general thrust of the recommendations and believed that their implementation would enhance the usefulness and effectiveness of United Nations representation at meetings and conferences.

27. Mr. BOUR (France), speaking on behalf of the twelve States members of the European Community, expressed regret at the late appearance of the report of the Committee on Conferences, in direct contravention of the rules which the Committee itself was supposed to enforce.

28. The recommendations of the Group of High-level Intergovernmental Experts were supposed to lead to a reduction in the number and duration of meetings and in the volume of documentation. In practice, as the Secretary-General himself had recognized, the calendar of meetings had hardly changed since the reform process had begun. The mandate of the Committee on Conferences should therefore be strengthened in order that it might take account, in particular, of the budgetary aspects of conference-servicing activities. The fact that consensus had not been achieved on the change in the Committee's terms of reference was regrettable. The

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relatively timid approach adopted by the Committee at its 1989 session and the absence of any really new decision were also disappointing, and it was to be hoped that, with time and experience, the Committee would be in a position to assume all the responsibilities entrusted to it under General Assembly resolution 43/222 B.

29. His delegation approved the Committee's decision to revert to a biennial basis for the organization of its work, which should enable it to consider the financial implications of the draft calendar, in accordance with its new mandate. Since the statistics on the utilization of conference-servicing resources merited particular attention, the extension of such statistics to meetings of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the Main Committees of the General Assembly was welcome and should be further developed. The Committee should also study in detail ways of ensuring that bodies with low "utilization factors" took note of its recommendations and, if the overall utilization rate were again to fall below 75 per cent, consider more forceful measures. The decision to hold, in future, one or two meetings in June to consider the draft calendar of meetings of subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council was welcome and would enable the Committee fully to exercise the responsibilities set out in paragraph 4 (b) of its mandate.

30. The reviews conducted by a number of intergovernmental bodies of the recurrent publications for which they were responsible had unfortunately led to an increase in the number of publications, which required further close attention. In that respect, the Committee could play a role, which it should define precisely at its next session. Despite the Committee's decision to defer discussion of questions relating to the control and limitation of documentation until 1990, the Twelve wished to re-emphasize that documents should be both as short as possible and submitted on time. Further efforts were required in that connection on the part of both the Secretariat and the chairmen of subsidiary organs. Those chairmen who did not respect the 32-page rule, as well as those States or groups of States which were in the habit of sending long communications, should not assume that biennialization meant any weakening of the Committee's determination to ensure the proper control and limitation of documentation. The Committee should consider those questions in detail at its next session and submit specific proposals to the General Assembly.

31. The Twelve took note of the Secretary-General's measures to ensure respect for equal treatment of the official languages of the United Nations and encouraged him to continue his efforts in that direction. Essential priorities were the provision of adequate conference services, in accordance with the resolutions and decisions adopted by the General Assembly, and the prompt distribution of documents in all official languages. Given that the provision of such services was essential for the proper functioning of the Organization, the Twelve would support the application of new technology with a view to ensuring the improved utilization and increased productivity of conference services. They agreed with the Committee that the draft medium-term plan should be made simpler and more straightforward. In conclusion, they appreciated the decision of the Secretary-General to undertake a review of the Department of Conference Services in the course of the biennium

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1990-1991 and hoped that that review would be carried out in the most objective possible manner, with the participation of the Committee on Conferences.

32. Mr. DUHALT (Mexico) said that his delegation endorsed the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Conferences and fully supported the draft resolutions recommended for approval by the General Assembly. However, it had serious doubts with respect to the validity of the criteria and methodology used to measure the utilization of conference-servicing resources. In the first place, the methodology confused ends with means by considering a body with a "utilization factor" of over 75 per cent to be efficient, without taking account of the results achieved by that body or the nature of the matters which it addressed. Secondly, the methodology was incomplete because it covered only formal meetings, ignoring other important means of negotiation such as informal consultations. Thirdly, the current methodology was too simplistic: it took no account of external factors over which the bodies concerned had no control such as, for example, the late distribution of documents by the Secretariat. His delegation urged once again that the necessary measures should be taken to ensure the timely issuance of documents.

33. Item 49 of the draft calendar of conferences and meetings for 1990 indicated that the Working Group of the Committee of the Whole of the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was made up of 24 governmental representatives. However, the Governing Council of UNDP had, by its decision 89/25, decided that the Working Group should be made up of all members of the Governing Council and be open to participation by all members of the Programme. The draft calendar of conferences should be amended accordingly.

34. His delegation supported the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit with respect to the representation of the specialized agencies at conferences and meetings. It also took note with satisfaction of the measures adopted by the Secretary-General to implement some of those recommendations and looked forward to receiving reports of their full implementation in due course.

35. Mr. GARRIDO (Philippines) said that his delegation supported the efforts of the Department of Conference Services to ensure the cost-effective management of meetings, documentation and publications and considered the Department's requests for budgetary support to be rational and reasonable. With regard to the proposed technical innovations, which in themselves were laudable, the Department might wish to quantify its proposals for budgetary consideration and, in view of the scarcity of available resources, establish clear priorities for different aspects of the new technology. It would be interesting to know whether new equipment was to be installed at all main duty stations simultaneously or on a step-by-step basis.

36. His delegation wished to know whether, if a third special session of the General Assembly was indeed to be held during 1990, that would give rise to additional financial implications. It also awaited the draft report referred to in paragraph 107 of the report of the Committee on Conferences, without which no action could be taken on draft resolution C. His delegation would suggest amendments to the draft resolutions in due course.

ORGANIZATION OF WORK

37. The CHAIRMAN reminded members of the Committee of the need to make the best use of the time allotted for its meetings and to observe deadlines for the closure of lists of speakers. Considerable time had been wasted at the present meeting because speakers had failed to address the Committee as scheduled or postponed their statements until a later meeting. Some delegations had even submitted requests to speak after the list of speakers had been closed. The optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources could be ensured only if the procedures of the Committee were rigorously observed.

The meeting rose at 11:25 a.m.