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at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 9th 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 3.15 p.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. HOHENFELLNER (Austria) welcomed the Committee's decision to adopt a biennial work programme, for that would allow it to concentrate better on specific areas each year and to increase the efficiency of its work. Although the Committee was concentrating in 1989 on questions of meetings, reserving matters of the control and limitation of documentation for its next session, it should nevertheless keep in mind that members had expressed their concern on several occasions about the delay in the publication of documents. As a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, the Committee had a most important role to play in that area.

2. With regard to the draft calendar of conferences and meetings for the biennium 1990-1991, efforts had been made to stagger meetings throughout the year, but it was also necessary to avoid as much as possible the overlapping of meetings in the same area and the hiring of costly temporary assistance.

3. His delegation also hoped that efforts would be made to ensure the equal treatment of all United Nations conference centres with a view to optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. It was glad that 20 posts had been included in the manning-table of the United Nations Office at Vienna in order to establish a permanent team of interpreters. The current efforts to fill the still vacant posts in that sector should enhance the efficiency of conference services at Vienna while also reducing the costs of temporary assistance. His delegation had also noted the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) that the Secretary-General should submit a report on the establishment of unified conference services at Vienna, taking into account views expressed on the question by the General Assembly, the ACABQ and the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), a report which would shortly be debated by the Fifth Committee.

4. A number of organs had made considerable efforts to make better use of the conference services made available to them. Meetings statistics were useful as indicators but, as the Committee on Conferences had noted, they did not provide a complete picture of the overall efficiency of a given body. The Committee on Conferences should therefore refine its methodology and keep the question under study.

5. The Austrian delegation approved of the decision of the Committee on Conferences to consider the finalized version of the chapter of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 concerning conference and library services before its submission to the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) at its spring session in 1990. The Committee's input would be all the more useful since a major role was to be accorded to technical innovations, which should enhance the efficiency of the Department of Conference Services.

(Mr. Hohenfellner, Austria)

6. Finally, his delegation supported the decision of the Committee on Conferences to play a role in the review of the Department of Conference Services, for that was in keeping with the mandate assigned to it by the General Assembly in paragraphs 4 (a) and (d) of resolution 43/222 B and would enhance the dialogue between Member States and the Secretariat.
7. Mrs. SHEAROUSE (United States of America) recalled that the late issue of documents was a recurrent problem for which responsibility rested not only with the Department of Conference Services but also with the substantive departments of the Secretariat, and she requested that the Committee on Conferences should look into the matter once again when it had been provided with information about the way in which the guidelines contained in document A/INF/44/1 were being applied.
8. Her delegation was pleased that the Committee on Conferences had reviewed the draft calendar of conferences and meetings of the subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council, for that should help to improve co-ordination within the United Nations system. The draft calendar of conferences and meetings presented in the Committee's report (A/44/32) should also lead to better utilization of resources by staggering meetings throughout the year and avoiding the overlapping of meetings in the same sectors. However, the location of certain meetings had still not been finalized; it was to be hoped that the relevant decisions of the General Assembly would be taken into account in that connection.
9. The utilization factor of conference-servicing resources had unfortunately declined in comparison with 1988 and many bodies still did not make effective use of the available services. It was therefore regrettable that, once again, the Committee on Conferences had not taken decisive action to cut the resources made available to such bodies. There should be a direct correlation between the calendar of conferences and the utilization factor of each body, and the acceptable level should be raised from 75 to 85 per cent.
10. The United States delegation was pleased that the Committee on Conferences had proposed an extension for one more year of the experimental period with respect to the entitlement to summary records of subsidiary organs of the General Assembly, and it noted with appreciation the decision of the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) to dispense with summary records. Efforts should also be continued to ensure compliance with General Assembly resolution 42/207 C.
11. The JIU had submitted two very interesting reports on the representation of United Nations bodies at meetings, and that technical analysis could serve as a useful basis for the creation of administrative directives for standardization of the representation procedures. The Committee on Conferences should also play a leading role in the review of the Department of Conference Services requested by the Secretary-General (A/44/222). With regard to the co-ordination of conferences within the United Nations system, her delegation had no objection to the Committee on Conferences seeking the views of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC), but ACC must not usurp the responsibilities entrusted to the Committee under its mandate.

(Mrs. Shearouse, United States)

12. The United States delegation believed that it was important to manage all conference services properly and it would therefore support the draft resolution contained in the Committee's report.

13. Mr. BARABANOV (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) said that, on the whole, his delegation had no objection to the draft calendar of conferences and meetings for the biennium 1990-1991, even though it might not guarantee the optimal utilization of conference services. His delegation noted with satisfaction that the Committee on Conferences had devoted a great deal of time to reviewing the proposed medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997. It was of the opinion that the plan should contain an in-depth analysis of prospects and trends relating to the United Nations Conference schedule. The principal aims must be defined so that conference services could be used to the fullest and activities could be assigned to the various United Nations conference centres taking into account the resources available to them. Intergovernmental bodies should be included from the outset in the process of elaborating the medium-term plan, and his delegation welcomed the Committee's intention to resume its review of the proposed medium-term plan prior to the session of the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination in spring 1990.

14. By contrast, with respect to other questions included in the agenda of the Committee on Conferences, the results achieved were certainly disappointing. The Committee's new mandate constituted an acceptable basis for completing its work while pursuing a dual objective: ensuring that the most rational and economical use was made of existing conference services but also that purely financial considerations did not hinder the progressive development of machinery for multilateral negotiation. However, a reading of the Committee's report showed that it had disregarded a number of essential new elements of its mandate and that, moreover, it had no plans to include them in its future programme of work. The General Assembly must request the Committee to establish a concrete programme for its future activities. In that connection, attention must be accorded on a priority basis to improving the co-ordination of conference activities within the United Nations system and to maintaining some balance in assigning activities to the major conference centres.

15. In its resolution 40/243, paragraph 12, the General Assembly had requested the Committee to continue its periodic examination of the rules governing conference planning. Obviously, in the context of the reform of the United Nations, adjustments might prove to be necessary. Hence, it had become apparent of late that the strict implementation of the rule requiring certain bodies to meet at their headquarters could at times entail additional expenditures.

16. As the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments had indicated, the Committee could play a vital role in the review of the functioning of the Department of Conference Services, for example, by establishing an ad hoc working group.

17. In view of the above-mentioned tasks, the Committee would doubtless have to review the practice of holding annual sessions limited to five days, where three or four half-days were taken up by the elaboration and adoption of the report.

(Mr. Barabanov, USSR)

Neither was it beyond the realm of possibility that the Committee might need supplementary resources for the biennium 1991-1992. As the General Assembly would be called on to take decisions on such matters, it would be best not to defer consideration of the Committee's future programme of work until its organizational session in 1990. A preliminary discussion of the question was called for immediately, within the framework of the informal consultations to be held on the draft resolution submitted by the Committee.

18. Mr. SIGURDSSON (Iceland), speaking on behalf of the five Nordic countries, said that the lower conference services utilization factor in 1988 gave cause for concern. Statistics on the meetings of bodies, while useful, did not provide a complete picture of the situation. It would be particularly interesting to have information on the holding of informal meetings. The Committee on Conferences should urge all bodies to use the services made available to them as rationally and effectively as possible and to predict their conference-servicing needs realistically.

19. With respect to the draft calendar of conferences, the Nordic countries noted with satisfaction the effort made to stagger meetings and avoid overlapping. They, too, hoped that the remaining decisions on the locations of certain meetings would be taken in accordance with the provisions of resolution 40/242 and that all decisions regarding the use of all conference centres in the system would be taken bearing in mind the need for rationalization and effectiveness. They also noted with satisfaction that the Committee had reviewed the draft calendar of conferences and meetings of the Economic and Social Council and, in that connection, had submitted recommendations which the Economic and Social Council had taken into account. The Nordic countries looked forward with interest to the deliberations on co-ordinating and centrally planning all aspects of conference-servicing in the United Nations as a whole, which would take place in 1990 when the Secretariat presented its full report on the question.

20. The Nordic countries hoped that the question of the control and limitation of documentation would be discussed in detail at the forty-fifth session of the General Assembly. They urged all organs concerned to do their utmost to reduce documentation and maintain it within the required limits. Member States, for their part, must exercise restraint in requesting to have communications circulated as official documents of the Organization. Lastly, the Nordic countries supported the Committee's recommendation to extend for another year the period during which most subsidiary organs of the Assembly would not be entitled to summary records.

21. Like other delegations, the Nordic countries were concerned about the late distribution of documents necessary for the deliberations of the Fifth Committee. Such delays could only have negative repercussions on the work of the Committee and lead to a waste of resources. In that connection, they noted with interest the progress report on the application of new technology to conference-servicing and the significant changes it had entailed. They were convinced that such technological innovations would enhance the Department's productivity and efficiency.

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(Mr. Sigurdsson, Iceland)

22. With respect to the review of the chapter of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 on conference and library services, the Nordic countries noted with satisfaction that the structure of the plan would be simplified in future. A more precise definition of priorities, strategies and activities could be of help in attaining the targeted goals more closely. They also welcomed the Secretary-General's request for a review of the productivity and efficiency of the Department of Conference Services. Lastly, they noted with interest the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the representation of organizations of the United Nations at conferences and meetings.

23. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) welcomed the efforts made by the Department of Conference Services and by the Committee on Conferences - particularly with regard to the rationalization of the calendar of conferences and meetings and the control and limitation of documentation - efforts which were contributing to the greater effectiveness of the system as a whole. His delegation supported the adoption of the three sections of the draft resolution submitted in the Committee's report (A/44/32). In respect of paragraphs 4 and 5 of section A, it considered that it would be appropriate to substitute the word "full" for the word "adequate", since the full use of conference services was not the same thing as the adequate use of those services. Section B was particularly important in that it related to the limitation of documentation and to ensuring that documents were distributed simultaneously within the prescribed time-limits so that delegations would have the relevant information available to them at the right time. Achievement of that goal required joint efforts on the part of the Secretariat and the Member States.

24. He agreed with the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services that the increase in peace-keeping and in future activities in the economic, social and environmental fields, was likely to lead to increased demand for conference services; he hoped that those factors had been taken into consideration when the necessary resources were being estimated. The automation of conference services would allow the Department to be more efficient. It would be desirable for the Secretariat to submit a report on the topic, through the Committee on Conferences, during the current session of the Assembly.

25. The draft calendar of meetings for the Organization for 1990-1991 would enable meetings to be staggered more satisfactorily throughout the year. However, the distribution of meetings between the various United Nations conference centres still stood in need of improvement, and in that connection, his delegation supported the conclusion reached by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 26 of its report.

26. Mr. TALAVERA (Peru) noted with satisfaction that, in the draft calendar for 1990-1991, meetings were better distributed throughout the year, that being a particularly important consideration for delegations with small numbers of staff. Meetings of bodies in the economic sector should, however, be still further staggered.

27. His country attached great importance to the work of the UNDP Governing Council, and particularly to the Working Group of the Committee of the Whole. His delegation also noted with satisfaction that, according to the information provided

(Mr. Talavera, Peru)

by the Secretariat, the meetings of the Working Group would be programmed according to the available conference services, so that the Group would have interpreting services available to it during its meeting in February 1990. In that connection, his delegation wished to recall that the Working Group had expanded, since it now included all members of the Governing Council, and that it was, in addition, open to all members of UNDP. The information given in the draft calendar for 1990, according to which the Working Group consisted of 24 members, should therefore be changed.

28. In the light of the comments in paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Committee's report, his delegation wished to know how the "headquarters principle" could be reconciled with the need to treat various United Nations conference centres on the basis of equality.

29. While the statistics prepared by the Secretariat provided reliable indicators of the use of conference services resources, they did not always give an exact picture of the general efficiency of a particular body. For that reason, the Committee was proposing that the method used must be backed up by the inclusion of information on informal meetings, and on the time lost because meetings began late or ended earlier than expected. The Committee's decision to invite the chairmen of bodies to hold informal meetings within the framework of scheduled meetings could only contribute to the better use of conference services. If the informal meetings were held outside the official meeting time, it would be desirable to notify the Secretariat to that effect, so that it could take that situation into account in the statistics.

30. His delegation wished to know what criteria had been used to determine, at the thirty-seventh session of the General Assembly, the seven subsidiary bodies of the Assembly which were still entitled to summary records.

31. Generally speaking, the format of the medium-term plan for 1992-1997 with regard to conference services was clearer and simpler than in previous plans. A serious attempt, however, must be made to tackle the problem of the delay in the transmission of documents for translation and publication; a solution to that problem presupposed, in particular, greater co-ordination between departments. In addition, technical innovations should be encouraged in the Department of Conference Services, since they could not fail to help to make the Organization more effective.

32. Mr. KLETT (German Democratic Republic) said that, while the trend towards better use of conference resources had been confirmed in the case of certain bodies, the improvement was not general. Hence, organs which did not make adequate use of those services should consider reducing in the future the number of meetings they requested, as they were urged to do in draft resolution A. His delegation, however, was against proposals which aimed at an automatic reduction in the conference-servicing resources of those organs whose utilization rate remained below 75 per cent. The effectiveness of each body also depended on the subjects it dealt with, its composition, and above all on the interest taken by Member States

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(Mr. Klett, German Democratic Republic)

in its work. He welcomed the fact that the Committee on Conferences had decided to include informal consultations in the conference statistics in future, since that would provide a clearer picture of the way in which bodies were using the resources made available to them.

33. His delegation approved the calendar of conferences for 1990-1991, and welcomed the efforts made by the Secretariat to ensure that meetings were staggered over the entire period. On the other hand, it was also essential to ensure that meetings were equally distributed between the conference centres of the Organization, and in particular the three headquarters cities.

34. His delegation generally approved of the structure of the medium-term plan for 1992-1997 as far as conference services were concerned. At the same time, greater precision was needed with regard to some of the priority items, although the medium-term plan must not be made a copy of the programme budget. In view of the current role of the United Nations, and the growing requirements resulting from that role in respect of conference services, the Department of Conference Services must enhance its efficiency, a requirement which should be reflected in the next medium-term plan. The Committee on Conferences should therefore continue to consider the section of the draft medium-term plan relating to conference services even before the session of CPC scheduled for May 1990, so that it could take account of the Committee's findings. The Secretariat should also solve once and for all the problem of the delay in the submission of documents.

35. Bearing in mind the new mandate of the Committee and its programme of work, one substantive session of five days' duration no longer seemed sufficient.

36. Mr. PRODJOWARSITO (Indonesia) said that his delegation was satisfied with the draft calendar adopted for 1990-1991. It was clear that, although meetings had been staggered to a certain extent, there would unavoidably be a peak period during which the work-load would be beyond the capacity of the permanent conference-servicing staff and temporary assistance would therefore be required. It was advisable to abide by the established-headquarters principle, with the understanding that, given the current state of affairs, it was not possible to treat all conference centres equally.

37. While statistics on meetings provided useful indicators, they were not always the right way to measure the efficiency of the bodies considered. The Committee on Conferences should therefore employ a methodology based on mathematical criteria but which also took account of the productivity of certain bodies.

38. Indonesia was pleased with the adoption of Economic and Social Council decision 1988/103 which stated that, beginning in 1990, the Committee on Conferences would review the Council's draft biennial calendar of conferences and meetings and would submit its recommendations thereon to the Council. That decision was in conformity with the objective of strengthening the Committee's mandate.

(Mr. Prodjowarsito, Indonesia)

39. With regard to the medium-term plan for 1992-1997, his delegation understood how difficult it was for the Department of Conference Services to formulate a basic assumption on the level of conference-servicing for the period of the plan. However, the objectives should be defined more clearly and, as far as possible, a five-year base should be utilized, to determine requirements. Further, new conference-servicing technologies should be applied in order to improve the Department's quality of work and to offset the impact of staff reductions.

40. Mr. ECKERSLEY (Australia) said that his delegation was concerned about the absence of effective control over the allocation and utilization of conference-servicing resources. While the Group of 18 had recommended a considerable reduction in the number and duration of meetings, it was particularly disappointing to note, as had the Secretary-General, that the calendar of meetings was not significantly different in the current year from what it had been in 1986, before the reform process began. The Committee on Conferences should assume a more active role in co-ordinating the work of various bodies in order to eliminate overlap or duplication of meetings.

41. While the overall utilization of conference-servicing resources (76 per cent) represented a marginal improvement over the criterion for efficiency set by the Committee on Conferences in 1983 (75 per cent), that figure represented only an average and many subsidiary bodies had a much lower utilization rate. The Committee on Conferences should therefore systematically identify the bodies which under-utilized the resources at their disposal.

42. Although technological innovations were a means of improving the efficiency of conference servicing, it should not be forgotten that the fundamental objective of the introduction of new systems was an overall saving in resources. Experience had shown that the chairmen of various bodies could, by adhering strictly to the rules of procedure, help to speed up the work of their respective bodies and enable them to make the most efficient use of the conference services assigned to them.

43. Mr. INOMATA (Japan) said that the draft calendar of meetings for 1990-1991 did not reflect a decline in conference-servicing requirements; in fact, the Secretariat anticipated an increased work-load because of three special conferences scheduled for 1990. It would be useful to have detailed projections regarding the number of meetings, the work-load and the services to be provided in 1990-1991. During consideration of the revised budget estimates for 1988-1989, it had been pointed out that the number of meetings would increase roughly from 6,800 to 7,000 in the next biennium. In 1989, no information on that point had been provided, which would not facilitate consideration of the draft programme budget for 1990-1991. As the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) had noted in paragraph 29.14 of document A/44/7, it had never been possible to obtain fully reliable statistics concerning conference services in New York, Geneva and Vienna. Such information was absolutely essential for the approval of the calendar of meetings. His delegation hoped that the Secretariat would submit to the General Assembly before the end of 1989 information comparing the initial and actual/revised work-load statistics for the various services in the Department

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(Mr. Inomata, Japan)

of Conference Services for the bienniums 1986-1987 and in 1988-1989, as ACABQ had requested in paragraph 29.19 of its report.

44. While it was useful to have statistics on the utilization of conference services by UNCTAD and the principal organs of the United Nations, such statistics should be systematically expanded to cover all the other bodies which convened regularly.

45. With regard to the Organization's policy in the area of publications, a policy which the Committee on Conferences, in accordance with paragraph 4 (h) of General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, had been assigned to "monitor", it should be recalled that the Committee had taken up the question on the basis of a Secretariat report indicating the size of the work-load involved in producing recurrent publications and the volume of resources required. Since the Committee had considered that a more detailed statistical analysis would be necessary, Japan hoped that in 1990 the Secretariat would provide the information which would enable the Committee to undertake a further review of the recurrent publications programme and to formulate rules which would make it easier to monitor them.

46. The possibility of centrally planning and co-ordinating all the organizational aspects of conference servicing was an important issue, especially since the organizations tackled a multitude of problems requiring an interdisciplinary approach. His delegation noted that the Committee had decided to examine how best it could address its terms of reference as governed by paragraph 4 (f) of General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, and that it had decided to seek the views of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination regarding the status of co-ordination of conference servicing within the United Nations system and the possibility of improving such co-ordination. His delegation believed that the organizations participating in inter-agency co-ordination in that area should consider how they could contribute to a better scheduling of meetings and pool conference services and facilities when they jointly convened major special conferences.

47. One of the major problems to be solved in the medium-term plan for conference services was that of the length of documents and their late submission to intergovernmental bodies. The six-week rule should be strictly observed. It was particularly unfortunate that the report of the Committee on Conferences - the body which should set the example in that area - had been submitted with a considerable delay. The Secretariat should develop a system of planning and monitoring so as to meet documentation deadlines. Such a system required co-operation among departments, which should also be the rule in determining meeting dates for intergovernmental expert bodies. Japan hoped that concrete proposals for developing the modalities of such co-operation would be submitted in the context of the review of the draft medium-term plan for 1992-1997.

48. Since conference services played an important role in negotiations conducted by the Organization, it was advisable to consider how the Department's productivity and efficiency might be enhanced, and Japan hoped that the Committee on Conferences, responding to Mr. Wyzner's invitation, would contribute to a more thorough exchange of views on the subject.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.