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ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

COMMEMORATION OF THE FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE UNITED NATIONS

Letter dated 12 June 1985 from the President of the General
Assembly to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit to you the main conclusions of the UNITAR Meeting of Presidents of the General Assembly, held at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 6 to 10 June 1985, of which I was the Chairman. The purpose of the Meeting was to contribute to the debate on the improvement of the impact of the United Nations, which you have called for on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Organization.

I would very much appreciate it if those conclusions could be transmitted to Member States as soon as possible to help them prepare for the above-mentioned debate. My colleagues, the former Presidents of the General Assembly, and I also hope that the recommendations we have made will be taken into account by Member States during the commemorative session of the General Assembly.

(Signed) Paul J. F. LUSAKA

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ANNEX

Main conclusions of the Meeting of Presidents of the General
Assembly on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the
United Nations, held in New York from 6 to 10 June 1985

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. At the invitation of the Executive Director of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the former and current Presidents of the United Nations General Assembly met at the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York from 6 to 10 June 1985, in conjunction with the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations. The following personalities who have presided over sessions of the General Assembly attended:

1. Mr. Leopoldo Benites, Ambassador of Ecuador to Mexico, President of the twenty-eighth session in 1973;
2. Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Algeria, President of the twenty-ninth session in 1974;
3. Mr. Amintore Fanfani, former Prime Minister of Italy and former President of the Italian Senate, President of the twentieth session in 1965;
4. Mr. Imre Hollai, Ambassador of Hungary to Greece and former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, President of the thirty-seventh session in 1982;
5. Mr. Ismat T. Kittani, Senior Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Iraq, President of the thirty-sixth session in 1981;
6. Mr. Paul J. F. Lusaka, Permanent Representative of Zambia to the United Nations, President of the thirty-ninth session in 1984;
7. Mr. Corneliu Manescu, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Romania, President of the twenty-second session in 1967;
8. Mr. Salim A. Salim, Prime Minister of the United Republic of Tanzania, President of the thirty-fourth session in 1979;
9. Mr. Gaston Thorn, former Prime Minister of Luxembourg and former President of the Commission of the European Communities, President of the thirtieth session in 1975;
10. Mr. Stanislaw Trepczynski, former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Poland and Chairman of the Polish Committee for Co-operation with the United Nations Children's Fund, President of the twenty-seventh session in 1972;
11. Mr. Rüdiger von Wechmar, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, President of the thirty-fifth session in 1980.

2. The purpose of the Meeting of Presidents of the General Assembly was to make an assessment of the achievements and shortcomings of the United Nations and to suggest any remedial action that might be appropriate. More specifically, the Presidents were invited to discuss two main issues: "The crisis of multilateralism as it affects the United Nations" and "Improvement of the General Assembly". The Meeting was organized to contribute to the debate called for by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Organization, so that its recommendations might be taken into account by Member States during the commemorative session of the General Assembly, in October 1985.
3. The Meeting unanimously elected as its Chairman Mr. Paul J. F. Lusaka, Permanent Representative of Zambia to the United Nations and current President of the General Assembly.
4. The main conclusions of the Meeting are set forth below.

II. THE CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM AS IT AFFECTS THE UNITED NATIONS

5. On the issue of the crisis of multilateralism as it affects the United Nations, the Presidents regret that, in light of developments that took place during the first 40 years of the United Nations, peoples all over the world seem to expect much less from the United Nations now than at the time when the Organization was established. The reasons for the peoples' frustrations or for what may be termed the diminution of their expectations vary from one Member State or one region to another. They may, however, be summarized as follows:

(a) The model on which the United Nations was built has proved to be too ambitious and the scenario which was conceived by the Organization's founding fathers has not worked as planned. It must be remembered that the United Nations was designed first and foremost as an Organization that would ensure peace and security to all nations, the Charter being the corner-stone of international law and its provisions ensuring collective security, the abolition of war, the guarantee of justice and human rights as well as of social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom to all peoples of the world. The provisions of the Charter were drafted on the assumption that the victors of the Second World War would continue to co-operate, as closely as they had during the hostilities. However, post-war co-operation, as is well known, broke down almost immediately. As a result, from its very beginning the United Nations was unable to function as designed. Its institutional weaknesses are therefore not a recent phenomenon. It was hoped however that, considering the vision and standards for international conduct contained in its Charter, the United Nations would succeed in being the centre of a peaceful and harmonious world. If indeed a third world war has until now been prevented, some one hundred limited wars have erupted in several parts of our planet since the establishment of the United Nations, which in itself is an indication of a certain failure of the Organization to meet peoples' expectations as expressed in its Charter.

(b) The world has changed tremendously during the last 40 years. While the United Nations had only 51 Member States in 1945, its membership doubled in 16 years and has now more than tripled, totalling 159 Member States. The large majority of the new Members are developing countries whose people are frustrated that not enough is being done by the international community to meet their aspirations to better standards of life and to the development of a just and effective system of international economic relations. The very emergence of Third World countries has also affected the balance of power within the United Nations, where those Member States whose views used to prevail in the early years of the United Nations are somewhat frustrated by the consequences of the greater universality of the Organization and the subsequent order of priorities governing its agenda, discussions and decisions.

(c) A major source of frustration with the United Nations could be traced to the danger of nuclear war, which most would agree has increased rather than receded in recent years and threatens the very survival of mankind. Other sources of frustration include the periodic and quite regular outbreaks of armed conflicts, too many of which the United Nations seems unable to prevent or end and which may, at any time, lead to a larger or even global confrontation; gross violations of human rights that continue to occur in different parts of the world in spite of the existence of internationally-accepted legal instruments meant to protect human dignity; the fact that many decisions unanimously adopted by Member States in the General Assembly and the Security Council are not implemented, which makes the United Nations appear impotent and ineffective.

6. Notwithstanding its above-mentioned shortcomings and weaknesses, the United Nations remains an essential and irreplaceable instrument of international co-operation. As the former Prime Minister of India, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, stated in 1960 before the fifteenth session of the General Assembly:

"... it is a little difficult now to think of this troubled world without the United Nations. If it has defects, those defects lie in the world situation itself which, inevitably, it mirrors. If there had been no United Nations today, our first task would have been to create something of that kind." a/

7. The shortcomings and weaknesses of the United Nations do not justify the hostility to, or the lukewarm attitude towards, the Organization evident in certain quarters, nor do they minimize the United Nations significant achievements in many areas which justify fully the existence of the Organization and its multilateral approach to world issues. A good summary of the achievements of the United Nations is contained in the 1984 report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization. b/ To use the words of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar at the opening of this Meeting: "To recognize that much more needs to be done, and could be done, should not obscure what has been accomplished." In our modern times, when the international community is far more pluralistic than it was when the United Nations was founded in 1945, and interdependence among nations much more accentuated than 40 years ago, the world needs more than ever before an efficient universal multilateral system of institutions for international co-operation as now provided for by the United Nations, subject, of course, to any appropriate adjustments that may be required by changing circumstances.

8. It should also be stressed that since its establishment the United Nations has shown a remarkable aptitude for adjustment to new situations without any substantive amendments to the Charter. At the same time, it must be pointed out that many provisions of the Charter remain unimplemented or are insufficiently used, particularly with reference to action for the maintenance of peace and security. Never in the history of mankind has the world undergone such profound changes as during the last four decades. The Charter of the United Nations was the last major treaty of the pre-nuclear era, and yet the Organization was able to adapt itself in order to cope effectively with such new or unforeseen challenges as underdevelopment, hunger, population, environment, outer space, the sea-bed, nuclear proliferation, refugees, disasters, etc., either through the adoption of world-wide treaties or through the creation of appropriate institutions. c/ This proves that the Charter is a very flexible instrument, the application and interpretation of which continue to offer wide possibilities for the future.

9. Our 40-year experience teaches us that the Security Council's mission would be facilitated if it were possible to take advantage of advance warnings about possible political tensions. By bringing to the fore developments that are likely to result in political disturbances, the United Nations could create an early warning system to help in the prevention of dangerous situations. As the Secretary-General stated at the opening meeting:

"The United Nations can also be highly effective in the resolution of disputes and in keeping peace. The regrettable and dangerous fact that conflict persists must not be accepted as evidence that the concept of collective security is unworkable but rather as a warning that it must be made to work more effectively. The basic requirement is committed and consistent support of the United Nations by Member States."

The Presidents feel that every effort should be made by Member States to adhere to Article 25 of the Charter and implement the provisions of Chapter VII, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations in the maintenance of peace and security. As Article 103 stipulates, the obligations of Member States under the Charter have a higher priority than any other international obligations.

10. The Presidents also note that, while the United Nations has been affected by, and may continue to suffer from, its institutional imperfections, there are many decisions unanimously taken by the General Assembly and the Security Council which have not been implemented owing to lack of political will on the part of Member States. This actually means that the lack of effectiveness of the United Nations is not so much related to institutional imperfections, but is due rather to the lack of respect for the Charter by the very Member States that have pledged to abide by its provisions. Despite the difference in the present world situation as compared to 1945, the Charter is basically as valid today as it was at that time. In light of the foregoing and taking into account the realities of our time, it would be self-deceit to believe that the reasons for the weaknesses of the United Nations are to be found in the shortcomings or flaws, real or perceived, of its Charter and that a substantive revision of the latter would be a panacea to the imperfections in the functioning of the world Organization. It is not even certain that a revision of the Charter might lead to a better document than the existing one. The Presidents therefore strongly recommend the recommitment of Member States to the Charter in order to make the United Nations a more effective Organization.

11. Referring to the great concern about the danger of a nuclear war, the Presidents note that peoples in all parts of the world are alarmed that the future of our planet and the fate of mankind could be determined by two nations. The Presidents fervently express the hope that the disarmament negotiations currently underway at Geneva between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America will be successful and result in general progress in nuclear disarmament. In that connection, the Presidents voice support for an early Summit Meeting between those two countries. At the same time, they suggest that all peoples of the world, through their Governments, should be involved in the discussion of issues that affect so directly the very survival of mankind. The United Nations should therefore play a meaningful role in that respect.

12. The Presidents are particularly concerned by the public perception of the United Nations. This perception, largely built up through the media, the most powerful of which belong to only a few countries, is not very often based on a proper understanding of the purpose, role, functioning, achievements, limitations and difficulties of the United Nations. There is therefore a very strong need that the Organization be better understood by all the peoples of the world, whose action can change the attitudes of Governments. The Presidents urge that a special educational effort should be undertaken to promote a better understanding of the United Nations. They recommend particularly that the teaching of the principles and the work of the United Nations system should be introduced by Member States into the curricula of their school systems beginning with the primary level. The United Nations should develop appropriate curricula and teaching aids for that purpose. Non-governmental organizations can also make a significant contribution in this area.

13. With respect to the responsibility of the United Nations Secretariat for the overall performance of the Organization, the Presidents agree with the Secretary-General that "the United Nations must not lose the commitment of Governments because of an appearance of extravagance or administrative irresponsibility". Tight management and effective use of resources, to which the Secretary-General is committed, are therefore most commendable. Furthermore, the manner in which the Secretariat is organized and equipped to deal with important issues of concern to the world, taking into account available new means resulting from recent technological developments, will certainly enhance the effectiveness of the Organization. It is striking to note, for instance, that the Secretary-General may be inhibited in his role in preventive diplomacy for lack of proper equipment and infrastructure. The Secretariat should also develop greater capacity for policy analysis and future planning and for advising and guiding Member States on major issues of concern to mankind. Closer contacts and co-operation between the staff of the permanent missions and that of the United Nations Secretariat would improve the functioning of the Organization as a whole.

III. IMPROVEMENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

14. The General Assembly is the only forum where all issues may be discussed by all countries of the world regardless of their size and importance. Indeed, since the United Nations is now almost universal, the Assembly has become a true mirror of the world. Its importance as a global instrument capable of assessing, reflecting and analysing the various currents that prevail in the world cannot be underestimated.

15. The general debate, in particular, is an occasion for as many world leaders as possible to explain the positions of their respective countries. It is a unique opportunity for Heads of State or Government and for Ministers for Foreign Affairs not only to address other Member States' representatives to the General Assembly, but also to engage in high-level dialogue both at the multilateral and bilateral levels.

16. The General Assembly should also consider the possibility of organizing its sessions in such a manner that from time to time Heads of State or Government can hold summit meetings on specific issues during the period of the general debate. Furthermore, in order to examine in depth major international issues, it might be useful for the General Assembly to consider focusing its attention during the general debate on one or two main topics, without restricting the right of Member States to deal with any other pressing subjects of their choice.

17. The Presidents agree with the Secretary-General of the United Nations that "we often witness heated rhetoric rather than a reasoned co-operative approach" when the General Assembly and the Security Council deal with the most vital problems of the widest concern. They also agree with him that "the best resolution in the world will have little practical effect unless Governments of Member States follow it up with the appropriate support and action". The Presidents recommend, therefore, that special efforts should be made by Member States to promote constructive debates in the General Assembly and the systematic introduction of the art of consensus-building before the final vote, so that a debate could be concluded with the widest possible margin of support. Any doubts remaining over the outcome of a final vote would be overcome by granting the President of the General Assembly or the Chairman of a Main Committee the power to conclude a debate by taking stock of a sufficiently broad consensus on well-defined issues. The Presidents also recommend that the President of the General Assembly and the Chairmen of Main Committees should clearly identify the issues to be addressed during the debate on a given agenda item in order to ensure that a real exchange of views takes place on those issues during the debate.

18. Much has been accomplished by the General Assembly over the years in relation to the rationalization of its procedures. Although the membership of the Assembly and the number of items on its agenda have more than tripled since the first session, it has been possible for the Assembly to complete its work almost within the same period as four decades ago. Nevertheless, in spite of the progress achieved in the rationalization of the General Assembly's procedures, a great deal remains to be done. A first and important step in this direction would be for

Member States to implement fully the measures which were unanimously approved by the Assembly in its decision 34/401.

19. Another measure which would increase considerably the impact of the decisions of the General Assembly would be to reduce the number and, possibly, the length of resolutions adopted by the Assembly. A number of other practical suggestions aimed at improving the procedures of the Assembly appear in the appendix.

20. The Presidents also feel strongly that to enable the United Nations to contribute fully to the preparation of a better future for the world, the General Assembly should endeavour to plan its sessions in such a manner that thorough discussions of issues that may affect the future of mankind - such as better functioning of the United Nations, the prevention of nuclear war, disarmament, development, North-South co-operation, the debt issue, energy, the eradication of famine and poverty, the protection of the environment, population control, the consequences of informatics and robotics - are properly organized to enable Member States to tackle those issues successfully. As the General Assembly is about to observe the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations, a large number of world leaders will attend the commemorative session. The Presidents recommend that the Assembly should seize this unique opportunity and devote its attention to the remaining 15 years of this century and, with a vision of the future, should initiate plans at the global level for the year 2000 and the beginning of the new millennium.

* * *

21. The Presidents of the General Assembly wish to express their appreciation and gratitude to the Executive Director of UNITAR for the initiative he has taken in organizing this Meeting. They also wish to thank the Secretary-General of the United Nations for his contribution to the success of their deliberations.

Notes

a/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifteenth Session, Plenary Meetings, 882nd meeting, para. 110.

b/ Ibid., Thirty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 1 (A/39/1).

c/ In addition to the specialized agencies established after the creation of the United Nations, the following institutions, which are related to the United Nations have been established during the last 40 years: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 1946, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1949, the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) in 1949, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1951, the United Nations Special Fund in 1958, the World Food Programme (WFP) in 1963, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) replacing EPTA and the Special Fund in 1965, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in 1965, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization

Notes (continued)

(UNIDO) in 1966, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) in 1969, the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (UNDRO) in 1972, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1972, the United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC) in 1974, the World Food Council (WFC) in 1974, United Nations University (UNU) in 1975, and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) in 1978.

APPENDIX

Recommendations made by the Presidents of the General
Assembly concerning the rationalization of the
procedures of the Assembly

I. ORGANIZATION OF THE SESSION

A. Election of officers

1. The President of the General Assembly and the Chairmen of the Main Committees should be elected, or at least nominated, before the conclusion of the work of the previous session in December. Such a measure would enable the future presiding officers to undertake the necessary consultations, in particular with their predecessors, long before the opening of the session.

2. In order to enable the five regional groups to be represented among the officers of all Main Committees, each Committee should elect three Vice-Chairmen instead of two. a/

B. General Committee

3. The General Committee should play more fully the role assigned to it under the rules of procedure. It should, in particular, scrutinize the draft agenda more closely before submitting its recommendations to the General Assembly (see also paras. 5 to 7).

C. Schedule of meetings

4. In order to expedite the work of the General Assembly and out of consideration for those who are punctual, it is essential that both plenary meetings and meetings of the Main Committees should start on time. Yet, on many occasions meetings have been delayed for lack of quorum. The General Assembly may wish, therefore, to consider lowering the quorum requirement for the opening of meetings to one quarter for the plenary Assembly and one fifth for committees, on the understanding that the presence of the majority of members would still be required for any decision to be taken. b/

D. Agenda

1. Reduction in the number of items

5. In view of the steady increase in the number of items on the General Assembly's agenda, every effort should be made to eliminate those items which are no longer relevant.

2. Grouping of items

6. In order to utilize more fully the time available to the General Assembly and its Main Committees, items of a similar nature should be grouped under a single heading.

3. Staggering of items

7. The measures initiated in the Second Committee regarding the staggering of items over two or more years should be extended to other Main Committees.

E. Allocation of items

8. The number of items allocated to plenary meetings has increased steadily over the years (from 35 at the thirty-fourth session to 47 at the thirty-ninth session). In this regard, every effort should be made to implement paragraph 4 of General Assembly decision 34/401, in which the Assembly decided that "items previously allocated to plenary meetings should henceforth be referred to a Main Committee unless there are compelling circumstances requiring their continued consideration in plenary meeting".

9. To avoid duplication of work, the same question should not be considered by more than one Main Committee or both by the General Assembly in plenary meeting and by a Main Committee.

F. General debate

10. The General Assembly may wish to consider focusing its attention during the general debate on one or two main topics, without restricting the right of representatives to speak on any other subject of particular concern to them.

II. WORK OF THE MAIN COMMITTEES

11. Once an item has been fully debated in a subsidiary organ, delegations should refrain from holding a comprehensive debate on that item when it is considered by the General Assembly.

III. DOCUMENTATION

A. Reduction of documentation

12. The General Assembly should once again be alerted to the need for a reduction in the number and length of documents.

B. Reports

13. The fact that a report has been requested does not necessarily mean that a corresponding item should be included in the provisional agenda of the next session (see also para. 5).

14. The General Assembly should not automatically, upon the conclusion of an item, request the Secretary-General for the submission of a report.

15. When delegations have had an opportunity to express their views on a given item in a Main Committee or at a plenary meeting of the General Assembly, the resolution adopted by the Assembly should not necessarily request the Secretary-General for the submission of a report containing observations from Governments.

C. Communications from Member States

16. In view of the constant increase in the volume of documentation, Member States should refrain, to the extent possible, from requesting the circulation of communications as documents of the General Assembly, it being understood that they have the possibility of circulating those communications directly to other Member States.

IV. RESOLUTIONS

A. Number of resolutions

17. A significant reduction in the number of resolutions would add considerable weight to the decisions of the General Assembly.

B. Content of resolutions

18. For the same reason, it is necessary to reduce as much as possible the length of resolutions. Every effort should also be made to use a wording that is clear and easily understandable.

C. Voting procedure

19. An increasing number of resolutions are being adopted by consensus. This trend must be encouraged as it promotes the process of negotiation.

V. SUBSIDIARY ORGANS

20. Subsidiary organs dealing with similar subjects should be merged.

21. The General Assembly should review periodically the usefulness of its subsidiary organs and, to the extent possible, should not establish new organs unless an identical number of existing ones have been discontinued.

Notes

a/ If this recommendation were approved, the beginning of rule 103 of the rules of procedure would have to be amended to read as follows:

"Rule 103

"Each Main Committee shall elect a Chairman, three Vice-Chairmen and a Rapporteur. ... "

b/ If this recommendation were approved, rules 67 and 108 of the rules of procedure would have to be amended to read as follows:

"Rule 67

"The President may declare a meeting open and permit the debate to proceed when at least one quarter of the members of the General Assembly are present. The presence of a majority of the members shall be required for any decision to be taken."

"Rule 108

"The Chairman may declare a meeting open and permit the debate to proceed when at least one fifth of the members of the committee are present. The presence of a majority of the members shall be required for any decision to be taken."
