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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Report on office accommodation for United Nations  
staff at Geneva

Note by the Advisory Committee on Administrative  
and Budgetary Questions

The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has received the comments of the Secretary-General on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on office accommodation for United Nations staff at Geneva (A/9164) and transmits them herewith to the General Assembly.

A. General

1. The Secretary-General is grateful for the thoughtful and detailed analysis of the problem of office accommodation for United Nations staff at Geneva, which has been prepared by Mr. A. F. Bender, Jr. and submitted by the Joint Inspection Unit (A/9164). This study suggests a number of ways in which existing policies and procedures can be improved and, accordingly, provides most useful advice for the Secretary-General in coping with the constantly changing problem of office space at Geneva.

2. The main thrust of the Inspector's report is that the new building in Geneva, from the moment of its completion, has been occupied to full capacity and that, as a result, steps must now be taken to secure additional space to meet future United Nations requirements. While critical of the lack of adequate forecasting of the needs of the various units already at Geneva and destined to be located there, the Inspector makes the subsidiary point that better space utilization in the new building could be obtained through more effective application of space standards. He also emphasizes that more rational planning both in Geneva and at other centres of decision in the United Nations system would reduce the office space problems existing in Geneva today and those which could arise in the future.

3. The Secretary-General does not disagree with any of these general observations. In his report to the General Assembly at its twenty-seventh session, he pointed out that, during the year 1972 (when the construction of the office building was nearing completion), a number of additional or new organizational units had been assigned space in Geneva (A/C.5/1458, para. 35). The needs of these units for space at Geneva "had not been foreseen at the time of the design of the new facilities" and, as a result, the Secretary-General reported that "most of the space currently available in both the new and old sections of the Palais" had been committed, thus making it difficult to consider the move of any sizable units of the Secretariat from New York Headquarters to Geneva.

4. Despite the foregoing, the Secretary-General expressed the opinion that, by making certain modifications in moves of units and by redistribution of certain space assignments, space could be found, "on a temporary basis", to house at Geneva in 1973 as many as 75 staff members, if such a unit as the Division of Human Rights were to be moved from New York to Geneva.

5. The Inspector seems to imply in his report that, on the subject of the space that could be made available for the Division of Human Rights at Geneva, there was some lack of co-ordination between Geneva and New York. He suggests also that the Secretary-General did not adequately inform the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the Fifth Committee or the Assembly in regard to this matter, because he did not mention that the space to be occupied by the Division of Human Rights was the same space as that which, it was expected, would be vacated and made available upon the transfer of the secretariat of the United Nations Environment Programme to Nairobi.

6. The Secretary-General wishes to correct these impressions created by the Inspector's report. There was at no time any lack of co-ordination between the positions of Geneva and New York. Geneva had made it clear that, by the last months of 1972, allocation of all available space in the old and new buildings of the Palais had been practically completed (including space for the staff college, which did not, in fact, materialize) and that space could be found in the Palais for the Division of Human Rights only if and after the decision were taken to transfer the secretariat of the United Nations Environment Programme elsewhere. (At this point in time, no decision had been taken to locate the secretariat in Nairobi or Geneva or elsewhere.) The Secretary-General decided, in these circumstances, to proceed on the assumption that the General Assembly would decide to locate the secretariat of the United Nations Environment Programme elsewhere than at Geneva; failing that, if a decision were subsequently made in favour of Geneva, space would have to be obtained for that secretariat, as a new organizational unit of the United Nations Secretariat, outside the Palais. Accordingly, after confirming with Geneva that the space then occupied on a temporary basis by the secretariat of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment would be earmarked to accommodate the move of the Division of Human Rights to Geneva, the Secretary-General reported that "it would be possible, on a temporary basis to make available in Geneva in 1973 office space to house about 75 staff members ..." (A/C.5/1458 and Corr.1 and 2, para. 36).

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7. In section III of his report, the Inspector has given a broad view of the problems involved in effective space management at Geneva. Among other things, he expresses the opinion that there has been a "lack of discipline" in the use of space in the old Palais. It is the Secretary-General's opinion that the Inspector has proceeded on the assumption that standards and practices adopted for the Headquarters in New York (a relatively modern office building constructed on a standard module basis) could be applied with equal facility to the Palais at Geneva, which was built many years earlier, on very different architectural lines, with space standards quite unlike those applicable to office buildings today. The fact is that the very nature of the layout of the old Palais, the size and configuration of its individual offices, and the "monumental" form of the building itself make it difficult in the extreme to apply the relatively austere standards suitable to a more modern edifice, such as the United Nations Headquarters in New York. This does not, of course, mean that the difficulties of applying Headquarters standards and criteria to the old Palais need to apply in the case of the new office building at Geneva. With that consideration in mind, the Secretary-General is impressed by the Inspector's recommendation that the space standards used in the allocation of space in the new building should be subjected to a careful review.

8. In this connexion, the Secretary-General has also noted that the Inspector, in paragraph 43 of his report, refers to the intention of the United Nations Office at Geneva to make an inventory of space actually occupied after all the services have been settled in their new quarters in order to determine to what extent adjustments might be required. (This review is actually now under way.) The Secretary-General considers that, following this review, it should be possible to modify certain of the situations which the Inspector and/or the users have alleged to be unsatisfactory.

9. The Inspector has also drawn attention to the problem of space assignment and control under circumstances where there is a diversity of users with differing legislative and administrative authorities, and has pointed out the need for a more explicit definition of the authority for space management of the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva. The Secretary-General agrees with this suggestion.

10. Finally, the Secretary-General has been particularly impressed with the Inspector's observations regarding the importance of acquiring additional space in Geneva. It will be recalled that the Secretary-General, in his report to the General Assembly last year (A/C.5/1458 and Corr.1 and 2), drew attention to the long-range space requirements at Geneva. The Inspector's more recent analysis of the situation confirms the Secretary-General's conclusion that, quite apart from considerations of the possible transfer of units from established United Nations offices (in addition to the Division of Human Rights), the present needs of units located at Geneva, plus the growth which can reasonably be estimated on the basis of past experience, fully justify immediate steps to reserve for the United Nations the properties to be vacated by the International Labour Organisation when their new building has been completed.

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B. Comments by users of space in the Palais des Nations

11. The Secretary-General asked all heads of organizational units having office space in the Palais to comment on the Joint Inspection Unit report and he has taken their views into account in compiling the present document. A number of the comments expressed a general acceptance of the Inspector's conclusions, particularly his view that the space situation in Geneva will become progressively more difficult. Specific reservations were expressed regarding the Inspector's suggestion that the Centre for Economic and Social Information could be moved out of the Palais. The Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has queried the Inspector's conclusion that "UNCTAD should accept the basic proposition that it must live within its present space, at least through 1974". Similarly, the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund has stated his concern regarding the proposal that UNICEF should move out of the Palais when alternative space becomes available. In this connexion, the Secretary-General would refer to the statement in his current report to the General Assembly on office accommodation in New York, Geneva and other locations (A/C.5/1511, para. 31) to the effect that he intends to review this matter with the Executive Director.

12. The Secretary-General has been advised that the United Nations Development Programme will move towards a central integrated European office located at Geneva. The Secretary-General has noted this information and will consider future UNDP space requirements in connexion with the over-all space needs at Geneva.

13. While the Secretary-General is concerned with the various aspects of the office space problem at Geneva, to which the Inspector has referred, he is confident that the reviews to be undertaken in connexion with recommendations 5 and 8 of the Joint Inspection Unit report will afford a means of reconciling the conflicting claims of users of the limited space in the Palais des Nations. Since the Inspector's report was completed, a measure of relief has already been provided for UNCTAD. At the same time, he thinks it appropriate to bear in mind the observation in paragraph 59 of the Joint Inspection Unit report that "the Inspector must recommend against acceptance of any suggestion that each organizational unit in the Palais is free to adopt its own rationale on the proper use of space". The Secretary-General fully supported the conclusion of the Inspector in this matter.

14. Finally, the Secretary-General has received comments from the International Labour Organisation to the effect that that organization would be prepared to approach positively the question of modifying the amount of space required in the Palais to service its annual conference; however, action would not be possible until 1975 when the ILO will have occupied its new premises.

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C. Consolidated comments on the Inspector's recommendations

15. In the light of the considerations and views set forth in the preceding paragraphs, the Secretary-General wishes to make the following observations on the 12 recommendations in the Joint Inspection Unit report:

Summary of Inspector's recommendation 1/ Comment by the Secretary-General

Recommendation 1

Space planning and management in United Nations Geneva buildings should be done by a unit in the Office of the Director-General, or at least the Office of the Director of Conference and General Services.

The Secretary-General agrees that a small unit, responsible for both the day-to-day management and the future planning of office space, should be created in the United Nations Office at Geneva. This unit should operate under the over-all responsibility of the Office of the Director of Conference and General Services, who, in this as in other matters, is directly responsible to the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva.

Recommendation 2

Space planning should be submitted to and approved by the General Assembly, and should thereafter be modified only by the Assembly.

The Secretary-General agrees that policy decisions concerning the transfer of major elements of the Secretariat from one geographical location to another should be made only with the concurrence of the General Assembly, and only after the receiving office has been given full opportunity to study and report on the possible consequences of the proposed transfer, both for the elements of the Secretariat involved in the proposed move and for the future expansion requirements of the units already forming part of the receiving office. The Secretary-General does not consider, however, that such constraints should apply in the case of proposals to transfer less substantial elements of the

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1/ The recommendations have been summarized for the convenience of readers but the summary does not include the details of the Inspector's argument, and the full text of his recommendations, on pages 36 and 37 of the report, should be consulted in evaluating the Secretary-General's comments.

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Summary of Inspector's recommendation

Comment by the Secretary-General

Secretariat, where major policy considerations are not involved, and where the Secretary-General considers that the move is justified on administrative grounds and takes his decision in his capacity as chief administrative officer of the Organization under Article 97 of the Charter. In such cases, it should be sufficient for the Secretary-General to keep the General Assembly informed of the decisions taken and the reasons therefor.

Recommendations 3, 4 and 6

The Secretary-General should instruct all United Nations Secretariat units in Geneva that the Director-General is the final authority on space allocation there. Units outside the Secretariat which are accommodated in United Nations buildings in Geneva should agree to accept the Director-General's decision on office space matters. There should be a clear policy, uniformly applied, on the use of interior space.

The Secretary-General recognizes that the allocation of office accommodation and the settlement of related problems in Geneva can be managed effectively and efficiently only if the Director-General has the authority to make final decisions concerning standards of occupancy and use of space in United Nations premises in Geneva. He will therefore advise all organizational units located in Geneva accordingly.

Recommendation 5

Consultations should be held to solve the major space problem in the Palais, that of UNCTAD; meanwhile, UNCTAD should accept the basic proposition that it must live within its present space, at least through 1974.

The Secretary-General recognizes that there is a problem arising from the growth of UNCTAD, particularly in extra-budgetary programmes, which had not been foreseen. Under the circumstances, although the Secretary-General appreciates the view of the Inspector that it is not likely that any substantial relief can be obtained before the end of 1974, he has already made arrangements for a measure of relief to meet the minimum space requirements of UNCTAD through to the end of 1974.

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Summary of Inspector's recommendationComment by the Secretary-GeneralRecommendation 7

/The ILO and WHO should reduce significantly the number of offices in the Palais which they use for their general conferences./

Discussions will be initiated at the earliest possible opportunity with the Directors-General of the ILO and WHO regarding the use of space in the Palais des Nations by those agencies (see para. 14).

Recommendation 8

/The space unit should start at once to re-examine space allocations and uses./

This review has been started. It was not possible to start this review earlier (e.g. prior to the preparation of the Inspector's report) since, at that time, not all units had moved into the space tentatively allocated to them.

Recommendations 9, 10 and 11

/These recommendations are to the effect that the Secretary-General should ascertain, and report to the General Assembly, the cost of renting and renovating the part of the ILO building on which the United Nations has exercised its option, and the terms on which the United Nations could acquire the Petit-Saconnex buildings and lease the land on which they stand. The Secretary-General has no comment at this stage except to say that these negotiations are in hand; some information on this topic has been included in the report to the General Assembly at its twenty-eighth session on office accommodation at New York and Geneva (A/C.5/1511) and a more detailed report will be made when the information is available./

Recommendation 12

/The Secretary-General should propose criteria for moving units out of the Palais as new space becomes available, and the General Assembly should decide upon those criteria./

There may be policy considerations which justify reference to, and decision by, the General Assembly when the transfer of a major unit from one geographic location to another is being considered. It is doubted, however, whether these considerations should apply to movement of staff within a given location, where administrative considerations largely determine whether a unit should be located in the main building of the Organization or in space outside. This decision

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Summary of Inspector's recommendation

Comment by the Secretary-General

should be left to the Secretary-General, who should be free to develop and apply such criteria as he considers consistent with the administrative requirements of the service. Having said this, the Secretary-General will naturally give careful consideration to the criteria which the Inspector suggests in his report as being pertinent to moves of organizational units into United Nations buildings in Geneva.

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