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FORTY-EIGHTH SESSION  
*Official Records*

FIFTH COMMITTEE  
21st meeting  
held on  
Friday, 19 November 1993  
at 10 a.m.  
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 21st MEETING

Chairman: Mrs. EMERSON (Portugal)  
(Vice-Chairman)

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

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 126: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/48/32/Rev.1 and Add.1 and 2; A/C.5/48/1)

1. Mrs. ROTHEISER (Austria) said that her country, as a member of the Committee on Conferences, supported the conclusions and recommendations contained in that body's report. She emphasized that the changes in the conference calendar which appeared in document A/48/32/Rev.1/Add.2 were not a part of the Committee's report but were being proposed by the Secretariat; they should accordingly have been issued as a Secretariat document and submitted to the Committee on Conferences before being brought to the Fifth Committee.
2. Her delegation attached great importance to the rule that United Nations bodies should meet at their headquarters. She was glad that the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space had decided to hold its meetings and those of its subcommittees at Vienna. On the other hand, she was concerned to note that the Committee on Conferences considered that there had in fact been departures from the rule, although the terms of reference of the bodies concerned did not seem to justify them, and she thought it essential that the Secretariat prepare the analytic report requested by the Committee on that question (A/48/32/Rev.1, para. 12). Her delegation would approve the conference calendar subject to the conclusions it drew from that report.
3. Because of its concern for the optimal and most cost-effective use of conference services, her delegation fully supported the decision to set the benchmark for the use of those services at 80 per cent and the recommendation that bodies falling below that benchmark should review their requests for services. It regretted that the Secretariat had not implemented paragraph 5 of General Assembly resolution 47/202 A, in which it was requested to bring to the attention of all organs the cost of conference services, in particular by providing them with information on the notional costs per hour of meeting time. She asked for an explanation of that situation.
4. Praiseworthy as their intentions were, the economy measures announced by the Secretary-General on 16 August 1993 were interfering with the work of intergovernmental bodies whose purpose was to resolve through dialogue the disputes which might arise between Member States. Those measures should therefore be rescinded immediately. Noting in addition that the anticipated savings mainly concerned temporary staff who, if employed for long periods, cost more than permanent staff, she emphasized that it would be cheaper, in some cases, to convert the temporary posts into established posts, as the Committee had in fact recommended in paragraph 10 of its report (A/48/32/Rev.1/Add.1). That recommendation should be taken into account in the proposed budget for the 1994-1995 biennium.
5. Her delegation welcomed the agreement of principle between the United Nations and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) on the merger of their conference services at Vienna. She hoped that the

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(Mrs. Rotheiser, Austria)

negotiations would be conducted quickly enough for the Secretary-General to be able to submit to the forty-ninth session a revised budget for the unified conference services reflecting the projected savings, as the Committee on Conferences had, in substance, recommended.

6. Mr. HUTCHESSON (Australia), speaking on behalf of Canada, New Zealand and Australia, noted that the Committee on Conferences, having, pursuant to paragraph 3 of General Assembly resolution 47/202 C, explored ways and means for a more effective implementation of its terms of reference, had concluded that it had on the whole been functioning within its terms of reference, although its mandate remained less comprehensive than envisaged by the Group of 18. The Committee had indicated that it would in future concentrate its efforts on providing clear directives to the Secretariat and setting standards which would make it possible to better meet the needs of Member States. It was therefore to be hoped that the Committee would in future reports outline the progress made in those areas, particularly with regard to the implementation of the measures to ensure optimum utilization of conference services set out in annex II of its report.

7. Australia, Canada and New Zealand supported the Committee's recommendation that the benchmark figure for the rate of utilization of conference services be raised to 80 per cent and that those bodies whose utilization factor was below that benchmark for three sessions should be invited to review and revise their requests for those services.

8. As the conference calendar for the 1994-1995 biennium would be particularly full, it was essential that subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council keep to a minimum their requests for exceptions to be made to the biennialization of meetings, especially where such requests did not result in sessions of shorter duration.

9. Peace-keeping had assumed a prominent place among the activities of the United Nations. The calendar should accordingly include the meetings of the Special Committee on Peace-keeping Operations as those meetings were too important to be covered in the present ad hoc manner.

10. It was in accordance with normal practice that the Committee should be authorized to adjust the conference calendar as a result of decisions taken by the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session. On the other hand, if it was the case that the Secretariat had issued amendments to the draft calendar without consulting the Committee in advance, such circumventing of the usual procedures must not continue.

11. Australia, Canada and New Zealand strongly supported the Committee's request that the economy measures, whose impact had been particularly acute in Geneva and especially for the Centre for Human Rights, should be lifted.

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(Mr. Hutchesson, Australia)

12. Although the Committee on Conferences had focused attention that year on meetings, it should not overlook the problem of the late submission of documents and the difficulties which it had created, particularly for the Fifth Committee. It was unacceptable that six weeks prior to the scheduled closure of the General Assembly for 1993, 30 per cent of the documentation required had not yet been submitted to the Office of Conference Services, as the Director of the Office had pointed out. It was essential that those who bore the main responsibility, namely, author departments, should make an effort to remedy the situation, although a much more proactive approach was needed by the Office of Conference Services too. For the same reason the Office of Conference Services must identify ways of ensuring compliance with the 10-week rule. Lastly, Australia, Canada and New Zealand were convinced that further improvement in the provision of translation services was possible, particularly with regard to priority-setting and the application of new technologies.

13. Mr. MADDENS (Belgium), speaking on behalf of the States members of the European Union, expressed support for the Committee on Conferences. The organization of meetings was an essential function of the United Nations, and the Committee on Conferences, by striving for the efficient use of the conference-servicing resources available to Member States, could make a very important contribution to the sound administrative and financial management of the Organization. The European Union regretted the fact that, since the Committee on Conferences had no standard-setting powers, too often its function was merely to rubber-stamp decisions; it should play a much more active role by creating awareness and taking action on more specific bases than those mentioned in paragraphs 126 to 128 of its report.

14. At the preceding session the General Assembly had adopted by consensus resolution 47/233 on the revitalization of its work, as a result of which the number of its Main Committees had been reduced. It was to be hoped that such efforts would be pursued and that the agendas of the intergovernmental bodies would eventually be rationalized, as envisaged by paragraph 6 of resolution 47/233 and in accordance with the recommendation made in paragraph 93 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

15. The European Union regretted that Member States had been presented with a fait accompli when the Secretary-General announced the introduction of austerity measures, particularly since they did not take account of some of the General Assembly resolutions - including those concerning equal status for the six official languages, which implied the simultaneous distribution of documents in all languages. Concerned by the situation which had arisen as a result of the measures, especially at the Centre for Human Rights at Geneva, the European Union requested that they be rescinded.

16. The European Union supported the recommendations of the Committee on Conferences concerning the draft calendar of conferences for 1994-1995 and looked forward to the reports requested regarding the application of the rule that bodies should meet at their established headquarters. Moreover, it was satisfied that the Committee on Conferences had decided to raise the minimum

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(Mr. Maddens, Belgium)

rate for utilization of conference-servicing resources to 80 per cent. It also welcomed the progress made in the consultations with the chairmen of the different bodies on measures to be taken to ensure the more efficient use and greater productivity of conference services. However, it was disappointed to note that the Secretariat had not informed all the bodies of the notional cost per hour of meeting time, as the Assembly had requested in paragraph 5 of resolution 47/202 A. That request should be made once again and the chairmen of the different committees obliged to indicate the total cost (including translation and interpretation costs) at the start of the session, with Member States being invited to limit the duration of their statements. The European Union was pleased to note that the issue of a unified conference-servicing operation in Vienna would soon be resolved.

17. The Committee on Conferences had not been able to assert its authority regarding the requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of resolution 40/243. If the bodies concerned improved the organization of their work they would no longer need to request such exceptions, and it would be well for the Fifth Committee to set an example in that regard.

18. With regard to the control and limitation of documentation, the Committee on Conferences had recommended that all bodies entitled to summary records should re-examine their requirements in that regard, which would provide the opportunity for a complete review of their working methods and decision-making processes. The European Union further proposed that delegations should be given the option of not delivering statements in their entirety, which might be included in the summary records. Moreover, it inquired what practical steps had been taken by substantive departments to observe the 10-week rule, in accordance with paragraph 8 of resolution 47/202 B.

19. The Committee on Conferences had good reason to welcome the progress made in the application of technical innovations in conference servicing, which should make not only for increased productivity, but also for an improvement in the quality of service provided. The European Union looked forward to the report from the Secretariat on that matter requested by the Committee on Conferences.

20. Lastly, the Committee on Conferences had quite correctly pointed out that before deciding to convene a world conference, the intergovernmental bodies should assess the implications of such a decision for the conference services and consider whether Member States would be able to participate.

The meeting rose at 11 a.m.