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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Communications in the United Nations system

Comments of the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the members of the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Communications in the United Nations system" (A/37/372).

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. The purpose of this note is to summarize the views of the Secretary-General regarding the main conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on communications in the United Nations system (JIU/REP/82/6).
2. The Secretary-General has repeatedly expressed his recognition of the importance of communications in support of all aspects of the Organization's work and wishes to express his appreciation to JIU for having provided its assessment of the present situation and of the problems to be overcome if the Organization's communications facilities are to be improved. The information contained in the JIU report provides interesting guidelines to improve the quality and effectiveness of the United Nations communication system.
3. The Secretary-General considers that the objectives which the authors of the report set out to achieve are appropriate and agrees with the initial premise that "traditional" communications services, such as mail, pouch, telex, and telephone, "still constitute the backbone of United Nations system communications and are likely to maintain this position in the foreseeable future" (A/37/372, p. 3, para. 3). As a consequence, efforts should be directed towards ensuring a more cost-effective utilization of these traditional communications services. This should be coupled with an identification of the new technologies which can best complement and enhance the traditional methods.
4. The Secretary-General has noted that, with respect mainly to these traditional communications services, JIU has drawn attention to the following general deficiencies:
  - (a) Inability of the United Nations system to provide uniform and compatible statistics;
  - (b) Insufficient analysis of communications usage;
  - (c) Absence of long-term planning.
5. These weaknesses are symptomatic of some of the fundamental shortcomings of the United Nations system in the field of communications. They show as well the negative effects of a fragmentary communications network which has developed over many years of improvisation meant to resolve problems on an ad hoc basis. This being said, the findings of JIU serve to emphasize the fact that the United Nations has reached a crossroad in the area of communications planning, implementation and operation. The expansion in the sphere of United Nations activities over the years has imposed a manifold and growing demand on the Organization's communications system. This means that the often unco-ordinated and improvised approach to meet the level of demand, which may have been practical in the past, is no longer valid today. The constantly increasing activities, combined with the unprecedented advance in communications technology over the past decade, have thrust the

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organization into a situation in which carefully considered decisions which will have an impact for many years to come must be taken. The question is no longer whether the various components of the United Nations system should combine their communications facilities but rather how best an integrated communications system can be developed. The JIU report is most helpful in that it encourages the members of the United Nations system to focus greater attention on this central issue.

6. Although it is agreed, as pointed out by JIU, that it has now become necessary to pay greater attention to the development of the Organization's communications facilities, the Secretary-General would suggest that the statement by the inspectors that the issue is "one of strategy and policy rather than a technical or budgetary one" (A/37/372, p. 4, para. 11) underestimates the fact that the problem is actually a combination of policy, technology and budget. While it is true that requirements stem from policy decisions, they cannot be translated into actual communications personnel, equipment and systems, without the assistance of communications technicians and budgetary experts working in close co-operation with those officials who are responsible for the substantive economic, social and political work of the United Nations. Throughout this process, strategy, policy, technology and budget cannot be separated.

7. Similarly, while the caution expressed in the report against a conservative budgetary policy is understood, it is to be noted that the controls of telex and telephone, which are cited as examples of that policy, have provided essential data for determining the level of requirements for these services without impairing the work of the Organization. Requests for additional or improved resources of this nature require proper documentation through the type of data which emanate from such controls.

8. In section V of its report where it formulates its conclusions and recommendations (see A/37/372, pp. 29-33) JIU addresses two categories of issues; the first deals with specific matters relating to the United Nations itself, while the second group of recommendations is of concern to the United Nations system as a whole.

9. Regarding specific problems connected with the United Nations, the following comments can be made:

(a) Telephone. The need for outside expert assistance is fully recognized. Several commercial telephone contractors have been asked to review United Nations requirements and to submit proposals for fulfilling them.

(b) Cables, telex and teleprinter network. JIU recommends a study on the advisability of upgrading the present system. This view is shared by the secretariat, which has already undertaken studies of the existing cable system. As a result, plans are being developed to enhance its capacity. These plans, which include optical scanners, have been partially implemented through the acquisition of more sophisticated code equipment.

(c) Pouch. JIU urges that steps be taken to upgrade working conditions at Headquarters, to modernize the accounting system and to reduce transshipments. In this connexion, it should be noted that an overhaul of the physical facilities has

just been completed, which has resulted, inter alia, in improving working conditions in the Headquarters pouch room. The modernization of the accounting system is under study and the reduction of the number of transshipments is an ongoing project which is being intensified.

(d) Mail and messenger service. The Secretary-General is in agreement with the JIU recommendation for the modernization of the equipment used by mail and messenger units in order to reduce sorting and delivery time. It should be noted in this regard that the physical plant of the central work station has been upgraded. The Secretariat is in consultation with commercial firms with large-scale mail and messenger activities, as well as suppliers of mail-handling equipment and systems, to determine the best approach to an improvement programme.

10. Turning to those recommendations which concern the United Nations system in general, the following remarks may be of interest:

(a) The JIU report recommends that the communications services offered by public telecommunications authorities should be kept under constant review. The Secretary-General agrees with this proposal. At the same time it must be appreciated that the United Nations would find it difficult to participate in the research and development of experimental equipment and thus must rely on the acquisition of tried and tested equipment and systems already used by public and commercial communications organizations. It is considered that this type of review, which already is regular practice, conforms to that recommended by JIU.

(b) JIU urges greater use of facsimile. As a means of record copy transmission, facsimile has valuable applications, for example in the transmission of authenticated copy of documents, graphics or charts. On the other hand, facsimile is not always necessarily the best method of transmitting documents for reproduction. In many areas of interest to the United Nations, a reproducible copy best results from those systems which physically reproduce a document through such conventional means as cables. This being said, the JIU survey has confirmed that the utilization of facsimile transmission can and should be expanded. Measures to encourage the use of this method are already being undertaken. For example, all of the reports and resolutions of UNISPACE-82 were transmitted by facsimile to Headquarters for translation and the results similarly retransmitted to Vienna for reproduction and distribution.

(c) JIU recommends increased use of communicating computers and word processors. This is viewed as a forward-looking proposal which certainly merits further study and exploration.

(d) JIU proposes that voice teleconferencing experiments be made for routine consultations or short missions involving three or more participants. These experiments would be designed to (i) demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of teleconferencing over travel and (ii) adopt policies which will discourage recourse to travel when the same results are obtainable through teleconferencing. There is no doubt as to the cost advantage of teleconferencing over travel and the Secretariat has been instructed to give teleconferencing increased attention. As a first step, efforts will be made to identify meetings which would lend themselves

to this technology in order that sufficient lead time can be obtained to provide for the necessary installations.

(e) The Secretary-General agrees with the proposal that a thorough study of needs and requirements should be undertaken prior to any attempt being made at modernizing the radio network. Such studies have in fact been under way for some time.

(f) The possibility of the United Nations acquiring its own communications satellite has recently been put forward, in particular in proceedings of the Committee on Information. In commenting on this matter in the Committee, the Secretary-General has expressed the view that less expensive but equally satisfactory facilities could be obtained by way of arrangements to be concluded with already existing satellite-owning organizations. Subsequently, the Committee on Information requested that the Secretariat undertake a further and more extensive study of the question and evaluate the current costs of communications in relation to projected costs and savings over a seven-year period with a United Nations communication satellite. The study in question should also reflect savings obtained through the exploitation of all the potential uses of a communications satellite. The Committee also decided that it would, at its next session, also take into account the report on communications to be produced by JIU. The Secretary-General notes that, in this regard, following its examination of this issue, JIU concluded that:

"Instead of looking into the possibility of acquiring their own communication satellite system, United Nations organizations - preferably with a single voice - should endeavour to negotiate with Intelsat (or similar consortia) and with the Governments of host countries the acquisition of communications channels ..." (A/37/372, p. 32).

Measures designed to initiate action in regard to this particular recommendation have already been taken. There is indeed no doubt that a system of this nature with earth stations in eight centres of United Nations activity could effectively serve as the framework of a quality United Nations communications system. It should be observed, however, that international regulations require that the earth stations be licensed by the Governments of the host countries. Endorsement of JIU recommendation by Member States in the proceedings of the General Assembly would undoubtedly facilitate the negotiations which would have to be entered into at a later stage.

(g) JIU, in its final recommendation, expresses the wish that the Secretary-General should take the initiative with a view to the creation, within the framework of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC), of an ad hoc interagency committee on communications. The Secretary-General will pursue this matter in consultation with his colleagues in ACC.

11. In summary, the Secretary-General considers that the study conducted by JIU in regard to communications within the United Nations system constitutes an important and useful contribution that provides an appropriate basis to develop rational action towards an improved, responsive and cost-effective communication system.