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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Letter dated 22 January 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to forward herewith the summary of a retreat on strengthening the General Assembly, which brought together a group of Permanent Representatives to the United Nations on 12 and 13 July 2012 in Tarrytown, New York (see annex). The meeting was organized by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, in close cooperation with the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

The retreat was attended by the President of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, and elected members of the General Committee of the sixty-seventh session. A representative of the President-elect of the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly, Vuk Jeremić, was also in attendance.

Participants in the seminar discussed the role and the status of the General Assembly, and efforts to revitalize its work and working methods, with the objective of defining elements for a stronger Assembly.

Specifically, participants considered tangible measures that could be taken towards this objective and agreed that these could be useful contributions to the ongoing discussions on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Furthermore, the retreat provided an opportunity to allow incoming General Committee members to be familiarized with the working methods of the General Assembly.

The attached report has been prepared under the Chatham House Rule.

I would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 116.

(Signed) Jarmo Viinanen

Ambassador

Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 22 January 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Towards a stronger General Assembly: high-level retreat, 12 and 13 July 2012, Tarrytown, New York

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

The Permanent Mission of Finland organized a retreat entitled “Towards a stronger General Assembly” on 12 and 13 July 2012 at Tarrytown, New York, with the aim of contributing to the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly. The retreat, which brought together incoming members of the General Committee at the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly with the President of the sixty-sixth session, and a representative of the President-elect of the sixty-seventh session and senior Secretariat officials, consisted of a keynote dinner address followed by a question-and-answer session on 12 July, and presentations followed by an interactive exchange of views on the working methods of the General Assembly on the morning of 13 June.

Thursday, 12 July

Keynote address

A keynote address was delivered by Vijay Nambiar at a dinner held on the evening of 12 July. At the outset, he noted Finland’s contribution to the effort of strengthening the United Nations, as underlined by its holding of the retreat and organizing similar ones for members of the Security Council. He also noted the comments made by the keynote speaker last year, some of which he suggested could be further built upon in this endeavour.

In his thought-provoking address, Mr. Nambiar underlined the unique role and position of the General Assembly in international affairs as the only fully representative body, a fact that he noted had been reaffirmed by Member States at the very highest level, including at the 2005 World Summit. The general debate, for example, was a unique event not replicable elsewhere, and one that also provided an opportunity for fostering public-private relationships and reaching out to the media, which was crucial in today’s age of global communication. The General Assembly Hall projected an important symbolic image that could not be substituted.

While the range of issues and the nature of the international discourse on them within the Assembly had changed over the years, as exemplified by the emerging discussions on the protection of civilians in peacekeeping operations, the responsibility to protect, human security and the need to protect the global commons, a critical factor that remained was the role played by Governments. At the same time, that role was now complemented by other actors, such as civil society and the social media, which entailed a need for the Organization to engage in increased management of outside perceptions. The General Assembly was particularly powerful, Mr. Nambiar noted, when it acted beyond immediate politics,

such as when it adopted resolutions on Holocaust remembrance or in commemoration of the Rwandan genocide or the transatlantic slave trade.

Incoming presidents, Mr. Nambiar noted, demonstrate leadership by setting the tone for each session. The Office of the President had an important role to play and the handbook prepared during the sixty-fifth session was an invaluable tool. Geographical rotation of the office was important, and extending the presidency for more than one year would not work. Also, assembling and maintaining a large office may not be a possibility for every president, and, therefore, a senior member from each regional group, at the level of Permanent Representative, could be appointed to serve in the Office of the President. These figures could interact with their respective groups, constituting this essential link. Regarding the regional groups themselves, the speaker suggested that the membership of some of them may be outdated.

A strong relationship between the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly was extremely important, which the current Secretary-General was acutely aware of, given his own background as a former Chef de Cabinet to the President of the fifty-sixth session. If the United Nations was to fully exercise its moral leadership, this relationship needed to be harnessed. Of particular note in this regard were the joint travels undertaken by the Secretary-General and the President of the sixty-sixth session to Libya and Somalia last year, the first such trips of their kind. Another example was their joint proposal to convene in 2015 a follow-up conference to the Fourth World Conference on Women.

An important tool for the Secretary-General was his annual report on the work of the Organization, the consideration of which, Mr. Nambiar remarked, could probably be rescheduled in order to allow for a little more attention to detail. Another means of broadening the interaction between the General Assembly and the Secretariat could be the organization of periodic briefings on substantive issues on the Assembly agenda, with the possibility of high-level Secretariat officials, such as of the Department of Political Affairs or the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, briefing Member States. In concluding his statement, Mr. Nambiar emphasized again the huge role incumbent upon the General Assembly to play.

Friday, 13 July

Opening remarks

The morning session on Friday, 13 July, began with a summary by the Permanent Representative of Finland of the keynote address of the previous day, which was followed by presentations by the Secretariat on various aspects of the work of the General Assembly. The session was concluded with a statement by the President of the General Assembly and wrap-up remarks by Finland.

Secretariat presentation: overview of the sixty-seventh session

The Deputy Chief of the General Assembly Affairs Branch of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, Kenji Nakano, provided an overview of the sixty-seventh session based on the provisional programme of work of the session as issued in document A/66/861 and Add.1, with a special focus on the opening part of the session, which included the High-level Meeting on the Rule of Law at the national and international levels and the general debate. Mr. Nakano

also delineated the various procedural steps involved in the adoption of the agenda, the allocation of items and the organization of work of the sixty-seventh session. With regard to the general debate, he noted that its opening would be preceded by a statement by the Secretary-General, in which he would introduce his annual report on the work of the Organization. The theme proposed by the President-elect for the general debate of the sixty-seventh session, upon which Member States were invited to comment, was “Bringing about adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations by peaceful means”. Mr. Nakano also specifically highlighted the role played by the Vice-Presidents during the general debate, who are traditionally called upon to chair meetings. During the main part of the session, simultaneous to the ongoing work of the Assembly in the Main Committees, the plenary would hold debates on a wide range of items, including the reports it receives from the other principal organs. The Assembly would also elect members of those bodies and those of a number of its subsidiary bodies. During the sixty-seventh session, the elections for the Human Rights Council would, for the first time, be held during the main part of the session, following adjustment of the Council’s membership cycle with the calendar year. Towards the end of the main part of the session, the Assembly would take action on the reports of the Main Committees, traditionally revisiting each recommendation. In concluding, Mr. Nakano briefly touched on the resumed part of the session, during which the Assembly normally disposes of those items that remained open on its agenda.

Discussion

In the ensuing discussion, participants discussed the method of the plenary’s consideration of the reports of the Main Committees, especially the possibility of reviewing the traditional pattern with a view to streamlining it, for example, by approving those recommendations that had been adopted without a vote in the Main Committee in a single decision. Participants demonstrated considerable interest in this option, noting in particular the time-saving effect of such an innovation. The view was also expressed, however, that each Main Committee differed in practice and that procedural implications needed to be studied carefully. One participant, who strongly welcomed what he termed the one-gavel initiative, suggested that the Assembly could request the Secretariat to undertake such a study. Also on a procedural matter, it was noted that each year the Assembly ended up extending the date of recess it had adopted at the outset of the session, and wondered whether this could be improved through greater discipline on the part of Member States. One speaker suggested that the President of the General Assembly could facilitate this by insisting on observance of the original decision. Others, however, pointed to the particular working methods inherent in the deliberations of the Fifth Committee.

Several speakers focused on the role of the Vice-Presidents, with one wondering whether that function entailed any activity beyond presiding over meetings in the absence of the President. One participant, who had previously served as a Vice-President, suggested that, de facto, it did not. The participant recollected that the only time the General Committee had met during that session was at its opening, in order to consider the draft agenda before it. One participant enquired as to the formula by which Vice-Presidents were chosen to preside over meetings, and it was clarified that care was taken to rotate the Vice-Presidents with a view to maintaining a geographical balance. It was generally suggested that better

use could be made of the collective wisdom of the Vice-Presidents, and one speaker, in this vein, proposed periodic meetings for team-building purposes.

Secretariat presentation: role of the General Committee

Following the presentation by Mr. Nakano, the Chief of the General Assembly Affairs Branch, Saijin Zhang, briefed the group on the role of the General Committee and its functions, noting that the potential role of the Committee, as defined by the rules of procedure, had received intermittent attention from the membership in the context of the deliberations of the General Assembly on the strengthening of its working methods and on making its operations more effective and efficient. Highlighting the role of the Committee in considering the draft agenda and the inclusion and allocation of items, Mr. Zhang briefly recalled the various measures adopted by the Assembly in previous resolutions on how to strengthen the role of the General Committee, including the recommendation that it continue to meet throughout the session and play the leading role in advising the General Assembly on the efficient organization, coordination and management of its work.

Discussion

In the ensuing discussion, several speakers again wondered how the Vice-Presidents could be better used to reach out to Member States, and one participant suggested that the Vice-Presidents should receive more visibility. There was the sentiment that overall the Vice-Presidents constituted an underused resource, and that they could be called upon more often, as facilitators, for instance. The practice of holding an early meeting of the General Committee-elect for an exchange of views before the opening of the session was particularly welcomed and the representative of the President-elect of the sixty-seventh session indicated its continuation in advance of the forthcoming session.

Secretariat presentation: the Main Committees and their work

As the third and final presentation, Mr. Nakano briefed the retreat on various organizational aspects of the work of the Main Committees, distinguishing between pre-, in- and post-session phases of their work. Reviewing the various provisions elaborated by the Assembly over recent years, Mr. Nakano emphasized the importance of the timely election of the Main Committee and of a smooth transition process from one session to the next, recalling that the Bureaux-elect would meet immediately after their election in order to discuss the organization and division of their work. With regard to the Committees' agenda, the Assembly had periodically requested the Main Committees to continue their efforts to further rationalize them, giving specific attention to the biennialization, the triennialization, the clustering and the elimination of items, a request reiterated in the most recent resolution on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Discussion

In the course of the subsequent discussion among participants, the Chair of the Fourth Committee expressed her disappointment that the Chairs of the Main Committees for the sixty-seventh session had not yet been elected. Looking back at her experience, she stressed the impeccable cooperation with the Secretariat and her proactive dialogue with delegations as crucial factors in the work of the Fourth

Committee during the sixty-sixth session. Taking into account the experience during that session with the hearings of petitioners, and the great interest of the outside world in them, the Chair suggested that all meetings of the Main Committees be webcast. While the Fourth Committee had held a long discussion on possible means to streamline its agenda, it succeeded in reducing the actual number of meetings held. An important factor in this regard was the insistence of the Chair on starting meetings on time.

The Chair of the First Committee echoed several of these points, noting that the workplan during the sixty-sixth session had been changed to make it more practice-oriented. As a result of a request to identify the delegation that had requested a vote on one of the draft resolutions before the Committee, there had been some discussion within the Committee on the transparency of its proceedings. It remains to be seen whether this will continue during the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly. Even though the First Committee work programme has been streamlined throughout the years, there is a need to make improvements. For example, the Committee had agreed to push forward interaction with representatives of different disarmament and arms control arrangements in order to assure high-level participation and fruitful interaction. One issue of particular importance to the Chair was the inclusion of civil society and non-governmental organizations in the work of the First Committee to allow the membership to hear and benefit from their views.

Several participants concurred with the desirability for streamlining the agendas and the workload of the Main Committees, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulty inherent in this task. In response to a question regarding the timely election of the Chairs of the Main Committees, it was again underlined that this would indeed be highly beneficial, also taking into account the increasing complexity of the work of the Main Committee. It was also recalled that the geographical pattern of the distribution of the chairmanships as set out in resolution 48/264 was about to expire and that it was up to Member States to consider its replacement.

Statement by the President of the General Assembly

The President of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, provided reflections on the retreat's theme, strengthening of the work of the General Assembly, based on his experience as President of the sixty-sixth session, noting at the outset that "United Nations reform and revitalization" had been one of his four key pillars chosen for this session. He stressed that the General Assembly was critical to finding legitimate solutions to the challenges of today's world. Pointing to the work undertaken in the ad hoc working group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly, co-chaired by the Permanent Representatives of Georgia and the Gambia, the President affirmed the need to make progress in that forum, including on the internal working methods of the Assembly and its political role and authority. The President stressed that the role of the Assembly should never be perceived as a mere substitute for the mandate of the other principal organs. Instead, it offered a complimentary and viable alternative for the international community to act in moments of deadlock, citing in this regard the case of the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic during the current session. The President recounted that the Assembly had already held four meetings on the issue, resulting, *inter alia*, in the appointment of a Joint Special Envoy of the United

Nations and the League of Arab States and hearing briefings, including by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The President stressed that these had been practical measures for revitalizing the role and effectiveness of the Assembly.

Touching on the role of the President of the General Assembly, which, in parallel with the agenda of the Assembly, had evolved and expanded over time, President Al-Nasser emphasized that the President bore responsibility for driving forward the agenda, leading and facilitating the follow-up processes on substantive mandates and helping to move forward processes when necessary. In other words, the President was the chief mediator of the Assembly. His role, however, also included outreach and representation beyond United Nations Headquarters to increase public visibility of the United Nations.

Furthermore, particularly important was ensuring a smooth relationship between the General Assembly and the other principal organs; President Al-Nasser underlined that throughout the session he had maintained close cooperation with both the President of the Security Council and the President of the Economic and Social Council, which had helped to harmonize efforts in driving forward the United Nations agenda. The President also noted the smooth coordination with the Secretary-General, as reflected in their joint visits to Libya and Somalia.

Another factor noted by the President as directly affecting the effectiveness of the Office was the one-year term, suggesting that it was not always the case that each President found this limited period of time appropriate or sufficient for familiarizing him or herself with the Office, while at the same time advancing from the first day the rich and diverse agenda of the Assembly.

The President also referred to the gap between the current available budgetary resources of the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the actual budget needed to run the Office. In the current situation, the President had to seek external budgetary support from his or her country of origin, potentially preventing candidates from developing and least developed countries from nominating their talents for the presidency and contributing their rich expertise at that level.

In conclusion, President Al-Nasser noted that the session had been a particularly testing one for the General Assembly, taking place against the backdrop of historic shifts in many parts of the world. In the face of these challenges, the General Assembly had stood strong, active and responsive, building bridges and brokering new partnerships. In doing so, it had reaffirmed its place as the most legitimate, representative and universal body in the world.

Discussion

In the course of the ensuing discussions among participants, many thought-provoking questions were raised and speakers engaged in an interactive exchange of views covering the gamut of issues covered in the retreat. One participant wondered what could be done to better ensure the implementation of resolutions adopted by the Assembly and another proposed creating a body that would regularly inform Members of the status of implementation. The President concurred that a good follow-up mechanism was needed, while noting the varied responsibility involved in the implementation of mandates. Another speaker held the view that better use could be made of the General Committee along the lines of a Cabinet, while another

participant in the discussion suggested that not all Committee members were equally available for this to be feasible. One speaker argued that the Vice-Presidents could be used to consult with the regional groups. In response to another question, the President noted that having taken forward the issue of mediation during the current session was an important legacy, and expressed gratitude in this context for the initiative undertaken by Finland.

Wrap-up and closing remarks

In concluding remarks, the Permanent Representative of Finland wrapped up the meeting and thanked all attendants for their active participation in the discussions, which had again highlighted the keen interest among Member States, and in particular the General Committee-elect, to strengthen the work of the General Assembly.

Enclosure**List of participants**

Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser
President of the General Assembly

Tariq Al-Ansari
Deputy Chef de Cabinet of the President of the General Assembly

Stuart Beck
Permanent Representative of Palau

Rodney Charles
Permanent Representative of Trinidad and Tobago

Ken Kanda
Permanent Representative of Ghana

Henry Leonard Mac-Donald
Permanent Representative of Suriname

Simona Miculescu
Permanent Representative of Romania

Abulkalam Abdul Momen
Permanent Representative of Bangladesh

Vijay Nambiar
Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Myanmar

Ron Prosor
Permanent Representative of Israel

Nawaf Salam
Permanent Representative of Lebanon

Herman Schaper
Permanent Representative of the Netherlands

Zahir Tanin
Permanent Representative of Afghanistan

Shekou M. Touray
Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone

Jarmo Viinanen
Permanent Representative of Finland

Sewa Lamsal Adhikari
Deputy Permanent Representative of Nepal

Ernest Tchiloemba Tchitembo
Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Congo

Damjan Krnjević-Mišković
Senior Adviser to the President-elect of the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly

Sami Wacklin
Special Adviser, Permanent Mission of Finland

Saijin Zhang
Chief, General Assembly Affairs Branch, Department for General Assembly and
Conference Management

Kenji Nakano
Senior Political Affairs Officer, General Assembly Affairs Branch

Henry Breed
Political Affairs Officer, Office of the Director
General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division

Georg Zeiner
Political Affairs Officer, Office of the Director
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