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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Letter dated 13 December 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 11 and 12 July 2013 at Greentree, Manhasset, 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, organized for the third year in a row, was attended by the President of the General Assembly, Vuk Jeremić, and elected members of the General Committee of the sixty-eighth session. A representative of the President-elect of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly, John Ashe, 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 for incoming members of the General Committee to familiarize themselves 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-eighth session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 122.

(Signed) Jarmo Viinanen

Ambassador

Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 13 December 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Towards a stronger General Assembly: high-level retreat, 11 and 12 July 2013, Greentree, Manhasset, New York

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

On 11 and 12 July 2013, the Permanent Mission of Finland, for the third year in a row, organized a retreat entitled “Towards a stronger General Assembly”, held at Greentree, Manhasset, 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 of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly, the President of the sixty-seventh session, a representative of the President-elect of the sixty-eighth session and senior Secretariat officials, consisted of a keynote dinner address followed by a question-and-answer session on 11 July, and presentations followed by an interactive exchange of views on the working methods of the General Assembly on the morning of 12 July.

Thursday, 11 July 2013

Keynote address

A keynote address was delivered by the President of the sixty-seventh session at a dinner held on the evening of 11 July. At the outset, President Vuk Jeremić underlined that no challenge in the twenty-first century could be faced by any country individually, hence the need for collective action. If the United Nations was to stay relevant, this is what was required. President Jeremić noted that the issues before the United Nations could be divided into peace and security on the one hand, and everything else on the other. Whereas the former was effectively within the domain of the Security Council, the latter was the remit of the General Assembly. The President identified the elaboration and the setting of the foundation for the post-2015 development agenda as the priority issue during the sixty-seventh session. Whereas there might have been an appearance of considerable duplication, with various processes and simultaneously ongoing tracks emanating from the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), Mr. Jeremić stressed that the General Assembly was in effect, the only place in the world where a global, bottom-up process of this magnitude and importance could have taken place. Generally speaking, the President argued that the Assembly could be made more visible by discussing all issues openly, for which the practice of convening thematic debates had proved a useful tool (for example, on the peaceful resolution of conflicts in Africa; global economic governance; sustainable development and climate change; inequality; culture and development; entrepreneurship for development; credit-rating agencies; and international criminal justice). In this regard, the President had observed a lot of excitement outside the United Nations, but sometimes opposition from within. Turning to the revitalization of the work of the Assembly, the President emphasized that the best way to bring this about would be by agreeing on a set of sustainable development goals. The

Assembly should also have a greater role to play in the selection of the Secretaries-General. The Assembly, the President proposed, might also consider instituting confirmation hearings for appointments within the United Nations Secretariat at the Under-Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General levels, a practice, he argued, that was prevalent in the parliamentary systems of many countries. The resources allocated to the Office of the President could also be strengthened, thereby creating a level playing field by obviating the need for additional funds from the respective President's country of origin. Generally speaking, while he was not in favour of a standardized two-year term for the presidency of the General Assembly, the current one-year term was insufficient, and the option of a one-time re-election should therefore be contemplated.

Discussion

In the ensuing interactive discussion, a number of questions were addressed to the President, including questions on what could be done to resolve the current impasse regarding the election of the Main Committee Chairs for the sixty-eighth session. In response, Mr. Jeremić recalled his meeting with the regional groups in June before the date originally set for elections pursuant to the rules of procedure, at which he had identified three options: one, the reaching of an agreement among the regional groups; two, a decision by means of a vote; and three, to arrive at a decision by means of drawing lots. Another participant suggested that a fourth option could be facilitation of an outcome, and the President suggested that he was willing to appoint anyone willing to take on such a task. Generally speaking, whereas all arguments brought in favour of the various positions were good ones individually, they were also mutually exclusive, and a solution needed to be arrived at. Other issues raised during the debate included the relationship between the General Assembly and the other principal organs, the role and relevance of thematic debates and decision-making in the Assembly.

Friday, 12 July 2013

Opening remarks

The morning session on Friday, 12 July, began with welcoming remarks and a summary by the Permanent Representative of Finland of the opening speech made by the President of the sixty-seventh session on the previous day, followed by the keynote speech by the President of the General Assembly of the sixty-fifth session, and two consecutive segments. Under the theme "Reflections on the work of the General Assembly", a statement was made on behalf of the President-elect for the 68th session and a presentation was delivered by the Under-Secretary-General of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. Under the theme "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly", the retreat received briefings from the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly and the Director for General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs. The various interventions were each followed by discussions. The retreat was concluded with wrap-up remarks by the Permanent Representative of Finland.

Keynote speech by the President of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly

The President of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly, Joseph Deiss, provided reflections on the retreat's theme, "Towards a stronger General Assembly",

based on his experience as President of the sixty-fifth session. Mr. Deiss noted, in particular that the retreat would help to enhance institutional memory. Pointing to the broad mandate of the Assembly as contained in Article 9 of the Charter of the United Nations, and its wide-ranging role, as reaffirmed at the highest level at the 2005 World Summit Outcome, Mr. Deiss nonetheless noted a feeling of dissatisfaction with the Assembly's relevance, as evidenced not least by the item on its agenda focused on the revitalization of its work. Attributing the reason for this discomfort to, *inter alia*, a certain competition inherent in the respective mandates of the principal organs, he suggested two possible responses: empowering the Assembly and/or improving its working methods. Speaking on the Assembly's role and authority, the President of the sixty-fifth session underscored his conviction that the Assembly had an important role to play in light of its comparative advantages, namely full representation and, hence, legitimacy. Recalling the particular situation that had arisen in the aftermath of the world economic and financial crisis, President Deiss noted that quick action had been required, giving rise to the formation of the Group of 20. This, in turn, had highlighted the global governance question, which became a focus of attention during the sixty-fifth session. He also touched upon the Assembly's decision-making process, contemplating the principle of efficiency with the need for agreements acceptable to all. Whereas every effort should be made to reach consensus on issues of major relevance to the sovereign interests of Member States, greater use of voting could be made when deciding matters of a more procedural nature. Other measures that could improve the Assembly's methods of work included the recent practice of thematic debates, although the capacity of individual delegations needed to be borne in mind. Turning to the role of the President and his/her office, Mr. Deiss argued that the question of resources was an important but not essential one. The Office of the President, he noted, could rely on the support of the Secretariat, which he recalled as always being excellent.

Discussion

In the ensuing discussion, participants focused on the wide range of issues covered in the keynote speech. Among other topics, discussants focused on the relationship of the General Assembly with other principal organs, including the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. The importance of enhancing the visibility of the General Assembly was touched upon, as was the role played by the Vice-Presidents. Participants also raised a number of questions concerning the Assembly's programme of work, the way meetings were scheduled and the potential for streamlining the Assembly's agenda. The argument was also put forward that a revitalized agenda depended more on the Member States themselves, than on the working methods employed.

Reflections on the work of the General Assembly

Opening the first thematic segment, "Reflections on the work of the General Assembly", the Chef de Cabinet of the Office of the President-elect of the sixty-eighth session, Paulette Bethel, expressed appreciation for the convening of the retreat for the third year in a row. The retreat, she noted, had, in itself, helped advance the United Nations reform agenda. Laying out the President-elect's plans and broader vision for the forthcoming session, Ambassador Bethel underlined President-elect Ashe's intention to dedicate significant time and resources to the question of United Nations reform. She also noted that the President-elect hoped to conclude some of

the outstanding negotiations. It was imperative, she stressed, that if the United Nations was to remain relevant it needed to be able to face evolving global challenges, and it was in this context that the President-elect had identified setting the stage for the post-2015 development agenda as a major priority issue of the sixty-eighth session — a theme he had also suggested for the general debate. This theme would also be explored throughout the session from a variety of angles, such as in the context of thematic debates and high-level events, including: the contributions and role of women, youth and civil society; human rights and the rule of law; South-South and triangular cooperation, as well as the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for development; the role of partnerships; the importance of ensuring stable and peaceful societies; as well as water, sanitation and sustainable energy. From a general perspective, the President-elect intended to meet regularly with the General Committee throughout the session to benefit from its advice and counsel on advancing issues on the session's agenda. He further intended to meet regularly with the Presidents of the other principal organs and, together with the Secretary-General, would organize informal meetings of the Assembly to hear briefings from the Secretary-General on his priorities, travels and most recent activities. In concluding her statement, Ambassador Bethel emphasized that the sixty-eighth presidency would work in close cooperation with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

In the next presentation, under the theme “Reflections on the work of the General Assembly”, the Under-Secretary-General of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, Mr. Tegegnetwork Gettu, provided an overview of the sixty-eighth session based on the provisional programme of work of the session as issued in document [A/67/922](#). Noting that the retreat provided an excellent opportunity for an exchange of views among Member States, and between Member States and the Secretariat, Mr. Gettu also provided a brief overview of the work of the Department and the services it provided to Member States. Describing the role of the Department as one of facilitating the effective conduct of the deliberations and follow-up actions of the General Assembly and other intergovernmental bodies it serviced, and ensuring the provision of high-quality conference-servicing support, he reported that the Department also provided a wide range of support to the Office of the President of the General Assembly, including institutional memory. In addition, the General Assembly and ECOSOC Affairs Division represented the Secretariat's institutional memory on the Assembly's rules of procedure, precedents and past practices, and its responsibilities included compiling the agenda for each session, planning the programme of work and assisting Member States in their work in the Assembly. Turning to the opening of the sixty-eighth session, the Under-Secretary-General delineated the programme of work for the first two weeks, highlighting the modalities and organizational aspects for the general debate and the other high-level meetings taking place. In concluding his statement, Mr. Gettu touched upon some trends in the work of the Assembly, such as the practice of convening thematic debates, and also underlined the additional workload that has accrued therefrom, including new subsidiary bodies established in the wake of the 2005 World Summit and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012.

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Moving to the second theme, “Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly”, the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group at the sixty-seventh session, the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations, Mootaz Ahmadein Khalil, made a presentation in which he briefed the retreat on the Working Group’s activities during the current session. Noting that one of the Working Group’s priorities had been to review the status of implementation of provisions related to the revitalization of the Assembly, the Chair informed participants that the Working Group had issued an updated inventory that would be annexed to its final report. The proceedings had been divided into thematic meetings which had focused on: the role and authority of the Assembly and its relationship with other principal organs and other groups outside the United Nations; the Assembly’s working methods; its role and responsibility in the selection and appointment of the Secretary-General and other executive heads of the United Nations system; and the functions of the Office of the President of the General Assembly, including strengthening its institutional memory, as well as its relationship with the Secretariat. Ambassador Khalil highlighted the briefings and presentations provided to the Working Group by Chairpersons of the Main Committees as well as from the Secretariat, and from which it had benefited greatly. The President of the Assembly had addressed the opening meeting of the Working Group, which had enriched its subsequent deliberations. The issues raised in the deliberations under the various clusters included: the need to enhance the Assembly’s role in responding to emerging challenges; heightening public perception of the Assembly’s work; improving the level of implementation of the Assembly’s resolutions; expanding the relationship with other principal organs; the election of Main Committee chairs; streamlining the agenda; concentrating high-level meetings in the spring; electing the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the members of the Economic and Social Council earlier than is currently the practice; strengthening the role of the General Committee; engaging early on in the selection process of the Secretaries-General; augmenting the budget allocation for the Office of the President; and enhancing coordination between the Office of the President of the Assembly, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and the Offices of the Presidents of the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council. Evaluating the process of the revitalization of the General Assembly as a whole, the Chair noted that modest improvement had been made since 1991 when the issue was first included as a separate item on the Assembly’s agenda.

Following the presentation by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group, the Director of the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, Mr. Ion Botnaru, briefed the group on the role of the General Committee and its functions. Noting that the General Committee played an important advisory role regarding organizational matters, Mr. Botnaru pointed to the relevant provisions in the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, in particular as regards the consideration of the draft agenda of the Assembly and the Committee’s role in making recommendations on the inclusion and allocation of items. He also underlined that a number of measures adopted in the context of the revitalization process related to the General Committee, such as the possibility of scheduling informal briefings on topical issues. With regard to the composition of the Committee, the President and Vice-Presidents of the sixty-eighth session had duly

been elected, but there remained an impasse concerning the election of the chairpersons of the six Main Committees, which was due to some competing candidatures. Stressing the importance of the early elections of those officials, including to foster better advance planning and preparation of work and to allow for a better handover from the outgoing to the incoming bureaux, as has also been underscored in past resolutions, the Director shared some general observations, including the proposal to consider the option of having future elections coincide with the conclusion of the work of the Main Committees at each session of the Assembly. This would furthermore coincide with the existing practice whereby the Committees adopt a provisional programme of work, which had had a beneficial impact on the planning of work. In concluding, Mr. Botnaru also touched upon the expiration of the rotational pattern outlined in the annex to resolution [48/264](#) regarding the rotation of the sixth chairmanship among the African, Asia-Pacific and Latin American and Caribbean State groupings. Whereas this question was separate from the present impasse, it also needed to be addressed in the near future, and discussions were in fact ongoing in the context of the Ad Hoc Working Group, as noted also by Ambassador Khalil.

Discussion

In the course of the ensuing question-and-answer segment that formed part of the overall discussion on the two themes, speakers underlined the importance they attached to the making of further progress in the ongoing process of the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly, even as the view was also expressed that the revitalization process itself required revitalization. The argument was made that while some progress had indeed been made in relation to the improvement of the Assembly's working methods, further advances were subject to the required political will on behalf of the membership. One speaker raised the issue of the weight of the resolutions that are adopted by the Assembly, while another argued that a lot of important work undertaken by the Assembly too often went unnoticed. As to the Assembly's relationship with other principal organs, one participant suggested that there was a certain sense of inferiority on the part of the General Assembly vis-à-vis the Security Council. Even though provisions seeking to address this perceived imbalance existed, these were rarely observed. Another speaker stressed the importance of greater coordination among the Main Committees, as well as between the Main Committees and the plenary. Turning to the role of the General Committee, one participant wondered what role was envisaged for its members, aside from their being asked to preside over meetings of the General Assembly in the absence of the President. Several speakers also touched upon the question of the timely election of the chairs of the Main Committees.

Summary and closing remarks

In his concluding remarks, the Permanent Representative of Finland summarized the retreat and thanked all attendants for their active participation in the discussions, which had once again highlighted the keen interest among Member States, and in particular the members of the General Committee-elect, in strengthening the work of the General Assembly.

Enclosure

List of participants

Vuk Jeremić
President of the General Assembly

Joseph Deiss
President of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly

Dejan Sahovic
Senior Special Adviser to the President of the General Assembly

Paulette Bethel
Chief of Cabinet of the President-elect of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly

Tegegnetwork Gettu
Under-Secretary-General, Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

Francis Mading Deng
Permanent Representative of South Sudan

Octavio Errázuriz
Permanent Representative of Chile

Dilyor Khakimov
Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan

Mootaz Ahmadein Khalil,
Permanent Representative of Egypt

Mohamed Khaled Khiari
Permanent Representative of Tunisia

Simona Mirela Miculescu
Permanent Representative of Romania

Nelson Messone
Permanent Representative of Gabon

Michel Tommo Monthe
Permanent Representative of Cameroon

Desra Percaya
Permanent Representative of Indonesia

Isabelle F. Picco
Permanent Representative of Monaco

Norachit Sinhaseni
Permanent Representative of Thailand

George Talbot
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Magdi Elderini
First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations

Anna Salovaara
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Political Affairs Officer, Office of the Director
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