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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Letter dated 29 October 2014 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 26 and 27 June 2014 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 fourth year in a row, was attended by the President of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser, and elected members of the General Committee of the sixty-ninth session. Representatives of the President of the sixty-eighth session and of the President-elect of the sixty-ninth session, the Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly during the sixty-eighth session and the Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General were also in attendance.

Participants 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 and to benefit from lessons learned and best practices.

The attached report was 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-ninth session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 118.

(Signed) Kai Jürgen Mikael Sauer
Ambassador

Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 29 October 2014 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Towards a stronger General Assembly: high-level retreat, 26 and 27 June 2014, Greentree, Manhasset, New York

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

On 26 and 27 June 2014, the Permanent Mission of Finland, for the fourth 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. On 26 June, incoming members of the General Committee of the sixty-ninth session of the Assembly and representatives of both the incoming and outgoing presidencies heard a keynote dinner address by the President of the sixty-sixth session of the Assembly, as well as a presentation from the Permanent Representative of Slovakia and Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly during the sixty-eighth session, followed by a question-and-answer session. On 27 June, presentations and briefings were given, each of which was followed by an exchange of views. The participants in the retreat had before them a concept note as well as the draft programme of work of the plenary for the sixty-ninth session together with the annotated preliminary list of items.

Thursday, 26 June 2014

Keynote address

A keynote address was delivered by the President of the sixty-sixth session, Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser, at a dinner held on the evening of 26 June. At the outset, Mr. Al-Nasser underlined the Assembly’s role as the main democratic mechanism within the United Nations and its potential, as such, to be its strongest organ. Speaking from the perspective of lessons learned during the sixty-sixth session, Mr. Al-Nasser emphasized the crucial importance of the Assembly’s deliberations on and engagement in a range of issues during the following 12 months, from climate change to peace and security, noting that many human beings had no other shelter. During his presidency, Mr. Al-Nasser had had to focus on all of those issues, as well as on the economic and financial crisis and United Nations reform. On Security Council reform specifically, Mr. Al-Nasser recalled the convening of several rounds of intergovernmental negotiations under his presidency that had culminated in the holding of two retreats on that issue, one on Long Island, New York, and the other in Doha. The joint visits he made together with the Secretary-General to Somalia and Libya, meanwhile, highlighted the importance of the relationship between the two executive heads. Regrettably, lack of coordination and of respect for protocol during other sessions had the potential of reflecting negatively on the work of the Organization. In that regard, it was necessary that the required resources be made available to the Office of the President of the Assembly. Together with the support of Finland, mediation and the peaceful settlement of disputes emerged as a main theme during the sixty-sixth session. Another main theme was sustainable development, and Mr. Al-Nasser recalled putting his full

political weight behind the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and its outcome document, "The future we want". He noted that the fact that the resources needed by the international community were increasingly in short supply affected the ability of the United Nations to respond to situations of aggravated insecurity in many parts of the world, from the Central African Republic to South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. In conclusion, he noted that, in his current role as the High Representative of the Alliance of Civilizations, he was committed to the continued promotion of mutual respect as a contribution to addressing global challenges.

The keynote address was followed by remarks by the Permanent Representative of Slovakia and Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly, František Ružicka. Mr. Ružicka underscored the importance and special significance that the United Nations derived from the General Assembly's inclusivity and, looking ahead at the Organization's forthcoming seventieth anniversary, noted the Assembly's proud history and continued successful existence. He underlined, in particular, the new types of threats that had emerged and would continue to emerge in the twenty-first century, such as climate change, and said that such phenomena required a collaborative approach given that no nation alone could defend itself against nature. Against that background, the current work of the United Nations on the elaboration of sustainable development goals was especially important. While noting that the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly had various aspects, including political, administrative and budgetary ones, Mr. Ružicka said that it was time to achieve consensus and to take bold actions. Looking to the sixty-ninth session, during which he would serve as Chair of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (Fifth Committee), Mr. Ružicka asked: What additional measures could be taken to make the United Nations even more efficient and effective?

Discussion

In the ensuing discussion, a number of questions were addressed to the presenters, including on whether enough use was being made by the Organization's membership of the General Assembly. The length of the term of office of the President of the Assembly was raised by one discussant, who argued that one year was not enough for the incumbent to become familiar with the Assembly's working practices and to engage in wide consultations with the membership; discussions should focus, therefore, on whether to extend the length of the term and whether to enhance resources. Another participant noted that the issue had not featured prominently and was never raised by the Ad Hoc Working Group during the sixty-eighth session. It was also highlighted that the best source of institutional memory was a smooth transition between the outgoing and the incoming presidencies, one of the objectives of the current retreat. Another participant suggested that General Assembly revitalization was a matter of political will, and noted that the Assembly was not very good at presenting its work to the outside world even though there was much to be proud of. The unique status of the general debate, which was the only forum that brought together Heads of State and Government from all parts of the world, was underlined in this respect. Yet another participant argued that political groupings ought to be more concerned with

considering how to make better use of the Assembly's powers and to support a stronger Assembly.

Friday, 27 June 2014

Opening remarks

The morning session on Friday, 27 June, began with welcoming remarks and a summary by the Permanent Representative of Finland, Jarmo Viinanen, of the opening speech made by the President of the sixty-sixth session and of the remarks made by the Permanent Representative of Slovakia and Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the previous day. The summary was followed by two consecutive thematic segments, entitled "Reflections on the work of the General Assembly" and "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly".

Under the theme "Reflections on the work of the General Assembly", statements were delivered on behalf of the President-elect of the sixty-ninth session and on behalf of the President of the sixty-eighth session. Under the theme "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly", the participants in the retreat heard briefings by the Permanent Representative of Thailand and Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group and by the Permanent Representative of Iceland and Co-Chair of the intergovernmental process of the Assembly on strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system. The statements made under each segment were followed by discussions. Before adjourning, the participants in the retreat also heard a statement by the Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General. In conclusion, remarks were made by the Permanent Representative of Finland.

Reflections on the work of the General Assembly

In opening the first thematic segment, Ambassador Arthur Kafeero delivered a statement on behalf of the President-elect of the sixty-ninth session, in which he underlined the importance of a smooth transition from one Assembly presidency to the next and specifically expressed gratitude to the President of the sixty-eighth session, John W. Ashe, for the cooperative attitude extended by his cabinet in that respect. Such cooperation was even more significant in the light of the importance of the forthcoming session in paving the way for the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations and the drafting of the post-2015 development agenda. Noting that the world had changed dramatically since the establishment of the Organization, the role of the Assembly and its President had changed with it, and so, accordingly, had the expectations. To find effective solutions to the myriad problems faced by the international community, the central role of the Assembly needed to be further strengthened. Issues that could be addressed in this regard included: the non-implementation of resolutions, the lack of visibility of the Assembly's work, the importance of enhancing institutional memory, the perceived encroachment on the Assembly's mandate and the resources made available to the President. The revitalization of the work of the General Assembly would, therefore, remain a priority for the President of the sixty-ninth session, as would the other issues listed in his acceptance speech, such as the post-2015 development agenda, climate change, cooperation between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations, the peaceful settlement of disputes, gender equality and the empowerment of women, and the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Deputy Chef de Cabinet of the Office of the President of the sixty-eighth session, Ambassador Noel Sinclair, shared lessons learned from the experiences of the current session, noting at the very outset the significant, historic expansion in the Assembly's workload, which had become evident both from the fact that the number of items on its agenda had increased from 120 in 1980 to 170 in 2014 and from the fact that the length of the main part of the session now routinely extended beyond 24 December. The President needed to be prepared to take initiatives that went beyond the obvious in order to facilitate the Assembly's work. At the same time, the end of the main part of the session had become but the beginning of another significant segment of every session, which pointed to the need to improve working methods even further, in particular as regards the budgetary process. In that context, Mr. Sinclair suggested that it might be worthwhile to consider making the budget the very first item on the Fifth Committee's agenda, or to consider it in a special session. The holding of thematic debates had also placed a burden on Member States. The Deputy Chef de Cabinet specifically underscored the President's commitment to the issue of reform during the sixty-eighth session, from revitalizing the General Assembly to reforming the Security Council. As to the latter, he said that it was important that the Council better reflect today's world. As to the former, he underlined that one element was a strong and cooperative relationship with the Secretary-General, which he described as indispensable. This included the reliance of the Office of the President on the support provided by the Secretariat, in particular the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, as regards institutional memory, without which no President could effectively fulfil his or her functions. In that regard, Mr. Sinclair noted that elected Presidents assumed office against a background of complex situations, each with their legislative and negotiating history. In conclusion, he once again emphasized how the Assembly's importance, generally, was underlined by its centrality, vibrancy and universality, perhaps best exemplified by its annual general debate.

Discussion

In the course of the ensuing question-and-answer segment, speakers underlined the universal nature of the Assembly, where all Member States had one vote. One of the issues identified as being an obstacle for a more efficient and effective Assembly, however, was the way items were discussed, as the same subject was deliberated in various contexts, which sometimes led to a feeling of renegotiating texts over and over again. Similarly, the question of institutional memory was a problem to the extent that it took time to learn how the system worked. One participant expressed the wish to see more cooperation among regional groupings. Another underlined the important leadership role of the Permanent Representatives. The question of the implementation of resolutions was raised, as was the potential role of the President in this context. One speaker wondered whether there was a relationship between the high number of resolutions adopted and the rate of their implementation. Another speaker noted that, for every resolution or item, there was at least one delegation that attached great importance to its continued inclusion or adoption. Yet another speaker suggested the possibility of adopting shorter resolutions. The high number of events, and the complications posed for smaller delegations as a result, was also mentioned and reiterated. One participant argued that very often a lack of leadership was responsible for inefficiencies in the way the Assembly functioned, and cited the lack of the election of Main Committee Chairs three months in advance of the opening of the

sixty-eighth session as an example. The view was expressed that the proceedings in the Main Committees were often more interesting than those in the Assembly's plenary and that thought should be given to how to ensure that the Assembly becomes a more vibrant forum for discussion.

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

During the second thematic segment, the Permanent Representative of Thailand and Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group at the sixty-eighth session, Norachit Sinhaseni, briefed the participants of the retreat on the Ad Hoc Working Group's activities during the current session. His briefing was followed by remarks from the Permanent Representative of Iceland on lessons learned from her experience as Co-Chair of the intergovernmental process of the Assembly on strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system.

In his overview, Mr. Sinhaseni recalled the history of the Assembly's consideration of the item on revitalization before summarizing the proceedings of the Ad Hoc Working Group during the sixty-eighth session, including the negotiation of a draft resolution. He noted that very few Permanent Representatives had participated in that negotiation, and that concern had been expressed over the perceived encroachment by other principal organs on the mandate of the General Assembly, even though it was an issue on which no agreement had been reached by the membership. As regards working methods, a provision was under consideration to elect the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the members of the Economic and Social Council six months in advance of the beginning of their term in office, beginning with the seventieth session. The General Assembly would also welcome the establishment of a web link dedicated to revitalization, which, he noted, would constitute a small but tangible achievement in publicizing the work being done under that item. Another issue that was discussed was the process of selecting the Secretary-General and the Assembly's role in it, with everybody agreeing on Article 97 of the Charter of the United Nations, despite the existence of different interpretations. A specific debate had started regarding the Assembly's relevant rules of procedure, with some calling for their full implementation, including the convening of a secret ballot, while others underlined the Assembly's existing practices. Ensuring gender equality was raised in various contexts, including representation in the Office of the President of the Assembly. Also regarding the Office of the President, it was considered that future Presidents-elect might benefit from the lessons learned by their predecessors. Some speakers were strongly in favour of enhancing the budget currently allocated to the Office, whereas others emphasized the need to fund any additional measures from within existing resources; generally, that was a matter of discussion throughout the negotiation of a resolution. Finally, while the importance of institutional memory in the Office of the President was underlined, the Secretariat's role in that regard was acknowledged and noted.

Following the presentation by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group, the Permanent Representative of Iceland, Ambassador Gréta Gunnarsdóttir, spoke of her experiences and lessons learned from the negotiations on strengthening the human rights treaty body system, which had, over a period of two years, encountered numerous challenges. From a lessons learned perspective, it was important for the co-facilitators to work together as a team and to meet regularly with the major

stakeholders on the issue under consideration. The role of the President of the General Assembly, who must be kept informed and updated throughout, was equally crucial. Similarly, the Secretariat had a central role to play; in the context of the human rights treaty body system negotiations, this was complicated by the fact that the human rights treaty bodies were located in Geneva. Working remotely proved to be a challenge, which was perhaps why most of the work ended up being done by the Member States themselves. In the future, it would be useful to elaborate and receive detailed guidelines on what support facilitators can expect from the Secretariat. One element in that regard concerned the need for the membership to receive accurate and timely information on the programme budget implications. The Secretariat's position was that there would be no numbers before an agreement by Member States, while the Member States' position was that there would be no agreement before receipt of the numbers. As regards Member States themselves, the Permanent Representatives had a responsibility to ensure that there would be no difference between the result reached in the Fifth Committee and the result reached during the preceding negotiations. A lot of time was spent on the question of modalities. In the context of the human rights treaty bodies, the issue was complicated further by the large number of stakeholders, which included civil society and non-governmental organizations. In conclusion, Ms. Gunnarsdóttir noted that, while the United Nations was good at starting new endeavours, its record on coming to conclusions was less positive.

Statement

The Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra, underscored the importance and significance of the working relationship between the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly for the smooth functioning of the Organization. The Secretary-General, she noted, had placed great value in the personal interaction between the two executive heads, as reflected in their joint regular working luncheons, which allowed for and facilitated an exchange of views and information on issues before the Assembly. The Secretary-General also made every effort to personally attend thematic debates in the Assembly and to periodically brief the Assembly on his most recent activities and travels. The Chef de Cabinet further emphasized the range of substantive and administrative support provided to the Office of the President of the Assembly by several departments and offices, primarily through the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The Chef de Cabinet also indicated the intention of the Secretary-General to present a proposal to the Assembly to increase the level of resources for the Office of the President in the programme budget for the following biennium. The Chef de Cabinet emphasized the importance placed by the Secretary-General on the work of the Assembly and noted that he had stressed the importance of senior managers being available to the Main Committees. The Secretary-General and his office also worked closely with the Assembly's Main Committees, in particular its Fifth Committee. The Chef de Cabinet noted that the Secretary-General, with the support of the President of the Assembly, had submitted a proposal related to the operational arrangements and conditions of service of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. She further noted the important role that the Assembly played in many other areas, including on peace and security matters, as evidenced by its action with respect to the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Chef de Cabinet concluded by emphasizing the importance of the sixty-ninth

session in paving the way for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda and the seventieth anniversary commemorations.

Discussion

In the course of the ensuing question-and-answer segment, speakers focused on the nature of the relationship between the General Assembly and its President and the Secretary-General, underlining its importance for an efficient and effective Organization. Among other things, the question of the length of the term of the President was once again raised, with one participant wondering what impact the ratio of the terms of the President and the Secretary-General had on their relationship. At the same time, it was noted that this was a matter of philosophical rather than practical interest, as extending the term of office would reduce the opportunity for Member States to put forward candidates. Other issues raised included the relationship between the Assembly and the other principal organs and, also in this context, the importance of finding effective ways of tackling climate change. One participant stressed the role of the Secretariat in supporting the work of facilitators and argued that its capacity as repository of institutional memory was perhaps underutilized.

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

Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser
High Representative of the Alliance of Civilizations and President of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly

Susana Malcorra
Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General

Noel Sinclair
Deputy Chef de Cabinet of the President of the General Assembly of the sixty-eighth session

František Ružička
Permanent Representative of Slovakia

Norachit Sinhaseni
Permanent Representative of Thailand

Gréta Gunnarsdóttir
Permanent Representative of Iceland

Arthur Kafeero
Ambassador
Permanent Mission of Uganda

Stephan Tafrov
Permanent Representative of Bulgaria

Der Kogda
Permanent Representative of Burkina Faso

Nicholas Emiliou
Permanent Representative of Cyprus

Denis Antoine
Permanent Representative of Grenada

Durga Prasad Bhattarai
Permanent Representative of Nepal

Boubacar Boureima
Permanent Representative of the Niger

Masood Khan
Permanent Representative of Pakistan

Álvaro Mendonça e Moura
Permanent Representative of Portugal

Zwelethu Mnisi
Permanent Representative of Swaziland

Mahmadamin Mahmadaminov
Permanent Representative of Tajikistan

Sofia Mesquita Borges
Permanent Representative of Timor-Leste

Jarmo Viinanen
Permanent Representative of Finland

Tariq al-Ansari
Chef de Cabinet of the Alliance of Civilizations

Abdalla Othman Khamis
Minister Plenipotentiary, Permanent Mission of the United Republic of Tanzania

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

Slavomir Kantor
Third Secretary, Permanent Mission of Slovakia

Beckham Robert Mugimba
Third Secretary, Permanent Mission of Uganda

Georg Zeiner
Political Affairs Officer, Office of the Director, General Assembly and Economic
and Social Council Affairs Division, Department for General Assembly and
Conference Management

Anna-Maria Salomaa
First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Finland
