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REPORTS OF THE JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

The use of minutes instead of summary records (E/4802)

Addendum

Attached is the text of the observations addressed by the Secretary-General to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.

1. There are forwarded herewith copies of a report by Inspector Lucio Garcia del Solar on the use by committees, commissions and other bodies of "minutes" instead of summary records (JIU/REP/69/10 of December 1969).
2. Inspector Garcia had given the conference servicing offices at Headquarters and Geneva an opportunity to comment on the draft of his report; in its final form a number of these comments have been taken into account, and thus the observations by the Secretary-General may be limited to several specific points.
3. The basic recommendation (recommendation 2 (a)) to the effect that bodies which have not yet seen fit to dispense with summary records should be invited to consider replacing them with minutes is addressed to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, and thus, in the wording of the recommendation, is for consideration by those organs. However, attention is drawn to paragraph 1 of General Assembly resolution 2538 (XXIV) of 11 December 1969, which reads:

"Appeals to all United Nations organs, bodies and committees to consider ways of reducing documentation, and in particular the possibility of adopting a form of records less voluminous and less costly than that being used."

It might be considered that no further invitation is required, but rather that at the time the provisions of resolution 2538 (XXIV) are brought to the notice of the various bodies, the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit could also be placed before them. In this connexion, note might be taken of the fact that the following bodies which have met at Headquarters in 1970 have considered their need for summary records and decided to dispense with them:

- UNCITRAL Working Group on the International Sale of Goods;
- Ad hoc Committee on the Survey Programme for the Development of Natural Resources.

The Working Group was meeting for the first time; the Ad hoc Committee had held a previous session in 1967 at which summary records were provided. The Council Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, which had previously

dispensed with summary records, reconsidered the matter and decided to maintain its previous decision.

4. In recommendation 1, the Inspector expresses the need for a "central planning point at Headquarters" on matters relating to rationalization of documentation for conferences and meetings. It is the responsibility of the Chief Editor at Headquarters to pursue questions of this nature, in consultation with the appropriate officers in the Office of Conference Services, and where necessary, with substantive departments. Further, an attempt is made to keep the United Nations Office at Geneva informed on steps taken in this area which might be applicable at that Office. However, occasions may continue to arise when ad hoc decisions have to be taken without the opportunity of full study. The Secretary-General will endeavour, within his competence, to avoid such occasions; the manual on documentation - now under preparation pursuant to a previous recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit - should contribute to this end.

5. As regards recommendation 3, the Secretary-General agrees that corrections to minutes should not be invited. There might be occasions when a corrigendum would have to be issued in respect of the reflection of an attributed view (in the terms of the definition of minutes contained in recommendation 3), but such cases would be dealt with in the light of the specific circumstances.

6. With further reference to recommendation 3, it is assumed that when minutes are to be translated and distributed, this will be done in the working languages of the body concerned. In this connexion reference is made to the fact that several bodies - more often working groups and groups of experts - have not asked for summary records and have carried out their tasks either with no record at all or with "internal minutes" in one language prepared to assist the Rapporteur in the drafting of the report of the body, but not distributed. Further, a number of bodies which have dispensed with summary records have done so without any alternative form of record or, in two or three instances, on the understanding that minutes would be "kept" by the Secretariat and available for consultation. While the minutes system suggested by Inspector Garcia is more "economical" than full summary records,

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complete elimination of records, or resort to internal minutes, is much more desirable when the nature of the work of the body will permit this to be done. Thus, the Secretary-General would hope that the minute system proposed in the report would be adopted only after these other two alternatives have been carefully considered and found unacceptable.

7. Recommendation 4 deals with distribution of the minutes. In respect of the restriction of provisional summary records to "participants only", the practice has been to distribute these records to members of the body concerned and to accredited observers, whether or not they spoke during the meeting covered by the record. A similar practice would have to be followed for the minutes. To attempt to be as selective as is suggested in recommendation 4 would greatly complicate distribution procedures; it would also make it very difficult to establish the number of copies to be reproduced, which might vary from meeting to meeting. As regards the observation in paragraph 49 of the Inspector's report to the effect that the distribution of 560 copies of the "for participants only" version of the records of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs "seems much too liberal", it is noted that the figure is the total number of copies of the three language versions. Further, once it has been determined who are entitled to receive the records, the number of copies required to meet distribution needs is based on the needs of the recipients as stated by them. Comments on this arrangement were made in paragraphs 18 and 19 of the Secretary-General's observations (A/C.5/1247) on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on publications and documentation of the United Nations (A/7576). Lastly, it is noted that under recommendation 4, minutes would be distributed in initial form only, thus no question of delay in distribution of the final text - a point referred to in paragraph 52 of the report - would arise under the arrangements proposed.

8. As regards recommendation 6 relating to sound recordings, Inspector Garcia notes in his report (para.14) that sound recordings are made of the meetings of United Nations bodies in accordance with the arrangements suggested by the Secretary-General in a report (A/C.5/1187) to the General Assembly at its twenty-third session, and approved by the Fifth Committee at its 1271st meeting held on 2 December 1968. Interested parties can listen

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to the sound recordings and buy copies of them if they wish; but the facilities for listening to the recordings are not, for reasons of lack of space, manpower and equipment, really convenient. Technical studies are being undertaken to determine the cost of improving the facilities.

9. In recommendation 7, the Inspector indicates that a body which has adopted the "minutes" system might reserve the right to use summary records in certain circumstances, and in recommendations 8 (a) and (b) suggests the conditions under which this option should be exercised. Since organs are not in session at the time provisional agenda are issued, the specific suggestion that the decisions to have summary records for certain discussions should be taken at that time does not seem practical. Nevertheless, the need for summary records for the discussion of particular items should be foreseen well in advance, and the scheduling of those items for discussion should provide that they be considered in sequence, rather than with breaks for items covered by minutes. This latter arrangement is of particular importance for the United Nations Office at Geneva, in view of the heavy reliance of that Office on temporary assistance.

10. As regards recommendation 9 (a) relating to the time lag in the distribution of minutes, the Secretary-General would propose the same schedule for minutes as applies for summary records; i.e., the minutes in the original version should be distributed within two working days following the meeting; the translated versions within three working days following the meeting.

11. The Secretary-General would like to emphasize the point made by Inspector Garcia in recommendation 5 (a) to the effect that minutes are not official records. This has a bearing on the internal arrangements for writing minutes which, while an internal matter for the Secretariat, may be of interest to the Advisory Committee for Administrative and Budgetary Questions. Since minutes are not official records, their drafting is not a basic responsibility of the Office of Conference Services. Rather, the substantive secretariat, which is familiar with the subject matter, should establish the text of the minutes in the original language. It has been accepted that minutes would be drafted by translator/précis-writers when substantive secretariats, particularly in the case of small units, are unable

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to do so; however, in such cases, the draft minutes will be given to the substantive secretariat which will take the responsibility for the text. This perhaps represents a slight deviation from recommendation 8 (c) of the Inspector, but would not constitute "circulation" of the minutes in draft form.

12. Lastly, the Secretary-General would also draw attention to the fact that, as indicated in paragraph 41 of the report, drafting minutes is a "delicate task requiring special skill". If many bodies decided to replace records by minutes, and if, despite the position stated in paragraph 10 above, it was necessary to provide a substantial portion of the coverage from the central conference servicing offices, difficulties would arise. The number of translator/précis-writers who are adept at minute-writing is limited, and it might be no easy task to adapt the others to this kind of work, certainly not within a short space of time.
