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REPORTS OF THE JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

The use of minutes instead of summary records

Addendum

OBSERVATIONS OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON
ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY QUESTIONS

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report by Mr. L. Garcia del Solar, a member of the Joint Inspection Unit, on the use of minutes instead of summary records (E/4802) and the Secretary-General's observations thereon (E/4802 and Add.1). The Committee recalled that the question of limiting the volume of summary records had been discussed very extensively by the General Assembly at its twenty-third and twenty-fourth sessions.
2. Mr. Garcia del Solar analyses the experience of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs at its twenty-third session to show the savings accruing from the use of minutes instead of summary records. However, as the Secretary-General indicates in his observations, "while the minutes system suggested by Inspector Garcia is more 'economical' than full summary records, 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" (E/4802/Add.1, para. 6). 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. The Advisory Committee endorses the Secretary-General's conclusion.
3. Further progress in reducing the volume of the records of meetings will be achieved if it is realized that different bodies now call for records for

different purposes. At one end of the scale are the bodies, such as the main committees of the General Assembly, which require a permanent record of their proceedings: this calls for the provision of full summary records, in both provisional and final form, translated into all the working languages of the body concerned. At the other extreme are bodies, such as expert groups, which need no more than internal notes to help the Rapporteur or Secretary to draft the body's report; in such cases the provision of minutes, let alone of summary records, would be wasteful; and this fact is, as often as not, realized by the bodies concerned.

4. Most bodies now in receipt of summary records do not fall into either of the above categories, and in their case economies can be achieved by identifying the reason why they have requested records. For example, the smaller delegations which cannot attend on a continuing basis the meetings of all the bodies of which their countries are members rely on records to keep abreast of developments much more than do the larger delegations. But the usefulness of records to the smaller delegations for the above purpose depends on the speed with which such records are issued, and on whether they can obtain the same information more quickly from the Office of Public Information press releases. Hence, a body which uses records primarily to keep the smaller delegations fully informed can dispense with them if adequate press releases are in existence, and can rely on internal notes to help the Rapporteur in his task. In this connexion it might be noted that resort to sound recordings, while unquestionably useful for settling points on which questions might arise, is of limited value to the smaller delegations because of the time consuming nature of the operation.

5. Other bodies now in receipt of records need them for ready reference, but not as a permanent record: in such cases the issuance of records in a provisional form, together with corrigenda (should major inaccuracies occur) would suffice, and the records need not be issued in final form.

6. Even in the case of bodies with a recognized need for summary record coverage, considerable savings are possible through the elimination of material of ephemeral interest. In paragraph 10 (c) of its resolution 2538 (XXIV) the General Assembly identified several instances of such material. In the same spirit, the record of a meeting at which the body concerned considered and approved a draft report can more often than not consist of one sentence stating that the report was approved

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subject to drafting changes. The Secretary-General should be invited to consider other possible areas in which the volume of records can be reduced in the above manner.

7. In his report Mr. Garcia del Solar discusses also the problems arising from a system of mixed records - part minutes, part summary records, and describes the drawbacks involved (E/4802, paras. 37-39). As the Secretary-General states in his observations "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" (E/4802/Add.1, para. 9).

8. The Advisory Committee attaches particular importance to the Inspector's third recommendation concerning the form of minutes, and in particular to his view that the minutes should wherever possible be couched in impersonal terms. The Committee recognizes the force of the Secretary-General's assertion that the drafting of minutes in this way calls for different aptitudes which may place a temporary strain on the Secretariat. The Committee trusts, however, that this consideration will not deter United Nations organs from taking a decision in principle, where appropriate, to replace summary records by minutes even though it may not be possible to implement the decision immediately.

9. Mr. Garcia del Solar's comments and conclusions together with his analysis of the economies accruing from the use of minutes rather than summary records make a useful contribution to the study of the over-all problem of reducing the volume of United Nations documentation. His recommendations should be considered in conjunction with General Assembly resolution 2538 (XXIV) which was adopted after he had prepared his report.
