



THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

23 May 2017

Excellency,

I have the honour to transmit herewith a letter dated 23 May 2017 from the Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly (AHWG), H.E. Mr. Vladimir Drobnyak, Permanent Representative of Croatia and H.E. Ms. Lana Zaki Nusseibeh, Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates, enclosing a summary of the informal meeting held on 15 May 2017 as a continuation of the interactive dialogue between permanent missions and the Secretariat.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Thomson', enclosed in a simple rectangular box.

Peter Thomson

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York



THE PERMANENT MISSION  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS



PERMANENT MISSION OF  
THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS  
NEW YORK

23 May 2017

Excellency,

In our capacity as Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly (AHWG), we have the pleasure of enclosing a summary of the informal meeting held on 15 May 2017 as a continuation of the interactive dialogue between permanent missions and the Secretariat. The summary was prepared in response to a request made by several member states at the meeting.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Vladimir Drobnyak  
Ambassador and Permanent Representative  
of Croatia

Lana Zaki Nusseibeh  
Ambassador and Permanent Representative  
of the United Arab Emirates

To: All Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations, New York

## OVERVIEW

### INFORMAL MEETING OF THE AD HOC WORKING GROUP ON THE REVITALIZATION OF THE WORK OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY – CONTINUATION OF THE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE BETWEEN PERMANENT MISSIONS AND THE SECRETARIAT

*15 MAY 2017*

1. On 15 May 2017, the Co-Chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly (AHWG) convened an informal (closed) meeting for a **continuation of the interactive dialogue between Permanent Missions and the Secretariat** as mandated by paragraph 10 of resolution 70/305. A total of **10 delegations** intervened (including on behalf of two groups of Member States). At the outset, the Co-Chairs stated that the informal meeting represented a **valuable opportunity** to explore the issues at hand and encouraged Member States to use the opportunity to pose their questions and comments and make use of the presence of senior Secretariat officials. The Co-Chairs also commended the Secretariat for its efforts in improving its working methods even though there was **still room for improvement**. Future steps in that direction should be guided by the principles of **simplification, decentralization, and flexibility**. Subsequent speakers welcomed the opportunity for interaction with the Secretariat. At the same time, one group of States **questioned the requirement for the separate meeting** and expressed the view that it could equally have taken place as part of the forthcoming negotiations on the draft resolution.

2. In terms of specific queries posed, one group of States expressed deep concern at what it perceived as “unilateral measures” by the Secretariat on the **contents of the Journal of the United Nations (“UN Journal”)**, specifically the decision “not to publish in the UN Journal announcements on **exhibitions organized by Member States**” and not to accept for publication any announcements of **non-official events held by Member States after 6 p.m.** As a solution, that group of Member States proposed “compulsory consultations with Member States on such issues within the AHWG.”

3. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM) informed the Working Group that the length of the Journal had increased over the past ten years **from an average of 20 pages to 29 pages** and that, during peak periods, an issue could have as many as **50 pages**; including more information could make it more difficult for readers to find the information they were seeking. In an effort to ensure its timely issuance, **since 2009**, the Journal therefore no longer announced exhibitions and events held **after regular working hours**. For events held during regular working hours, only those related to an international day observed by the United Nations or related to a specific General Assembly resolution were included and the Secretariat had endeavoured **to follow that practice consistently**, with occasional exceptions for events connected to items on the agenda or in relation to International Days observed by the United Nations. In those cases, the practice for publishing such announcements was to include them in the Journal the day before and to remove them the day after. Exhibitions held outside regular working hours were not the only events that were not announced. Other examples included: **side events; bilateral meetings; concerts; and film screenings**. If all such requests were accommodated, the Journal might become too bulky and publishing it would involve significant resource implications.

4. That same group of States expressed the desire for an **improvement in the interaction with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG)**, in particular as regards issues where “the personal involvement of the Secretary-General or senior management” was sought by Member States, and proposed the creation of a **special focal point within the EOSG** for that purpose. Those States looked forward to discussing the issue during the informal brainstorming session with Member States to be convened by the Internal Review Team on Management Reform.

5. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM informed the Working Group that, having consulted with the EOSG, the entry point for Member States to the EOSG was generally, the **Chef de Cabinet**. Political issues requiring the Secretary-General's attention, and requests for appointments, should be raised with the Chef de Cabinet, while development issues should be raised with the **Deputy Secretary-General**. The Director of the Facilities and Commercial Services Division in the Department of Management (DM) also announced the creation in DM of a **focal point that could be contacted by Member States** in case of any queries concerning the relationship between Permanent Missions and the Secretariat.

6. The same group of States, noting that the UN website often contained outdated or incorrect information, insisted that the **Protocol lists should be updated at least once a month**.

7. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM, recalled her briefing to the Working Group on 15 March 2017 in which she had reported that an updated version of the Protocol Website had been launched in August 2016 and that DGACM had now **created an online version** of the Blue Book that would be automatically updated to reflect amendments **as soon as Protocol had been advised by Member States to make changes**. The Secretariat, however, relied on **timely and complete** information from Permanent Missions since no officials could be added or deleted until a formal notification had been received. To that end, e-mails had been sent to working level focal points in all Missions **requesting the verification of data to be included in the new version of the Blue-Book**. Once that information was verified, the Secretariat would be ready **to launch the first edition of the e-Blue Book**. Subsequently, in order to continue “Greening the Blue”, hard copies would be made available once per year.

8. The same group of States sought clarification from the Secretariat on the proposal of issuing a **compendium of best practices of past Presidents of the General Assembly (PGAs)**, underlining the importance of ensuring **smooth transitions between presidencies**. The group also sought clarification on past requests by the General Assembly **to review the budget allocation of the Office of the PGA (OPGA)**.

9. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM recalled, as stated at the Working Group's 28 April, that DGACM actively supported the OPGA on a daily basis **throughout the year** and that the General Assembly and ECOSOC Affairs Division served as the repository of institutional memory and as the backstopping office which was available to both the sitting and the incoming Presidents. To facilitate the **transition between sessions**,

DGACM had assumed the lead role within the Secretariat in developing and organizing an **induction programme** commencing with the 71<sup>st</sup> session. DGACM looked forward to continuing that practice. Furthermore, by resolution 70/305, the Assembly had requested the President, assisted by DGACM, to develop a **standardized format for the written handover summary of best practices and lessons learned** to be transmitted to his or her successor. As a result, DGACM actively supported the **preparation of the handover report** by the President of the 70<sup>th</sup> session, which was subsequently shared with all Member States. In his transmittal letter, the President of the 71<sup>st</sup> session described the report as a **“significant contribution to the institutional memory”** of the OPGA which **“supports a smooth transition between General Assembly sessions.”** In line with the relevant mandate in resolution 70/305, and DGACM’s standing goal to support the PGA’s work, the Secretariat looked forward **to continuing to provide its assistance** in preparing this year’s handover report. As to **paragraph 32 of resolution 67/297**, by which the Assembly requested the Secretariat, in coordination with the OPGA to **“explore the possibility of issuing a compendium of best practices of past Presidents”**, the Under-Secretary-General recalled that, in response to that mandate, during the 68<sup>th</sup> session, the Secretariat had informed the Working Group that it had preliminarily explored the matter and, as a result, had sought further clarification from the AHWG on the **type, nature and objective of the requested compendium**, also bearing in mind the political aspects of the Secretariat issuing best practices of past Presidents. As a consequence of the negotiations on the draft resolution during that session, **that formulation had not been used in subsequent resolutions** of the Assembly on the revitalization of its work.

10. Concerning the review of the **budget allocation for the OPGA**, the Under-Secretary-General recalled that in resolution 70/305 the Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to submit, in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2018-2019, **proposals to review the budget allocation** of the Office of the President of the General Assembly in accordance with existing procedures and bearing in mind the recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General's Task Force (A/70/783). That included the recommendation contained in paragraph 68, sub-paragraphs (k) and (n), which respectively stated that the Secretary-General should consider proposing the establishment of **an additional P-5 post in the Office**, which could be filled for a duration of up to five years to manage the continuity and transfer of knowledge between Presidents and sessions; and should propose that programme budget resources be allocated for **handover and overlap costs**, in order to maximize the use of the transition period for incoming Presidents. To that end, the proposed budget for OPGA for the biennium 2018-2019 **to be considered by the Fifth Committee during the main part of the 72<sup>nd</sup> session**, reflected an increase of \$386,500.

11. The same group of States sought clarification on the **criteria used by the Secretariat concerning the webcasting of meetings** and pointed out that **“most of the archived videos of meetings where interpretation was provided were not available in the six UN languages but only in English, taking into account that such action has no financial implications”**. The group furthermore expressed deep concern regarding the alleged **discrepancy between press releases “in the six official languages”**.

12. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM informed the Working Group that **all formal plenary meetings** were webcast as a matter of standard operating procedure and recalled General Assembly resolution 66/246 which had decided to **approve the live webcasting**, and subsequent web storage, of all **formal meetings of its six Main Committees**, and in that regard had approved \$835,500 to cover all related costs. For all other meetings, and **in the absence of specific guidance by the mandating resolution**, the question of whether a meeting would be webcast lay with the **presiding officer(s) and ultimately was subject to the decision of the membership**. For example, High-level Thematic Debates convened by the PGA were routinely webcast at the request of the Office of the President. That same practice had evolved in recent years to include many of the informal plenary meetings convened by the President. On the other hand, informal consultations and related processes were considered as meetings that were not webcast **unless otherwise requested**. The informal consultations on the **outcome document of the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda** constituted a notable departure from that practice, even though the continuation of that innovation during the 70<sup>th</sup> session was ultimately challenged by some of the membership. Other than formal plenary meetings, Member States would be well advised to **specify in the mandating resolution** of meetings and/or processes **whether they wished to have their intergovernmental proceedings webcast**. Such a decision might entail budgetary implications.

13. The Acting Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Public Information added that **webcasting and archiving did in fact require resources** which included language staff to edit videos and enter metadata for each video in the respective language and publishing and maintaining the language videos on the website as well as additional costs for bandwidth and storage of videos in six languages. As to press releases, he clarified that those were **produced in English and French only** and that each version was prepared **simultaneously by two different authors**; hence, it was **impossible to create identical versions**. However, should Member States spot a technical error, that could be brought to the attention of the Secretariat so that it could be amended.

14. The same group of States expressed the view that briefings on the **gender balance and regional origin** of staff should be maintained and established as an annual practice “to follow-up the improvements made in the composition of the Secretariat.”

15. In response, the Director of the Facilities and Commercial Services Division in DM informed the Working Group that DM was **ready to provide such briefings on an annual basis**, as requested.

16. The same group of States requested that necessary measures be taken to protect the image of the General Assembly in light of “the current practice of **distributing election materials as well as gifts in the General Assembly Hall** on the day of the election”; and “to print the names of all candidates on **ballot papers** with provision of space for writing in other names and display a list of candidates on electronic screens to serve as reminders”. That group further proposed that the Secretariat conduct an **analysis of the current electoral practices, identify gaps and problems and explore other solutions** including

technologically advanced electronic voting systems and “recommend specific suggestions for improvements”.

17. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM assured the Working Group that the Secretariat did **not facilitate the distribution of election material**, which was done by delegations on their own behalf. On the contrary, the Secretaries of meetings strictly controlled **which material was distributed** in the meeting rooms. What was occurring on election days however was beyond their control. Member States **may wish to address the matter through the resolution** that the AHWG was expected to recommend to the General Assembly during the 71s session. Concerning the elections, DGACM had taken note of previous interventions on that point during the current session and had proactively begun to examine **alternative ways of preparing elections** with a view to improving their conduct. In connection with the format of ballot papers, the Under-Secretary-General drew attention to **rule 92 of the Assembly’s rules of procedure** which stipulated that there should be no nominations. As a result, any change to the balloting papers **might be contingent on a prior amendment of that rule**. The Secretariat was happy to continue to assist the Working Group examine the issue further.

18. The same group of States sought clarification from the Secretariat for “the legal basis concerning the **organization of the meetings of the AHWG in an informal ways**” and called upon the Co-Chairs to introduce “some formal meetings during the negotiation process of the draft resolution” which would allow “the participation of all” and “give more solemnity to the work of the AHWG”.

19. In response, the Co-Chair clarified that **all meetings of the AHWG were open to all Member States** irrespective of their format. The Under-Secretary-General of DGACM referred to the mandate contained in resolution 70/305, which decided “to establish, at its seventy-first session, an ad hoc working group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly, **open to all Member States**:

(a) To identify further ways to enhance the role, authority, effectiveness and efficiency of the Assembly, inter alia, by building on the progress achieved in past sessions as well as on previous resolutions, including evaluating the status of their implementation;

(b) To submit a report thereon to the Assembly at its seventy-first session;”

In 2006, this mandate had been operationalized as an **informal process** whereby meetings were conducted by the Co-Chairs appointed by the President of the General Assembly in the **format of closed informal consultations**. That practice had been continued in subsequent years and had resulted in the working methods that are still observed today. It was up to the AHWG itself **to consider further revising its working methods and to make changes as needed**.

20. A number of delegations touched upon specific proposals that would **tangibly facilitate the work of Permanent Missions**, such as the creation of a “**One-Stop-Shop**”; the design of a “**UN App**”; the establishment of a **dedicated website that would list all side**

events taking place on any given day; more regular **briefings by the Secretariat on logistical and administrative matters preceding high-level meetings**; assisting Permanent Missions to build the capacity **to adapt to the use of modern technologies** (e.g. working in a paperless environment, e-mail and SMS filing).

21. In response, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM recalled her briefing of 15 March 2017 in which she had informed the AHWG of the establishment within DGACM of a **one-stop-shop project team within the department** which had already undertaken an analysis of the business requirements and which would be presented to Member States in the summer. The objective was to provide a **single entry point for requesting meeting services**, with a self-service interface that would **enhance coordination among all service providers at UNHQ**. In the same vein, and with a view to unifying available e-services to make them more convenient for delegations, DGACM had developed the **e-deleGATE portal** which was already available for use by Member States and whose objective was to provide all necessary information through one single platform.

22. Several speakers expressed their dissatisfaction with the current state of **catering and related services**, noting especially the **extraordinarily high costs charged** and the **lack of transparency** regarding the composition of these costs.

23. In response, the Director of the Facilities and Commercial Services Division in DM briefed the Working Group on the **history of procuring service providers at UNHQ**, citing a lack of interest as epitomized by the **low number of bidders**. That had made it more difficult for the Secretariat to provide quality-control. Additional factors impacting the cost charged for catering services included **security, cleaning and unionized labour**.

24. As to the **UN Journal**, one delegation wondered whether it could be produced in such a way that it could be **updated in real time** throughout the day. One group of Member States noted the need to carefully consider the innovative proposals provided by the Secretariat from the **perspective of financial implications**, calling for efficiency and citing automatic translation as a tool to be considered by the Secretariat. Some speakers also reiterated the importance they attached to **multilingualism**, both in connection with the UN Journal but also more generally.

25. In response, while also addressing a question raised on **whether the innovative proposals provided by the Secretariat corresponded to the mandate in resolution 70/305**, the Under-Secretary-General of DGACM, clarified that, based on careful examination, the Secretariat had concluded that maintaining the current format and volume of the Journal, while translating it into all six languages was not feasible without significant additional resource requirements. However, the Secretariat did not wish to exclude the possibility of the AHWG giving further consideration to that option. The AHWG was free to consider any option it wished and DGACM was committed to supporting Member States' decision-making process in that regard.



26. In answer to a query for a **written version of guidelines on access to UNHQ**, including for guests of Permanent Missions, the Director in the Department for Safety and Security (DSS) referred to the Organizational directives contained in **document ST/AI/387** which established the need for **ensuring the safety and security of all concerned**. DSS based its access control protocols on that directive, and upon a **threat and risk assessment**, in determining best practice for safety and security as they pertained to access control procedures. There were **general areas in which unescorted visitors were allowed**, and restricted areas to which official visitors, or guests of card holders who were authorized to sign in guests, could have access. Each authorised UN pass holder, in agreement with DM, **may sign in, and remain with, up to five guests**. In the interests of safety and appropriate accountability, all guests needed **to remain under the general control of the authorized card holder who had signed them in**. All guests must access the premises through the 46<sup>th</sup> Street Visitor Screening Building, and meet the delegate at the Information Desk in the GA Lobby, where the delegate would then sign them in.

27. In concluding remarks, the Co-Chairs assured the Working Group that they had taken careful note of all the points raised which would assist them in **finalizing the zero draft resolution** which would be circulated to the membership in the coming days, to be followed by its **presentation on Friday, 26 May**. Subsequently, the **first round of informal informals** on the text would take place on Thursday, 1 June.

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