

***PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

Fifth Committee

Agenda item 141: Pattern of conferences

12 November 2021

**Statement by Mr. Movses Abelian  
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management**

Distinguished Chair,  
Distinguished Committee members,

1. I have the honour to present the Secretary-General's report on the pattern of conferences (A/76/80). It describes the most important actions in 2020 by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM) aimed at implementation of various mandates of the Member States.
2. The biggest challenge last year was the need to continue to implement our mandates in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Secretary-General's report states, this response was rapid and effective. Leveraging our business continuity practices and the gProjects developed over the years, we made a seamless transition to working remotely here after the closure of the UN Headquarters compound and in our duty stations in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi when their buildings also closed. In a matter of a few months, meetings management teams across the duty stations started programming and planning virtual and hybrid (part virtual, part in-person) meetings with remote simultaneous interpretation.
3. The pandemic-related restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings caused two-thirds of meetings to be cancelled or postponed – a 67 per cent year-on-year reduction in the number of meetings held across the four duty stations. The global number of meetings held fell from 36,892 in 2019 to 12,266 in 2020 with the overall utilization rate in 2020 at 80 per cent, compared to 84 per cent in 2019.
4. Although the number of meetings serviced was smaller than in previous years, the complexity of those that were held was considerably greater, requiring far more efforts from the Secretariat's meetings management and interpretation teams, as well as colleagues in the Office of Information and Communications Technology (OICT), which provides the technical support for hybrid and virtual meetings.

Mr. Chair,  
Distinguished delegates,

5. The fact that all calendar bodies were able to continue their work is testimony to the resilience, flexibility and diligence of DGACM staff. For example, the sudden imposition of physical distancing measures resulted in intensive work to facilitate remote participation, including remote simultaneous interpretation otherwise known as RSI. Thanks to the prompt and concerted efforts of the interpretation services, OICT, and audio-visual and webcast teams at all four duty stations, three RSI platforms were identified, tested and procured. From June 2020 onward, interpretation was being provided to on-site, virtual and hybrid meetings at the four duty stations. Globally, 1,213 meetings were serviced with RSI during 2020.

6. In addition to managing an extraordinarily complex situation and rapidly evolving new meeting modalities, the Department developed several innovations in meeting services in 2020. A dedicated section entitled eStatements was created in the digital version of the *Journal of the United Nations* to facilitate access to statements delivered by delegations at the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly, replacing the previously separate PaperSmart system.

7. Regarding documentation, despite the challenges faced in 2020, compliance with document submission, processing and issuance deadlines was at 90 per cent, with over 216 million words processed. Compliance with processing mandates decreased from 99 per cent in 2019 to 93 per cent in 2020, primarily due to the liquidity crisis, which prevented translation services from filling vacancies and contracting the temporary assistance usually employed each year. In addition, New York processed over a million and a half words related to COVID-19 on a priority basis, which took away resources from the production of mandated documentation.

8. The productivity of the translation services has been trending upward for several years thanks, among other factors, to the deployment of the gText suite. Productivity increased again in 2020, in part due to the willingness of staff to put in extraordinary hours during the pandemic in support of the work of the United Nations at this critical time. Workload sharing became a critical resource for workload and capacity management in 2020, because hiring limitations generated staffing imbalances across the duty stations.

9. The eLUNa computer-assisted translation tool developed by the Department to support documentation processing played a key role in allowing translators to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The technology behind eLUNa was applied to

a new module, the eLUNa converter, in 2020 that automatically drafts content in the six official languages and compiles individually issued resolutions in XML format. The resolutions in XML format are made available to the public through a new machine-readability page on the DGACM website, together with interactive visualizations that allow users to filter data by agenda item, country, subject, Committee and Sustainable Development Goal.

Mr. Chair,  
Distinguished delegates,

10. Regarding staffing, the combined effects of the pandemic and the hiring freeze created considerable disparities in the availability of staff in the language services throughout 2020. The most notable increase in vacancy rates, compared with 2019, was in the Documentation Division in New York. However, with the easing of the liquidity situation, actions have been taken in 2021 to rapidly restore the balance. The Department is planning recruitments well in advance of retirements to accelerate the recruitment process and to reduce vacancy rates and minimize staffing gaps at all duty stations and will continue to do so.

11. The Department has demonstrated that it has the tools and the agility to switch to fully remote operations during an emergency and ensure business continuity. The new working methods and formats supported in 2020 (virtual meetings, teleworking and remote simultaneous interpretation) bring with them clear benefits, such as the possibility of increasing accessibility to meetings, reducing the environmental footprint and ensuring high quality services to delegations in the context of physical limitations. Should some of these new working methods remain in place in the future, they will need to be reflected in the mandates of the Department.

12. Other significant new opportunities were also identified, such as the ability to ensure continuous learning through online training resources available to DGACM staff. In this connection, I am pleased to inform you that during the first weeks of telecommuting, DGACM launched a self-paced online training tool, the SPOT, which contains over 500 learning activities and resources.

13. Now, touching on the present and the future, our strategy for 2021 and beyond is driven by expectations of Member States and stakeholders.

- We will respond quickly and effectively to emerging challenges through early engagement with all stakeholders.

## DEPARTMENT FOR GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND CONFERENCE MANAGEMENT

- We will increase automation and virtualization of workflows through continuous enhancement of our gTools.
- We will further streamline our processes and take further steps to integrate our conference and events management platforms with Umoja and Inspira.
- We will accommodate changes in the programme of conferences through advance planning and workload sharing.
- We will continue to nurture the workforce of the future through strategic succession planning.
- And, last but not least, we will continue to integrate gender, language, and geographical perspectives.

14. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, distinguished members, for the continued support to DGACM. My colleagues and I look forward to our interaction and to facilitating your deliberations. I wish the Fifth Committee a successful and productive session. Thank you.

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