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Statement by Ambassador Joseph M. Torsella
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On the Briefing of the 2014-2015 Budget Proposal
Before the Fifth Committee
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Ms. Casar, for your update on the Secretary-General's proposed budget for the 2014-2015 biennium. We applaud the hard work and commitment by the Secretary-General to meet the GA's mandated planning level for 2014-2015. We are very pleased to hear that the UN will be able to fully achieve all mandates within this level and the lower budget planning level will not materially impact the Organization's ability to deliver on its core functions. We also note with appreciation the Organization's ongoing efforts to modernize its working methods and find better ways to implement the mandates entrusted to the Organization.

The GA's decision on the budget level was both clear and responsible. It was intended to encourage, as in fact it has done, the Secretariat to think creatively about how best to deliver mandates, while taking into account the financial constraints that most Member States are experiencing. That decision was one element of a broad set of resolutions we adopted last December. And while any of us could find some element we wish we hadn't agreed to in any resolution – especially six months after the fact – we should all remember the comprehensive nature of the compromise that brought us to consensus.

There's an important point to be made, Mr. Chairman, about what we call the "mandates" on the UN. A "mandate" is the result we expect, not the way that result is achieved. Our mandate in the second resumed session, for example, is not to attend four weeks of meetings, or make hundreds of interventions, or exchange dozens of proposals; it is to approve the peacekeeping budgets for the Organization. The former are means; the latter is the end.

So the idea that there is somehow a one-to-one ratio between money and mandates – that any increase in mandates requires an increase in budget – is utterly misleading. Public and private organizations everywhere know this truth, and by using different means find ways to achieve greater ends with fewer resources: "doing more with less," and sometimes dramatically more with dramatically less. By approving this modest reduction – and to be clear, the planning figure established by the GA amounts to just a 1.8% reduction for 2014-2015 from the Secretary-General's request – the General Assembly directed the UN to manage our resources just as businesses, governments and families around the world do, especially in these times: by streamlining operations to achieve the desired outcomes within the budget envelope.

We hope that the final 2014-2015 budget proposal will show these new ways of working as well as the tangible benefits from our heavy investment in business transformation initiatives, such as UMOJA. And we encourage a continued focus, in the budget presentation, on how the UN will accomplish the mandates contained in the 2014-2015 Strategic Framework within the designated \$5.393 billion envelope.

For our part, we in the Fifth Committee would do well to remember that word, “strategic.” We should set levels and direction, give broad guidance, and look at the key drivers of costs and results. We should not, however, micromanage the professionals we have hired to administer the UN, nor should we ourselves confuse outputs (whether 90 or 95 reports will be produced, for example) with outcomes (whether a given expense will produce a real-world result in improved security, better-protected rights or increased prosperity).

In this regard, the United States continues to be concerned that we have not yet seen a comprehensive analysis of the overall staffing structure of the Organization. As we know, staff costs comprise about 70% of the budget. If we do not look seriously, and soon, at the UN’s staffing table, we are setting the stage for unfortunate programmatic impacts in the very near future. This is one of the reasons the GA mandated a comprehensive staffing review last December. And while we are encouraged by the limited efforts underway to right-size the Organization, we do not believe they go nearly far enough. So we hope that the results of this review will be presented as part of the 2014-2015 budget proposal as requested by the General Assembly.

We are also concerned that the 2014-2015 budget proposal may not be the final proposal. Additional PBIs will likely come to the Fifth Committee later this year, and additional needs may arise during the 2014-15 biennium due to urgent requirements. In order to accommodate these exigencies, we need to manage the budget request for 2014-2015 to create room for such unforeseen requirements.

We also understand that the number does not include anticipated re-costing for the 2014-2015 period, which could take the overall budget much higher. This is deeply troubling and we urge the Secretary-General to re-examine his proposal to ensure that the true 2014-2015 budget request is fully inclusive and in line with the GA-mandated \$5.393 billion budget outline level. Quite simply, a budget level is a ceiling, not a floor.

Lastly, in looking ahead not just to the 2014-2015 budget but to the Organization’s budgeting and planning more generally, we need to reengage in pursuing real and significant budget reforms. The task has been delayed for far too long, and it’s time to end the cycle of ongoing changes to every budget.

Mr. Chairman, in closing let me reiterate our appreciation for the efforts Ms. Casar and her team have made to build a budget proposal for 2014-2015 that responds to with the GA’s direction from five months ago. We stand ready to work with all colleagues to ensure the UN’s sustainability through a thoughtful and responsible budget. Thank you.