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Agenda Item 142 – JIU/REP/2017/3: A/72/629

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

I have the honour to introduce the Report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled “Review of air travel policies in the United Nations system: achieving efficiency gains and cost savings and enhancing harmonization” (JIU/REP/2017/03), contained in document A/72/629.

Given that travel expenses are one of the largest budget components of the United Nations system organizations after staff costs, the review was undertaken following calls from the General Assembly to improve, as a matter of urgency, the management of air travel and the effective and efficient utilization of air travel resources.

The review’s main objective was to assess relevant air travel policies, rules and practices and their implementation across United Nations system organizations with the aim of:

- a) Enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of air travel management;
- b) Increasing accountability and transparency of managers who approve travel, taking into account travellers’ productivity, safety and security;
- c) Promoting and increasing coordination and cooperation among organizations; and
- d) Identifying good practices and lessons learned to promote relevant system-wide harmonization.

The review primarily addresses eight aspects of air travel in 26 JIU participating organizations, including the United Nations Secretariat, funds and programmes, the specialized agencies and IAEA. It contains nine recommendations, four of which are specifically addressed to the General Assembly and another two to the legislative bodies of the UN system organizations. With your kind indulgence, I outline below the key findings and recommendations pertaining to eight key areas of this review.

Between 2012 and 2015, twenty-four UN system organizations spent approximately US \$4 billion on airline tickets, daily subsistence allowances, lump-sum, terminal expenses and shipment costs. This figure does not reflect the full picture as some organizations submitted incomplete data or none at all. Financial data was only available back to 2012 as



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prior to that, adequate systems for travel management such as enterprise resource planning systems were not in place in some organizations.

The standards of accommodation for air travel vary greatly among United Nations system organizations. First class travel is provided for authorized travel by high-ranking officials in seven organizations including the UN Secretariat and for certain non-staff categories. This class of travel costs an average of 33 per cent more per trip compared to business class travel. With major improvements in the comfort offered by business class travel, the report recommends that legislative bodies abolish first class travel for all categories of staff and non-staff by January 2019.

To further staff safety and productivity and eliminate unnecessary stopovers that lead to negligible cost savings, the reports also calls upon legislative bodies to request their executive heads to establish by 2019 a consistent percentage cost threshold below which the most direct route may be selected in lieu of the most economic route, taking into account the time thresholds established in each organization's travel policy for the selection of the most economic routes.

Providing for exceptions to the standards of accommodation is not a common practice across the United Nations system. However, between 2006 and 2016, the UN Secretariat and its affiliated entities granted 3147 exceptions, amounting to a total additional cost of US \$8.6 million. Exceptions for prominent persons accounted for half of all additional costs, increasing from US \$70,000 to US \$2.62 million. To address this, the General Assembly should clearly establish the standards of accommodation applicable for prominent individuals.

The review looked closely at the measures for improving policies and practices and strengthening accountability in air travel management and found that while 26 organizations have undertaken reforms and revisions of their travel policies in recent years, they are not necessarily consolidated, streamlined and well communicated. In addition, the multitude of resolutions and decisions governing standards of accommodation for air travel are old, with some dating back to the early 1980s, and need to be updated.

To address this issue, the report recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to review the resolutions and decisions and submit proposals by 2019 for updating and consolidating the policies, taking into consideration developments in information systems and technology, the air travel industry, as well as good practices in other United Nations system organizations. The report also calls for taking into account new opportunities and challenges emerging in the air travel industry, and limit unnecessary travel through introducing limits on the number of days per calendar year that staff members can travel on official business.

Another key aspect of efficiency and effectiveness is modernizing air travel tools and strengthening collaboration with services providers. While travel data is now more widely available than ever, thanks in part to Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, some organizations do not yet have access to such technology and therefore continue to use antiquated Information Technology systems. To enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of air travel management and improve transparency and accountability, Executive Heads are



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called upon to continue to streamlining their ERP systems to take advantage of more integrated management systems.

With regard to planning, monitoring and budget oversight in air travel management, the review found that despite significant savings for advance air ticket purchases, only 15 organizations have purchase deadlines in place. Even for submitting travel requests, the deadline varies considerably from 7 to 30 days across the 21 organizations that reported. The report calls for effective measures to enforce and monitor compliance with advance purchase policies and incorporate advance planning rules into standard travel policies. Member States are also called upon to respect deadlines for conveying information on their delegates whose travel is funded by the organizations.

The report recommends measures to increase efficiency gains and cost savings including alternatives to travel, such as using videoconferencing and e-meeting facilities, that can significantly reduce the need for travel and its associated costs. The review also calls for limiting the number of staff travelling to participate in official meetings and enforcing organizational representation in such meetings by staff based in the same duty station or region as the meeting venue. Other useful measures include advancing the option for self-ticketing, allowing for the purchase of non-refundable tickets, utilizing off-shore travel agents and low-cost airlines and extending the use of the lump-sum scheme to all categories of entitlement travel, where appropriate. The use of Online Booking Tools and its integration with existing information systems is also encouraged.

On the issue of system-wide harmonization, the review contains three recommendations addressed to the General Assembly. System-wide harmonization in air travel management is presently constrained by the diversity and variation in mandates, rules, policies, practices, operating procedures, business models, funding structures and the unnecessary or over-customization of the travel module of the ERP systems. However, the review found that some policies and practices could be adapted and replicated system-wide. In this regard, the report recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary General, in his capacity as the CEB Chair, to review measures to promote the harmonization of standards of accommodation for air travel applied system-wide, as well as the expenses related to air travel, and report on the results to the General Assembly.

The report further recommends that the General Assembly address the issue of variances in home-leave entitlements, through requesting the International Civil Service Commission to undertake a system-wide review of lump-sum entitlements for statutory travel, in order to establish by 2019, a common methodology and percentage for calculation. Steps should also be taken to further harmonization in the payment process for Daily Subsistence Allowance, eliminate stopovers and ensure the provision of adequate rest periods during mission travel.

Finally, the General Assembly is also called upon to address the existing gap in formal practice sharing and coordination on air travel management, by requesting the Secretary-General, as the CEB Chair, to submit a proposal on the feasibility of establishing a high-level formal advisory committee on travel matters, for the consideration of the General Assembly during the first part of its resumed 73rd session.



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Mr. Chairman,

The JIU welcomes the comments made by the Secretary-General and the CEB in report A/72/629 Add.1 and, in particular, the view that the JIU report is clear, comprehensive and constructive with conclusions that are both practical and feasible.

In concluding, I would like to emphasize the need for the General Assembly to play its part in advancing efficiencies in air travel management, by ensuring that timely action is taken on the recommendations including those addressed to the Assembly.

I thank you for your kind attention, and welcome any comments or questions that you may have.