

PERMANENT MISSION OF FINLAND
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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8 September 2011

Excellency,

I have the honour to forward herewith the summary of a retreat on strengthening the General Assembly, which brought together a group of Permanent Representatives on 16 and 17 June 2011 in Tarrytown, New York (see annex). The meeting was organized by the Permanent Mission of Finland in close cooperation with the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

The retreat was attended by the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss, as well as the President of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim, and the President-elect of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser.

Participants in the seminar discussed the role and status of the General Assembly, and efforts at the revitalization of its work and working methods, with the objective of defining elements towards a stronger Assembly.

Specifically, participants considered tangible measures that could be taken towards this objective and agreed that these could be useful contributions to the ongoing discussions on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly.

Furthermore, the retreat provided an opportunity to allow incoming General Committee members to be familiarized with the working methods of the General Assembly.

The attached report has been prepared under Chatham House rules.

I would be grateful if the present letter and report could be circulated as a document of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly under agenda item 118.

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



Jarmo Viinanen
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Finland
to the United Nations

H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss
President of the General Assembly
United Nations

**SUMMARY ON THE RETREAT
“TOWARDS A STRONGER GENERAL ASSEMBLY”,
16-17 June 2011, Tarrytown, N.Y.**

**Letter from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations
addressed to the President of the General Assembly**

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Annex to the letter dated 8 September 2011 from the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the General Assembly

Towards a stronger General Assembly

**High-level retreat, 16-17 June 2011
Tarrytown, New York**

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

The Permanent Mission of Finland organized a retreat entitled “Towards a Stronger General Assembly”, from 16-17 June 2011, at Tarrytown, NY, with the aim of contributing to the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly. The retreat, which brought together incoming members of the General Committee at the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly with the Presidents of the sixty-fifth and sixty-second session, the President-elect of the sixty-sixth session, a Co-Chair of the Ad hoc Working Group on the revitalization of the General Assembly at the sixty-fifth session, the Under-Secretary-General of Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and other senior Secretariat officials, consisted of a key note dinner address, followed by Q&A, on 16 June, and presentations followed by an interactive exchange of views on the working methods of the General Assembly in the morning of 17 June.

Thursday, 16 June

Key note address

A key note address was delivered by the President of the General Assembly of the sixty-second session, H. E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim, at a dinner held in the evening of 16 June.

In his thought-provoking address, President Kerim laid out a vision for the reform of the United Nations based on two basic preconditions, namely reaching agreement among the entire membership on the notion and scope of the reform process and, secondly, organizing a review conference on the Charter of the United Nations in accordance with its Article 109. Noting that the United Nations has proven indispensable as a tool of humanity during its sixty-six years of its existence, President Kerim stressed the need for a profound discussion of the role of the Organization’s principal organs, the balance among them and their composition. The General Assembly being the only universal body, and the Security Council being the most powerful one, a more substantive interaction and cooperation was required between them, which could be provided, inter alia, through regular discussions between the President of the Security Council with the General Assembly on issues which have been agreed in prior consultations between the President of the General Assembly and the respective President of the Security Council.

With regard to the General Assembly, President Kerim formulated ten points. First, he strongly argued against the use of the term ‘revitalization’ which he suggested sounded cynical, and instead proposed using ‘reform’ as a more accurate and reflective description of what was needed. Secondly, the General Assembly needed to become better in practicing and communicating its functions and powers as stipulated in the Charter. Third, the traditional division of the Assembly’s work into a main and resumed part of the session had ceased to reflect reality, and the Assembly should therefore be meeting throughout the year instead. Fourth, the agenda should be divided in two parts, one dealing with matters of global relevance, and the other with issues related to the work by the subsidiary organs. Fifth, it should be contemplated to integrate the work of the Main Committees directly into that of the plenary, except for those of the Fifth and Sixth, which should continue to exist as a separate organs. Sixth, a procedural resolution, adopted once per year, should clarify the reporting requirements for the Secretary-General, and should include a provision for quarterly briefings to the General Assembly. Seventh, the role of the General Committee should be revised and enhanced to make it more operational and involved in the coordination of the activities of the General Assembly. Eighth, participation of other stakeholders, such as NGOs, business representatives and scientists, should be formally integrated in the work of the Assembly. Ninth, the Assembly’s role and involvement in electing its President and in the appointment of the Secretary-General needed to be improved. The tenth point aimed at strengthening the Office of the President of the General Assembly, including in the areas of protocol, media, staffing and funding, which should be covered in full by the United Nations regular budget.

Friday, 17 June

Opening remarks by the President of the General Assembly

The morning session on Friday, 17 June, began with reflections by the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Joseph Deiss, on the work of the Assembly. In his presentation, the President noted the General Assembly’s role and authority on global matters of concern as reaffirmed by Member States in resolution 65/94 on global governance. It was necessary to elevate the debate on strengthening the Assembly accordingly. Noting the primary vision of the Assembly as serving as guardian of the Charter, President Deiss also noted the Assembly’s moral power vis-à-vis the world. The General Assembly should not be expected to do everything, but it should harness the unique legitimacy at its disposal and balance the other institutions. The Assembly’s convening power should be bolstered by focusing its debates on the most relevant topics of the day. While the General Assembly should not be expected to write history each and every day, it had proven its capacity to do so in the past, as when it adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The President also urged to strengthen bridges to other principal organs, specialized agencies, outside organizations, civil society, and others and noted with pride that the General Assembly was the only Parliament where a non-member could take the floor and that this should be increased. Citing the relationship with the other principal organs, especially the Security Council, the President noted that he had held regular meetings with each monthly President of the Security Council during

his presidency so far. He also noted that the Assembly had a responsibility in holding accountable the Council's non-permanent members that are elected by the Assembly. The General Assembly also enabled those Members that are not represented in the Council to air their views on issues discussed by the Security Council. Another important element regarding the Assembly's role and authority, according to President Deiss, lay in its outreach to external bodies, such as the G-20, or other stakeholders, such as NGOs and civil society.

Commenting on the means available to the Office of the President, the President emphasized the importance of adequate availability of funds which was also important for him/her to fully harness the representational aspect of the office. In this regard, some provisions concerning protocol had remained unrealized over the years. On the debates taking place in the Assembly, President Deiss hoped these could become more interactive, bearing in mind the institution's intergovernmental character, including through the closer personal involvement of the Permanent Representatives. One of the most important tools available to the President was the convening of thematic debates. The President also emphasized the need for better implementation of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly. In conclusion, he emphasized the importance of the Office of the President consisting of a team representative of the wider membership and noted the potential for improving the transition period from one President to the next.

Presentation of GA Handbook

The President's opening remarks were followed by a presentation by the Permanent Representative of Switzerland, H.E. Mr. Paul Seger, of a handbook on the General Assembly which is a practical guide to the work of the GA and which would be published by Switzerland shortly. The motivation for preparing the guide was based on resolution 60/286, specifically paragraph 9 by which the Assembly requested the President of the General Assembly at the end of his/her tenure to provide an informal, short report on best practices and lessons learnt to his/her successor. Relevant practical information had been collected accordingly and would be listed in this publication, which would be distributed to all Member States. Ambassador Seger also underlined that the information contained in the Handbook had not only been culled from printed sources but also been gleaned from unwritten practice and oral tradition, sources of institutional memory that, had they not been thus captured, might indeed have been lost. The Ambassador hoped that the Handbook would be of use not only to future Presidents and their teams, but also to new delegates and committee members, Secretariat staff, and civil society.

Address by President-elect

The Permanent Representative of Qatar, H.E. Mr. Nasser Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the President-elect of the sixth-sixth session of the General Assembly, provided an overview of his ideas on how to strengthen the work of the General Assembly during the forthcoming session. In his presentation, Ambassador Al-Nasser noted that effectiveness of the General Assembly and its work were directly linked to its ability to forge

consensus on major issues of the day, noting that the process of revitalizing the General Assembly should be a top priority. Other substantive issues that he flagged as having top priority for him included both MDG implementation and environmental action. The latter of these took on particular importance in light of the forthcoming Rio+20 Summit. The Ambassador realized, in regard to these and other issues, that leadership provided by the President of the General Assembly had been and would be crucial. It was therefore important that the Fifth Committee supports strengthening the Office of the President of the General Assembly. It was also important that the coordination between the different principal organs be enhanced, especially with the Security Council. Other elements included the shortening of statements in the General Assembly and the streamlining of its agenda. The option of making proceedings of the Assembly paperless should be seriously considered, and the practice of the NGO Committee could serve as a model in this regard. Also, the website of the General Assembly could be further improved. The Ambassador concluded by noting that the relationship between the PGA-elect and the membership should be an active one to ensure successful preparation of the forthcoming session.

Remarks by Co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly

The Permanent Representative of Lithuania, H.E. Mr. Dalius Cekuolis, briefly commented, in his capacity as Co-Chair of the Ad hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, on a number of issues and activities of the Ad Hoc Working Group that related directly to those that had been raised so far, both for the purpose of linking the efforts of the Working Group to the topics at hand and for the purpose of providing an overview for those who might be directly involved in the work of the Assembly or its subsidiary bodies in the course of the forthcoming session.

The Ambassador indicated his own initial misgivings about the term ‘revitalization’ as for him the Assembly was already a vital UN organ. The point and purpose of the Working Group’s efforts, as he saw it, was more about organizing a sustained effort to make the General Assembly as efficient and effective as possible. He noted that this task was not necessarily easy, as the Working Group had been in existence for many years, and that some saw it as a “guardian process” or a “steam release valve”.

While noting that some might argue that movement on concrete actions and “Member State implementation” has been little, he emphasized that progress was being made on both working methods and on coordination with other bodies, and suggested that pushing further forward on these fronts could help ensure the greater presence and participation at the Permanent Representative level that the President had mentioned earlier. Two specific initiatives highlighted by the Ambassador were the briefings given to the Working Group by the Chair of the Second Committee, the Permanent Representative of Mongolia, on improvements made in its working methods, and by the Chair of the Security Council’s Working Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Issues, the Permanent Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on its practices and innovations.

Discussion

In response to these initial sets of remarks, a number of comments and questions were raised. One speaker stressed the importance of “advocacy” and also wondered what the General Committee could do to be of greater support to the President and his team. Another expressed concern over the extent to which, in the context of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Revitalization, so much effort and focus had been devoted to questions of working methods, suggesting that the status of the General Assembly amongst organs ought to be promoted instead.

On advocacy, the President of the General Assembly responded that this was a question he asked each day, i.e. how best to make the Assembly’s work more visible and effective. He also noted that the General Assembly was not generally perceived as a Parliament and that it was important that the sovereignty of Member States be respected and reflected in this regard. At the same time, the more the membership thought about global governance, the more it would realize that many of the international community’s problems could not be solved at the country level.

Making an analogy to the country level, however, the President did take the opportunity to highlight the question of consensus as perceived and practiced in the UN, commenting that, in his home country of Switzerland, consensus was considered to be a strong majority and that, because of that, action could not be blocked as easily as it was here.

Because of its “very political nature” and its “infrequent meetings”, the President was not sanguine about an increase in the role of the General Committee. Instead, he first emphasized the importance of assistance and support received from the Secretariat. Then he heavily emphasized that, to his mind, what really distinguished the United Nations was the Charter, which he described as a “huge asset for humanity” in addressing the challenges before it.

Secretariat Presentations

The Under-Secretary-General for the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, Dr. Shaaban M. Shaaban, then briefed the retreat on various organizational aspects of the work of the General Assembly. Specifically, Dr. Shaaban pointed to the number of meetings in the Assembly’s schedule, both formal and informal, which over recent years had continually increased. This, in part, was due to the increased number of thematic debates, the number of high-level meetings, and the length of the Assembly’s agenda. Noting the mandate for thematic debates, namely resolution 59/313 by which the Assembly decided to convene and organize major thematic debates in order to establish broad international understanding on current substantive issues of importance to Member States, the Under-Secretary-General underscored that Presidents of the General Assembly have considered this to be an important tool at their disposal to give shape to their presidencies and to focus the Assembly’s deliberations. Naturally, each

thematic debate, which may include high-level participation, required individual preparation. Recurrent challenges, from an organizational point, included how to deal with the number of speakers who would like to take floor but that can not be accommodated because of time limitations. Also, with a view to promoting interactive exchange, Member States were regularly encouraged to have their written statements circulated in the room so as to allow for their oral interventions to be as interactive as possible.

Secondly, recent years had seen a veritable proliferation of the number of high-level meetings, particularly during September and in the vicinity of the general debate. This proliferation, in part, appeared to be due to the fact that various tracks of negotiations ran in parallel in the different Main Committees as well as in the plenary. It was also seen to be due in part to the understandable desire by various parts of the UN system to be proactive in making initiatives that would ultimately lead to the organization of a high-level meeting. One consequence of multiple high-level meetings, in addition to their budgetary impact, however, was the additional strain that they placed on Member States, who had to balance all of the demands that high-level attendance in New York entailed. In this context, Dr. Shaaban also noted the long-emphasized priority given by Member States to the importance of the general debate and the need to preserve its sanctity, as stipulated in resolution 57/301.

In concluding, the Under-Secretary-General referred to the General Assembly's agenda which currently listed 162 items. He recalled that Member States had decided to arrange the Assembly's agenda under thematic headings for the purpose of giving a sense of structure to the work of the Assembly, and for achieving a better presentation of the issues and challenges with which the Assembly deals and making the work of the Assembly more accessible, as outlined in resolution 58/316. At the same time, there had been continuous calls for streamlining the agenda by eliminating, biennializing, triennializing or clustering items. On the other hand, even though the call for streamlining the agenda, and making it more accessible, was frequently repeated, only very few concrete measures had been taken by the General Assembly in recent years.

Following the presentation by Under-Secretary-General Shaaban, the Director of the General Assembly and ECOSOC Affairs Division of DGACM, Mr. Ion Botnaru, briefed on the current status of the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly and highlighted a number of issues of direct practical relevance.

At the outset, Mr. Botnaru provided an overview of the services and support provided by GAEAD, emphasizing the Division's role as retainer of institutional memory on the Assembly's working methods and practices, including also for the Office of the President of the General Assembly. He then outlined a number of ideas that could have a positive impact on the work of the General Assembly and that could be further considered by Member States, such as the possibility of introducing the method of drawing of lots for determining the list of speakers for the general debate. Another point he raised was the potential for improving the General Assembly's website to make it even more user-friendly and to support Member States in their daily work, based on their

requirements. Another improvement that was often raised, but on which no tangible progress had materialized so far, concerned the method of balloting in the General Assembly. Mr. Botnaru underscored that for any steps to be taken in this regard by the Secretariat, it required a clear mandate coming from the General Assembly. Finally, the General Committee may meet more frequently to exchange views on current issues pertaining to procedural matters before the Assembly. For example, GAEAD was often faced with a situation where sponsors of resolutions, who pursuant to the rules of procedure can not explain their vote when action is being taken on their proposal, ask for the floor, which often leads to delegations having to take the floor on a “point of order” to convey their statement. This was just one example of a question pertaining to the rules of procedure which Member States may wish to consider in the future. Another one concerned current practice followed in the plenary whereby the recommendations of the Main Committees are considered one by one. One alternative that could be contemplated, with a view to time efficiency, was for the Assembly to approve all those draft resolutions that the respective Committee had adopted without a vote in one decision, unless a vote was specifically being requested at the plenary stage. In concluding, Mr. Botnaru noted that should the General Committee decide to enhance its role as repository of institutional memory, the Secretariat was always ready to assist in this effort.

Discussion

In the course of the ensuing discussions among participants, many thought-provoking questions were raised and speakers engaged in an interactive exchange of views covering the gamut of issues covered in the retreat.

Questions related to the modalities of influencing Member States, individually and collectively, to be more engaged in the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly were raised. Further, noting the importance of political advocacy, participants wished to know specifically what General Committee members in particular could do to contribute to the strengthening of the work of the Assembly. One view was that the General Committee, in theory, should be meeting throughout the session but it was noted that this was not currently the case and that efforts would need to be undertaken to ensure more regular meetings in the future. It was also acknowledged that Member States themselves bore primary responsibility for making the Assembly’s work more vital and energetic, inter alia by allowing meetings to be started on time and by respecting timelines.

Pointing to the need for increasing the visibility of the work of the General Assembly vis-a-vis the outside world, the importance of reaching out to students was highlighted, in particular, and the view was expressed that the work of both the President and the General Assembly itself should be better publicized.

On the idea of holding two major thematic debates in the course of each session, the question was put whether the cost burden this entailed might have an adverse impact on the ability of smaller delegations to participate effectively in these deliberations.

The role of the modernization of technology was raised in the context of the General Assembly's working methods, and participants asked to what extent improvements could be expected to result from the conclusion of the Capital Master Plan. Reference here was made in particular to conference facilities at other duty stations and whether best practices could be followed better in the General Assembly in New York, such as the installment of screens on delegations' desks. It was also noted that no progress had been made so far regarding modernizing and optimizing the balloting technology that is being employed in the General Assembly Hall.

Relevant experience from the Main Committees was shared, including the enhanced use of web-sites, for instance for the purpose of submitting and sponsoring draft resolutions. The idea of installing a virtual 'chat room' for the General Assembly was raised, and the importance of including NGOs in Assembly deliberations stressed.

Several speakers underscored the need to streamline the agenda, which they argued had become overburdened and unwieldy over time. The reporting requirements of the Secretariat should similarly be reviewed, with the objective of optimizing input into the intergovernmental deliberations.

Wrap up and closing remarks

In concluding remarks, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland thanked all participants for their contributions to an extremely stimulating and useful exchange of views. He identified five points that had crystallized in the course of the debate. First, the Assembly's agenda could be further streamlined to better focus the debates of Member States. Secondly, several participants had seized upon the idea of organizing two high-level debates during a GA session, one in autumn and one in the summer. Third, it had been widely recognized that the role of the General Committee was not fully harnessed and that the twenty-one Vice-Presidents could be better utilized in reaching out to the wider membership. Fourth, it was agreed among participants that there was a great potential for better making use of modern technology, such as enabling net-based functions and installing screens on each delegations' desk. This technology could also be better put to use in the Assembly's outreach efforts to the wider world. Fifth, the GA handbook that was presented during the retreat was a clear step towards strengthening institutional memory. Before concluding the retreat, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland indicated that a second seminar of this kind would be held next year to institutionalize the practice of bringing together the incoming General Committee members.

Enclosure – List of participants

H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss
President of the General Assembly

H.E. Mr. Ahmad Allam-mi
Permanent Representative of Chad

H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser
President-elect of the 66th Session of the General Assembly

Mr. Ion Botnaru
Director, General Assembly and ECOSOC Affairs Division,
United Nations

H.E. Mr. Dalius Čekuolis
Permanent Representative of Lithuania

H.E. Mr Srgjan Kerim
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly

H.E. Mr. Miloš Koterec
Permanent Representative of Slovakia

H.E. Mr. Thomas Mayr-Harting
Permanent Representative of Austria

H.E. Mrs. Simona Mirela Miculescu
Permanent Representative of Romania

H.E. Mr. Park In-Kook
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea

H.E. Mr. Gary Francis Quinlan
Permanent Representative of Australia

H.E. Mr. Armin Ritz
Chef de Cabinet, Office of the President of the General Assembly

H.E. Mr. Paul Seger
Permanent Representative of Switzerland

H.E. Mr. Shaaban Muhammed Shaaban
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management,
United Nations

H.E. Mr. Thomas Adoumasse
Deputy Permanent Representative of Benin

H.E. Mr. Mr. Eshagh Al Habib
Deputy Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran

H.E. Ms. Heidi Schroderus-Fox,
Head of Policy Issues, Office of the President of the General Assembly

Ms. Rita Kazragiene
Deputy Permanent Representative of Lithuania

Mr. Janne Taalas
Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland

Mr. Saijin Zhang
Chief, General Assembly Affairs Branch, United Nations

Mrs. Rofina Tsingo Chikava
Deputy Permanent Representative of Zimbabwe

Mr. Attila Zimonyi
Deputy Permanent Representative of Hungary

Mr. Tariq Ali Faraj H. Al-Ansari
Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Qatar

Mr. Kenji Nakano
Senior Political Affairs Officer, General Assembly Affairs Branch,
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Mr. Ahmed Azizi
Adviser, Permanent Mission of Qatar

Mr. Henry Breed
Political Affairs Officer, Office of Director,
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Ms. Nicole Ruder
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Mr. Sami Wacklin
Special Adviser, Permanent Mission of Finland

Mr. Georg Zeiner

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