

EXTERNAL "EXPERT" BODIES

The weaknesses of the General Assembly are accentuated by weaknesses in the external "expert" oversight and advisory bodies which aid the Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary) of the General Assembly. Although Secretary-General Annan commended the OIOS in 1998 for the way that it worked with the external oversight bodies "to provide comprehensive oversight" for the UN, the external units are even more handicapped in providing effective oversight than is the OIOS.

"Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services: Note by the Secretary-General", A/53/428 of **23 September 1998**.

The Fifth Committee itself suffers from the endless axes which its 190-some Member States have to grind, its very heavy annual agenda, scattered sessions, lack of its own substantive staff, and reliance on evasive and cryptic reports from the Secretariat. It must also interact with the other committees and bodies of the General Assembly, whose own work is often disorganized and dubious (as detailed, and as continues despite many reform attempts over the years) for instance in the UN Economic and Social Council.

"Joint Inspection Unit, "Management in the United Nations: Work in progress", UN document A/50/507, **1995**, Chapter VI, "Management reporting and intergovernmental body oversight", pp. 38-45, and
Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", UN document A/50/503 , **1995**, Part II, "Comparative tables", Table 12, "Primary governing bodies responsible for operational oversight, United Nations organizations".

The five external expert bodies cited below have had some 140 professional-and-above staff (measured in "staff years" because some people are full-time while others are part-time staff or only attendees at committee sessions), and their combined total expenditures have amounted to some \$18 million dollars a year (both totals apparently were publicly calculated only once, in 1995). Some of them have modest, or considerable, responsibilities for oversight of the \$15 billion or more annual expenditures of the entire UN system. In total, however, they do have more equivalent professional staff posts, and far more senior posts, than does the OIOS, as well as many major overlaps in the work that each of them does.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", UN document A/50/503, **1995**, Part II,

"Comparative tables", Table 11, "External system-wide oversight bodies."

The strongest such body is the BOARD OF AUDITORS, which provides the UN with professional auditors on loan from national audit offices. Their competence and discipline are well regarded but they have restricted impact, primarily because they work on a part-time assignment basis, and must spend most of their very limited time auditing the financial statements of the many complex and scattered UN programmes.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", UN document A/50/503, 1995, Part I, "Overview and analysis", Chapter VII, "External system-wide oversight bodies", paras. 181, 208-215.

IO Watch will devote much more attention to the good professional, work done by the UN Board of Auditors, in marked contrast to the other "expert" bodies. As an introduction, the following two quotes illustrate in part the key role that the Auditors' work played in establishing the General Assembly's management accountability resolution.

"UN officials who advocate a cleanup ... say that management by ... top officials has been inept and, occasionally, corrupt. 'There is no [regular] supervision of any agency' ... said [a senior official.] Governing councils ... are 'basically rubber-stamp bodies.'

The U. N. Board of Auditors ... cites numerous [problems] and 'weak internal controls' ... during 1990 and 1991 ... [in a] 136-page report that enumerates irregularities or deficiencies in hiring, cash and property management, internal audits and purchases of everything from project equipment to airline tickets. ...

Many anomalies [that they report] 'appear to be recurring' and point to a 'lack of determination to enforce regulations and rules and make the heads of units of the organization accountable,' the report says.

A recent confidential internal paper circulating in the U. N. Development Program ... put the problem more bluntly. Citing 'a deplorable vacuum of basic ethics' in the system, it noted widespread criticism of 'prolific structures, pompous-Byzantine attitudes of ranking officials, operational inefficiency and ... gross mismanagement of financial and personnel resources.'

The 10-page paper listed a dozen cases of corruption involving the development agency's staffers or programs that totaled millions of dollars in pilfered funds."

William Branigin, "The U.N. empire: polished image, tarnished reality", "As U.N. expands, so do its problems: Critics cite mismanagement, waste", Washington Post, **September 20, 1992**, p 4.

"Mismanagement, waste, abuse and in some cases fraud. These are among the findings by the U.N. Board of Auditors in its examination of Secretariat operations cited by the United States in a presentation to the General Assembly's budget-writing Fifth Committee.

The [U.S. representative] stated that the Secretariat 'has not made significant progress' in addressing these problems.

Referring to the current audit report [and affirming his status as a U.N. supporter, he] said it led to the conclusion that "existing mechanisms alone are unable to administer and safeguard funds entrusted to the organization.'

The Board's report identified serious deficiencies and abuses in program management, use of staff, payment of staff allowances and benefits and in procurement and property management, he said."

"Auditors' report blasts U.N. for waste, fraud", Diplomatic World Bulletin (New York), **October 19-26, 1992**, p. 1.

Five years later, the General Assembly repeated a blunt reminder of its serious concerns about UN financial performance and accountability problems, based again upon the oversight work of the Board of Auditors:

"The General Assembly, ...

Expressing deep concern about the persistence of problems and defects observed by the Board of Auditors in the financial administration and management of the United Nations;

...

11. Notes with deep concern the incidents of fraud and presumed fraud reported by the Board of Auditors;

12. Requests the Secretary-General and the executive heads ... to take the disciplinary actions necessary in cases of proven fraud and to enhance the individual accountability of United Nations personnel, including through stronger managerial control; ...

15. Emphasizes the need for greater transparency and stricter controls for trust funds ...

17. Notes ... that further work needs to be done in the biennium 1996-1997 to bring the financial statements fully in line with the United Nations common accounting standards, and requests the Secretary-General and the executive heads ... to pursue their efforts to ensure full compliance with those standards."

"Financial reports and audited financial statements, and reports of the Board of Auditors," General Assembly resolution 51/225 of **16 May 1997**.

An ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY QUESTIONS (ACABQ) provides part-time "experts" who make technical analyses and recommendations as a "traffic cop" on UN budgetary details, which the Fifth Committee relies on heavily. As an one intriguing sidelight about evasiveness on professionalism matters at the UN, at least three of the ACABQ's 16 "expert" members must be recognized financial experts. By tradition, however, the three are never identified, presumably so as not to embarrass or offend the dignity of the other thirteen.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", UN document A/50/503, "Overview and analysis" ..., paras. 184-187, and

"Budgetary and financial arrangements", General Assembly resolution 14 (I) of 13 February 1946.

A COMMITTEE FOR PROGRAMME AND COORDINATION (CPC) has budget overview and some evaluative responsibilities, but has often been cited as a conspicuous "fifth wheel" in the UN legislative process.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", UN document A/50/503, **1995**, "Overview and analysis ...", paras. 188-192.

The JOINT INSPECTION UNIT, as already discussed in detail in the preceding subsection, was established to provide independent external oversight for the UN and the entire UN system through expert reviews and reports to their many governing bodies, but has long been criticized for its weak performance and poor "value for money."

And an INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION (ICSC), although not an actual oversight body, makes key decisions about UN system salaries and conditions of work, amid much political turbulence and controversy, as noted below.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", UN document A/50/503, **1995**, "Overview and analysis ...", paras. 193-198.

In addition, and as a sign of dissatisfaction by the major UN donor countries, there has been some real pressure to allow major contributing Member States' own auditors to periodically audit the way in which the UN uses their funds, and some positive results. As one example, the Thornburgh report of 1993 observed that:

"These steps [to improve struggling UN field operations] represent a good beginning, but much more remains to be done. McKinsey & Co, Inc., in the course of its review of our operations, conducted a preliminary overview of FOD and estimated that as much as \$100 million per year could be realized in cost savings and, at the same time, visible improvements could be made in the quality of our field operations. I would suggest that a full study be undertaken, either by McKinsey ... or by other qualified international consulting firms, to be funded either out of a percentage increment of all future peacekeeping budgets or through voluntary contributions by interested Member States, some of which have already exhibited interest in funding such an arrangement.

Periodic 'outside' management reviews would, I suggest, not only provide recommendations for better management of field operations, but would also bolster the confidence of contributing Member States at a time when they are being asked to increase dramatically their financial contributions to these operations."

Dick Thornburgh, Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management, "Report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations" ["The Thornburgh report"], **1 March 1993**, pp. 25-26.

Other proposals are that part of the considerable funds devoted to the above "expert" bodies might better be used for expert consultant studies, or evaluations made by member government groups. All of these initiatives have been strongly resisted by those who defend the archaic UN *status quo* in oversight matters. Yet the potential for finally letting the modern world and outside experts examine the UN and improve its operations is great. Other UN system agencies have been much more active in using these important outside resources to consider problems, changing circumstances, and ways to enhance

their programmes. This topic (and UN reluctance to open the doors to outside review) will eventually be explored in considerably more detail in this archive.

Independent audits and management reviews of activities of the United Nations system", A/48/587 of **10 November 1993**.

The five existing "oversight" units have been exempt from the General Assembly's management reform and accountability efforts of the last decade, but they should obviously be an important element of accountability. However, the oldest of them were created in the late 1940s, and the "youngest" in the 1970s, with little real change ever since, except for determined efforts to expand their memberships so that more diplomats can "participate."

The "expert" advisors have thus not modernized their operations, with the notable exception of the Board of Auditors which, unfortunately, is still understaffed and underfunded for its tasks. They do, however, continue to provide important-sounding jobs, legislative activity, and not least handsome salaries or allowances which attract many ambitious diplomats seeking an "expert" label and credentials in "reviewing and guiding" UN programmes.

An excellent and definitive study by John Renninger of the ICSC in 1986 analysed the way in which this supposedly technical and expert body was captured by diplomats and political maneuvering. More recent studies and assessments by former senior UN officials have noted the continuing limited value of these units, and the noticeable increase in members with limited qualifications and stature for the tasks given them. The other expert and advisory bodies (except for the Board of Auditors) also match up poorly with the strong need for UN oversight professionalism and performance.

John P. Renninger, "Can the common system be maintained: The role of the International Civil Service Commission", United Nations Institute for Training and Research, New York, **1986**,

John Renninger, "The international civil service commission and the development of a common personnel policy in the United Nations system", Public Administration and Development, Vol. 7, 181-194, **1987**,

Erskine Childers, with Brian Urquhart, "Renewing the United Nations system", Development Dialogue 1994:1, Dag Hammarskjold Foundation and Ford Foundation, Upsala, Sweden, **1994**, Chapter VIII, "The decision-making machinery," pp.119-141,

Paul C. Light, Monitoring government: Inspectors General and the search for accountability, Chapter 10, "Measuring the impact of IGs", Brookings Institution/Governance Institute, Washington, D.C., USA, **1993**, pp. 204-220.

A follow-up assessment by Spiers eight years later showed

little if any improvement.

" The General Assembly holds the purse strings of the United Nations, and its most important function is the consideration and approval of the organization's biennial budget. However, this function is essentially entrusted to the lower-level representatives in the Fifth Committee, whose meetings the ambassadors seldom attend. [The committee favors] ... micromanagement [and] ... little attention is paid to the big issues which should underlie discussions about the utilization of resources. ...

A similar situation applies in the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), which is supposed to consist of experts acting in a nonrepresentative capacity. The quality, expertise, and seniority of the personnel selected for membership in ACABQ leave much to be desired. The committee has an important role to perform and much more attention should be given to its staffing.

Were the General Assembly to institute reforms [to provide] ... fewer but more-important agenda items, fewer constraints on its operating schedule, and a more manageable committee structure, and were the Fifth Committee to become less bureaucratic and engage the attention and participation of senior UN officials, this would [considerably] ... enhance its relevance and effectiveness."

Ronald I. Spiers, "Reforming the United Nations," in Roger A. Coate, ed., U.S. policy and the future of the United Nations, Twentieth Century Fund, New York, 1994, pp.19-40 [29-31.]

A very sharp 1996 assessment of overall UN reform and streamlining needs by Leon Gordenker, a long-time and prestigious observer of UN operations, went even further. He cited these expert bodies as among the prime candidates for reform or elimination because of their overlapping, duplication, mediocrity, corruption, and, intriguingly but importantly, their "hidden agendas". He stated that:

"[Oversight budget and management bodies] ... all cover some of the same territory. CPC is manned by governmental delegates, while the [ACABQ, JIU, ICSC, and the Board of Auditors] comprise governmental nominees who are supposed to function on the basis of expertness and independence. Their work adds up to a great deal of surveillance for a UN Secretariat of 9,000 officials and an annual budget of less than \$1.5 billion [at an annual cost of about \$ 14 million.]

The fact ... [of governmental nominees] suggests that they lack objectivity and neutrality. As for CPC, one of its underlying tasks is to ensure that the major donors support the budget ... But ... [CPC also] surveys the management of the Secretariat ... It has unfailing set priorities which, on examination, are too imprecise to serve as anything but a basis for debate.

Taken together, these structures have an obvious aura of redundancy and perhaps also hidden agendas. They imply substantial expenditures of Secretariat and clerical time to produce the necessary documentation. If this documentation is then considered by bodies that provide final resting places for the diminishing careers of their members, not enough can be accomplished.

Leon Gordenker, The UN tangle: policy formation, reform, and reorganization, WPF Reports number 12, The World Peace Foundation, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, pp. 6, 42-43, and

"Press conference on UN reform: Sponsored by United States on report by World Peace Federation on UN reform", 21 November 1996.

[emphasis added.]

These hidden agendas begin in the Fifth Committee, where ambitious people in the 190-plus Member State delegations can open the door to the levers of UN power and influence, and seek a very well-paid job and even a life-long career.

Many diplomats at the UN do try to work seriously in a limited-term (and career-wise not very prestigious or desirable) diplomatic assignment at the UN. However, many of the day-to-day delegates at the Fifth Committee are merely following orders from delegation heads and home countries and sleepwalking through their UN assignments. Others may be the lethargic who simply want to hold on to their places in the new and glamorous Manhattan diplomatic and social whirl for as long as they can. Still others, however, are -- most interestingly -- "loose cannons," off on tangents or searches for personal glory.

New UN delegates to the Fifth Committee must of course learn to speak of "budgets", "posts", "geographic distribution", and "supplemental appropriations". They can then become involved as "insiders" in the operations of a UN committee, and engage in its key "informal consultations", corridor encounters, get-togethers in the Delegate's Lounge, and endless alliances and intrigues. In particular, they can befriend and/or form alliances and connections with other well-placed diplomats and senior Secretariat officials, especially those in higher-level personnel and administrative posts. They are then ready to make their most important move, which may involve:

(a) a direct appointment to a full-time post in the UN Secretariat, with its excellent salary and allowances, career and pension and health-care potentials, and chances to rise to a top-level UN post (i.e., becoming a "baron");

(b) an assignment or multiple assignments in the many extrabudgetary posts, support accounts, and field missions or special missions provided by the worldwide UN bureaucratic structure and programmes (although this is a less desirable option because it is more temporary, may involve difficult duty stations, and in peacekeeping and humanitarian areas might involve some severe personal risk);

(c) moving onto the special Secretariat staff of one of the many UN world conferences, and then into another above option (although the possibilities for this have diminished due to exhaustion with such UN conferences, most especially the chaotic UN conference on racism in 2001);

(d) of most interest here, becoming a continuing member of one or more of the above expert and advisory

committees, either semi-permanently or as a stepping-stone to one of the other above options.

For those who choose the "committee option", or those want to mark time until a Secretariat post opens up, even brief participation in a UN oversight or advisory body allows one to claim important "expertise" on his or her *curriculum vitae*. The ultimate goal, not frequently but in some cases achieved, is to turn such a modest start into a 20- or 30-year career of earning handsome UN salaries and/or allowances, and living comfortably in New York. They also seize whatever prestige and reflected glory (and it may still seem considerable) accrues from being a higher-level cog in the work of "world government" and the "moral authority", "noble aims", and serving of "We the peoples" that can be associated with the United Nations. To many, this is a heady and compelling combination of attractions.

The chances for great success do exist. The three officers of a single CPC session in 1975 went on to high-level, multi-decade careers, eventually reaching the posts of head of UNRWA (the UN agency for Palestinian refugees), Under-Secretary-General for peacekeeping, and liaison with the Ted Turner billion-dollar fund for UN programmes by the late 1990s.

Overall, there have been, and still are, a plethora of choices and opportunities, as observed by Gupte in 1993:

"The conventional wisdom in Third World upmarket employment circles is that the best job opportunities in these recessionary days are still available in the United Nations system -- a bewildering alphabet soup rich in countless commissions, subcommissions, fact-finding missions, agencies, expert groups, blue-ribbon panels and blue-helmet peacekeeping operations. For the most part, it is a sprawling secretive system, where many modern-day rajahs reign with conspicuous disregard for accountability"

Pranay Gupte, "United Nations shenanigans", Newsweek International, **May 24, 1993**, p. 6.

[Note: Mr. Gupte is executive editor of *The Earth Times*.]

The duplication of these external advisory bodies and their pursuit of "hidden agendas", as outlined above, have led to many attempts to reform or even abolish the ACABQ, JIU, CPC, and ICSC. Conversely, although a major attempt to enlarge the scope and role of the Board of Auditors was suppressed in the late 1970s, the General Assembly has more recently encouraged the auditors to take on more and more management audit work. The reason is simple: even in an amateurish, "diplo/management" UN, the Board of Auditors role has grown because its professionalism and steady performance are now widely recognized, respected, and utilized.

Efforts to reform the other bodies, however, have met very stubborn resistance from the many Member State representatives who covet these posh jobs (except for their sometimes successful efforts to expand the memberships and open up even more posh jobs.) Once a decade or so, the General Assembly dutifully calls on the Secretariat to reassess the expert body structures and functions, but the resulting reports always end up as a mere tired description of their existing mandates and duties.

The expert advisory units, and their precious jobs, thus continue on and on. Meanwhile, the professional, productive, and independent UN external oversight that the General Assembly and Member States need (again, except for the Board of Auditors) is nowhere to be found.