



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

Fifteenth session

Agenda item 1

Organizational and procedural matters

## Conference servicing and secretariat support for the Human Rights Council

### Report of the Secretary-General\*

#### I. Introduction

1. On 1 October 2009, the Human Rights Council adopted resolution 12/1 entitled “Open-ended intergovernmental working group on the review of the work and functioning of the Human Rights Council”, in which it requested the Secretary-General to present a report to the Council at its fifteenth session on how to improve conference and secretariat services for the Council.

#### II. Background

2. Since 2006, when the General Assembly established, in its resolution 60/251, the Human Rights Council as a subsidiary organ of the Assembly, there has been a steady evolution in the servicing requirements of the Council and its related mechanisms. In September 2008, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), pursuant to Council resolution 8/1, submitted a report on conference facilities and financial support for the Council (A/HRC/9/18). The report was based on a joint review by OHCHR and the Division of Conference Management of the document processing and submission situation and an assessment by the Department of Public Information of the information servicing requirements of the Council, including the proposal to webcast all proceedings of Council working groups. The report included an assessment by the Division of the situation relating to the submission of documents to the Council, including those concerning the universal periodic review, and in particular of delays in the translation of documents into the six official languages of the United Nations. In the report, OHCHR noted that the lack of permanent capacity in translation, editing and documents processing and the difficulties associated with recruiting freelancers in the Geneva area constrained the

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\* Late submission.

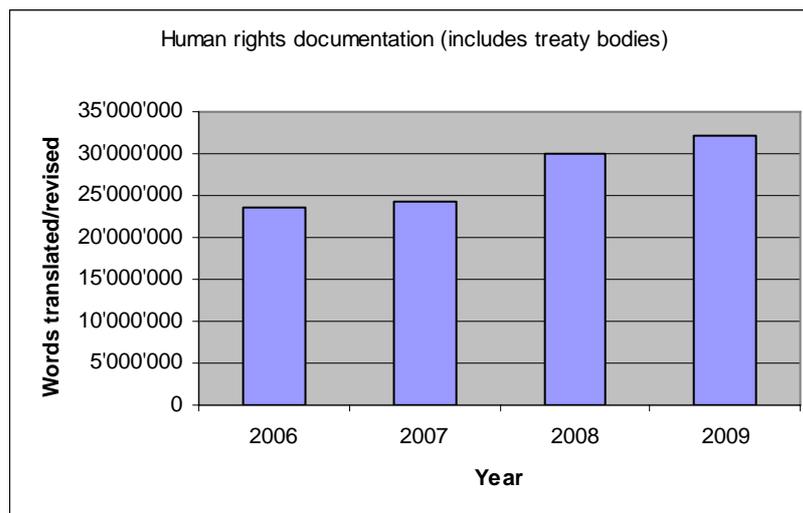
Division's provision of documentation and summary record services, and proposed comprehensive measures to address those shortfalls. The Council accordingly adopted decision 9/103 on 24 September 2008, in which it requested, inter alia, the Secretary-General to present to the General Assembly a report with details of the resources required to ensure the provision of necessary services indicated in the report of the Office of the High Commissioner (A/HRC/9/18).

3. The decisions of the Council from its ninth session were included in its report submitted to the General Assembly (A/63/53/Add.1), which was taken up by the Third Committee at its sixty-third session. A statement of programme budget implications (A/C.3/63/L.77) detailing the resource requirements as proposed in the OHCHR report (A/HRC/9/18) was submitted to the Committee in respect of its consideration of a draft resolution endorsing the Council decisions. Specifically, additional requirements of \$6,137,700 for the remainder of the biennium 2008-2009, and \$16,819,400 for the biennium 2010-2011, were identified. However, the Assembly eventually adopted resolution 63/160 with revised wording that "took note" of the report of the Council rather than endorsed it. Consequently, the related statement of programme budget implications was withdrawn. On 10 December 2008, the requirements in the withdrawn statement were reported to Member States for information only in an annex to the report of the Secretary-General on revised estimates resulting from the resolutions and decisions adopted by the Council at its ninth session (A/63/541/Add. 1, annex II).

4. In the absence of additional resources to support the greatly increased documentation workload associated with the evolution of the Council and the establishment of its universal periodic review process, the Secretariat endeavoured to utilize existing resources to support the Council as efficiently as possible. Without specific resources for the universal periodic review process, it was informally agreed to prioritize the processing of review documentation before considering the processing of summary records of the Council and its Advisory Committee for the period 2008-2009. Some document processing was also completed in New York, including translation of the report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (A/HRC/12/48) and the processing of a summary record backlog of 5 million words. In its report, the Advisory Committee for Administrative and Budgetary Questions noted that the net 2008-2009 workload estimate, which excluded 10.2 million words of summary records of the proceedings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies that were not drafted, as informally agreed by the Council, amounted to 66.7 million words, or an increase of 27 per cent over the workload for the biennium 2006-2007.<sup>1</sup> These increases, which included concurrent and continuing growth in documentation requirements for an expanding number of human rights treaty bodies, are indicated in the table below:

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<sup>1</sup> *Official Records of the General Assembly, Sixty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/64/7), chap. II, part I, para. I. 85.*



5. Deficiencies were nevertheless brought to the attention of the General Assembly, which, in its resolution 63/284, requested the Secretary-General to entrust the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) with a review of the circumstances that had led to insufficient conference services being put at the disposal of the Council in 2009, and to submit its recommendation to the Assembly at the main part of its sixty-fourth session in order to avoid similar situations. In its report, OIOS concluded that insufficient resources had been put at the disposal of the Division of Conference Management to provide conference services to the Council while maintaining the same level of service to the Division's other Geneva-based clients, and that the permanent capacity of the Division needed to be increased to provide more flexibility in dealing with fluctuations in the volume and timing of the document-processing workload, which had been fairly predictable until the creation of the Council, with the ability to request conference services on an "as required" basis (A/64/511, para. 13). OIOS accordingly made a number of specific recommendations for OHCHR and the Division of Conference Management.

6. The present report is submitted pursuant to the request of the Council to address the question of how to improve conference and secretariat services for the Council. It follows the structure of the above-mentioned OIOS report and addresses the recommendations and findings contained therein.

### III. Conference servicing for the Human Rights Council

7. The first recommendation made by OIOS in its report related to the processes involved in estimating the budgetary implications of Council decisions, considering that current arrangements were not adequate to cope with the Council's new mandates. A task force that included all parties involved in Geneva reviewed the procedures and confirmed the various stages wherein a review takes place to ensure accuracy and consistency. Each of the offices involved, including OHCHR, the Division of Conference Management, the Programme Planning and Budget Section of the United Nations Office at Geneva and the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts in New York, cross-checks the draft resolution and the associated additional requirements before the statement of programme budget implications is finalized and submitted to the Secretary of the Council for distribution. Any late revisions made to the draft resolution and/or its requirements are addressed orally at the session before the adoption of the resolution. The financial implications are again reviewed and consolidated by the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts in New York before presentation to the General Assembly in the

context of its review of the annual report of the Council. As noted in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences for 2010 (A/65/122), the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, in consultation with the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts, is updating the costing methodology for conference services.

8. In its second recommendation, OIOS recommended that the Division of Conference Management, in consultation with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, should develop a strategy that would include the optimal permanent staffing levels required to provide acceptable standards of service. As a follow-up to the OIOS report in the context of the review of the proposed programme budget for 2010-2011, the Secretariat briefed the Fifth Committee on the issues relating to conference facilities and secretariat support for the Council. The General Assembly subsequently approved redeployment within section 2 of the programme budget for 2010-2011 of six P-2 and six P-3 translator positions, \$5.5 million of temporary assistance for meetings and \$0.5 million for contractual translation, from New York to Geneva, only partially meeting the requirements put forward in its report (A/HRC/9/18) and reiterated in an annex to the report of the Secretary-General on revised estimates resulting from the resolutions and decisions adopted by the Council at its ninth session (A/63/541/Add.1/annex II). The Secretariat continues to maintain that the proposals put forward at that time reflect the actual requirements to adequately support the Council. While the redeployment of resources has been beneficial, including funds for temporary assistance, it does not address fully the permanent staffing needs of the Division of Conference Management.

9. In 2010, the Division of Conference Management has relied extensively on contractual translation arrangements and is requesting redeployment of \$300,000 from temporary assistance for meetings for this purpose. However, insufficient quality control capacity coupled with the limited number of documents appropriate for contractual translation (for reasons of confidentiality) makes it unlikely that further expansion of contractual translation could address shortfalls in documentation processing capacity. Gaps in reviser and editorial capacity have also proved troublesome to address, given the limited supply of experienced freelance staff.

10. Given the above-mentioned constraints and the near-continuous meetings schedule of the Council, the universal periodic review process and all related human rights treaty bodies, the use of temporary assistance to address conference servicing requirements is clearly no longer feasible. For these reasons, the Division of Conference Management is requesting a greater permanent capacity to meet the needs of new or expanded mandates, and will propose in its budget submission for the biennium 2012-2013 the replacement of temporary assistance resources with new posts – the only way to ensure availability of the right staff at the right time.

11. The long-standing issue of timely document submission was the focus of the third recommendation. OHCHR, with the Division of Conference Management, was tasked to increase awareness of the implications of non-adherence to General Assembly resolution 47/202, in which the Assembly urged substantive departments of the Secretariat to comply with the rule requiring them to submit pre-session documents at least 10 weeks before the beginning of a session in order to permit their timely processing in all the official languages of the United Nations.

12. While the rate of timely submissions has improved, it still remains below desired targets. One of the factors contributing to the improvement has been the introduction, at the request of OHCHR, of a slotting system for the reports to be submitted to the Council. OHCHR has also taken a number of internal measures aimed at increasing the rate of timely submissions; these include restructuring and strengthening the function of documentation management and processing by placing it under the supervision of the Deputy High

Commissioner, and by putting in place mechanisms to strengthen cross-divisional coordination and monitor the timeliness of reports.

13. A major challenge to the timely submission of reports remains the need to reconcile the annual programme of work of the Council with the 10-week rule prescribed by the General Assembly. In this respect, it is noted that the submission rate is generally highest for the sessions held in March, probably owing to the 6-month gap between sessions. Late submission is for example unavoidable in the case of reports requested at one session to be submitted for the next, wherein deadlines for submission expire even before the ongoing session is over. Likewise, the timing of meetings of certain subsidiary bodies renders it impossible for the reports thereon to be submitted within deadlines for the Council session at which they are to be considered.

14. To address the above challenge, OHCHR is working closely with the Division of Conference Management on a more comprehensive approach to the planning of the calendar of meetings and documentation.

15. In the most recent report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management submitted a document for consideration by the Assembly consolidating the existing guidelines on word and page limits and clarifying the number of words per page and pages per document for reports, including all documents submitted by the Secretariat directly and on behalf of intergovernmental bodies (A/65/122, annex VIII). This addressed the fourth OIOS recommendation, on improving the ability of the Secretariat to support the requirements of the Council.

16. The fifth and final recommendation of OIOS directed the Division of Conference Management, in cooperation with OHCHR, to improve coordination of activities that have an impact on the efficient provision of conferencing support to the Council by designating focal points, holding regular meetings and conducting outreach activities. In this regard, it is noted that the President of the Council, the Bureau and the secretariat of the Council maintain close coordination with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Division of Conference Management in the planning of Council activities and work, and regular meetings are held at the working and senior levels between OHCHR and the Division. Following a meeting between the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, the President and the Bureau of the Council to discuss the servicing of the Council by the Division, a tripartite task force was established to examine the problems relevant to the work of the Council. The task force, which comprised representatives from the Office of the President, OHCHR and the Division of Conference Management, identified as major challenges the steadily increasing servicing requirements of the Council. These included in particular the increasing number of new mandates that have to be serviced from “within existing resources” and the need to address the entire spectrum of servicing requirements, ranging from conference servicing, administration and security to webcasting.

17. The above-mentioned coordinating body has jointly produced documentation endorsing the mutual and specific requirements to support the Council and its mechanisms, and is similarly taking action to address issues of broader significance relating to standards of accessibility for universal participation by persons with disabilities in the Council’s proceedings. The close cooperation engendered by the task force has led to a number of solutions to the issues of the processing of universal periodic review reports, namely, the issuance of outstanding reports and the establishment of word limits and joint planning efforts, as a result of which almost all review reports are submitted, translated and processed in a timely manner. The task force also meets to review the status of compliance with planning targets and to discuss measures to address potential difficulties before they reach Member States. In this regard, responsible officers of the Division of Conference

Management address the Council periodically to inform and advise Member States on the current situation and any issues foreseen.

#### **IV. Secretariat support for the Human Rights Council**

18. Since the establishment of the Council in 2006, its activities have continued to expand, becoming more dynamic and demanding in terms of the services required. In addition to the 10 weeks of meetings that the Council holds pursuant to General Assembly resolution 60/251, the Council also holds the following activities on a regular basis:

- Open-ended organizational meetings at the beginning of each Council year to consider the agenda and set the annual programme of work and other procedural issues
- Organizational meetings before and, if necessary, at each Council session to discuss organizational and procedural issues particular to that session (convened by the President of the Council)
- Informative consultations/meetings on prospective resolutions or decisions (organized by the President of the Council or convened by main sponsors)

19. Furthermore, there has been an exponential increase in the number of panels, interactive dialogues, seminars and round tables held by the Council, all requiring significant support from the Council secretariat in terms of both pre- and in-session coordination. This trend is expected to continue.

20. Another new area for the Council is the holding of ad hoc special sessions. Since its inception, the Council has held 13 special sessions. A developing trend is the establishment of fact-finding missions to be carried out as a result of decisions taken at the special sessions. Such missions require intensive secretariat support, which must be provided in addition to the normal support services.

21. The Council requires significantly more media services than did its predecessor body. It is attracting more interest of the press, particularly during high-level segments and the special sessions. To ensure a high degree of transparency and openness in the Council's work, and to increase public awareness and understanding of its proceedings, Council sessions are broadcast live via the Internet. To ensure that up-to-the-minute information reaches delegations and other participants in Council sessions, OHCHR has introduced innovative outreach tools, such as an SMS alert service and a Twitter account, on which last-minute changes to the Council's work programme can be communicated in real time.

22. The Council secretariat provides advice to the President and his/her Bureau on the complexity of the rules and practices that govern its work. It provides substantive support to both the Council and the universal periodic review process, and coordinates the activities at both OHCHR and the United Nations Office at Geneva necessary to ensure the smooth servicing of the Council and its subsidiary bodies. It ensures that the decisions or requests of the Council are followed up and appropriate action is taken.

#### **V. Conclusion**

**23. The Council requires significantly more support than its predecessor, the Commission on Human Rights. The increase in the number of requests addressed to the secretariat, the quasi standing nature of the Council and the numerous and consecutive weeks of meetings, the complexity of the roles played by the secretariat and the diversity of the Council's actions all require greater secretariat support.**

24. As a result, the current level of staffing for the Council will be revisited in the context of the budget preparation for the biennium 2012-2013 to ensure that the Council benefits from the level of staffing actually required.

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