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27 August 2020

Excellency,

I have the honour to write to you today to provide an update on the operational arrangements in place at the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recent months, the Commission has significantly adapted its working methods to meet public health requirements. I am most grateful to the membership of UNECE for agreeing to operate under special procedures temporarily to ensure business continuity at a time when on site meetings at the Palais des Nations were not possible and the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) could not provide interpretation services at all or in a commensurate scope. To meet this exceptional challenge, you authorized critical decision-making after informal consultations and under silence procedure. Delegations also showed great flexibility when deliberating in virtual and hybrid meeting formats to advance our mandated work. The 2020 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development that was held only a few days after the beginning of the confinement is one example, the Conference of European Statisticians another, where the work of UNECE has gone virtual. Since then, many more meetings have increased our experience in working together remotely.

Looking back at recent months, I also wish to put on record the professionalism and the resilience that UNECE staff has shown since the outbreak of the pandemic, where working from the office environment was first suspended and at this time remains limited. The resourcefulness and dedication of my UNECE colleagues to overcome all associated challenges is a testament to our joint commitment to the mandates of UNECE. We will continue to do our utmost to navigate these exceptional circumstances.

On an earlier occasion, I informed you of the work that UNECE has initiated to support member States in their fight against the pandemic. I invite you to consult our dedicated webpage on the UNECE COVID-19 response for an overview of our related activities (<https://www.unece.org/covid-19.html>).

Permanent Representatives of UNECE member States

As the summer is progressing, we had hoped that we could resume much of our normal activity and return to established working methods. Unfortunately, the health situation has not fully stabilized and thus a number of mitigating measures remain in place.

On 27 August 2020, the Director General of UNOG and UNOG Conference Services briefed delegations on the arrangements at the Palais de Nations and the meeting planning for the remainder of 2020. In case you did not have an opportunity to join the discussions, I am attaching their presentation to this letter for ease of reference.

The Director General informed that UNOG's capacity to service meetings of Geneva-based entities remains severely limited, due to a combination of COVID-19 response measures, financial constraints triggered by the liquidity crisis, and the ongoing renovation work of the Strategic Heritage Plan (SHP). As a consequence, the quota for meeting services allocated to UNECE has been reduced from three to only one meeting a day with interpretation. Due to technical constraints, hybrid sessions are usually limited to two-hour timeslots, compared to the traditional three-hour formats of onsite meetings. Practically, this means that UNECE has to reduce its interpreted sessions from 18 hours to 4-6 hours per day.

With this significant reduction in interpreted meetings, UNOG will not be able to support the UNECE Official Calendar of Meetings for the Fourth Quarter of 2020, as originally scheduled. After intensive internal consultations across UNECE and with the Bureaux of our subsidiary bodies on possible mitigating measures, my team is now in discussions with UNOG to develop a revised calendar that makes maximum use of the available support services and seeks to host meetings to the extent possible. It is suggested to prioritize meetings of intergovernmental bodies over expert groups, where needed, taking into account also the importance of facilitating deliberations on issues with particular relevance to the pandemic response and the health and well-being of people in our region. Generally, we will try to accommodate meetings within the different modalities stipulated by the respective Rules of Procedure, considering a combination of formal (interpreted) and informal (English only) sessions, to advance our work. Meetings may have to be shortened and agendas to be reconsidered to focus on business-critical items, in order to accommodate the breadth of mandates under our subprogrammes. Further, it may be prudent to consider the extension of the special procedures for the COVID-19 period to retain the additional flexibility that these arrangements have afforded us in recent months.

As you will appreciate, in this *force majeure* situation, hard choices will have to be made that we all wish we did not have to consider. I will brief you in greater detail, once a proposal is elaborated that specifies possible arrangements, and look forward to your guidance and support in addressing this difficult situation that is unprecedented in the history of our organization.

Regrettably, today, I already have to advise that UNOG has indicated informally that they will not be in a position to provide in full the resources needed to service even the reduced UNECE meeting quota, as additional technical costs for hybrid meetings have not been budgeted for and reduced allotments of Regular Budget resources do not cover all staffing needs of conference services for the remainder of 2020. Once we have a full costing of the additional expenditure associated to the revised calendar, I will seek your support to meet the funding gap and hope that you can support the important work of UNECE generously.

I take this opportunity to renew my best wishes for your health and wellbeing, and that of your delegations and your families, in these uncertain times. Please be assured that UNECE stands ready to support its membership in addressing the pandemic and in advancing our mandated work.

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



Olga Algayerova

Enclosure