



# CENTER FOR UN REFORM EDUCATION

## Interview No. 13 Secretariat Accountability is the Fundamental Issue for Member States

by Lydia Swart  
18 December 2007

*An Interview with Mr. Rajat Saha, Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.*

In January 2008, Rajat Saha will report back for duty at the foreign ministry in New Delhi, after serving three years on the Fifth Committee and nine years on the ACABQ (Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions). For almost two and a half years, he served as its Chairman, taking over from Vladimir Kuznetsov who was found guilty of money laundering. Regrettably, the reputation of the ACABQ did suffer for a while, Saha admits, though there was also recognition that an individual's behavior did not represent a collective failure of the ACABQ.

The UN's 192 Member States heavily rely on the in-depth analysis that the ACABQ provides on all budgetary issues. Saha estimates that only approximately five percent of its advice ends up amended. Its 16 members represent the various geographical regions and are elected by the General Assembly for a period of three years and may be reappointed for subsequent terms. As so many of its members first serve on behalf of their countries as delegates in the GA's Fifth Committee – where divisions and differences in priorities between the North and South are very apparent – I asked Saha whether they don't bring rather specific political attitudes and perceptions to their new job on the ACABQ. In other words, has the ACABQ not become more politicized over the years by picking so many of its members from within the Fifth Committee? From Saha's perspective, the ACABQ is not overly politicized. In 95% of the cases, he estimates, there is no political interference. All in all, he is quite pleased with the consensus process. New ACABQ members, he admits, may take up to a year to grow into their role, realizing that they do not represent a particular country or grouping of Member States anymore. He added that successfully imparting on new members that their role is to frame highly technical questions on very complex issues, has been one of the most satisfying aspects of his role as Chairman. Without exception, he feels, each member significantly grows in his or her role as independent expert.

The late issuance of reports by the Secretary General has a serious impact on the work of the ACABQ, Saha believes. It forces the ACABQ now and then to rush its work which may result in mistakes. It also causes the ACABQ to regularly have to work during weekends. Not only do the 'author departments' – the departments in the UN Secretariat from which the reports originate - produce their reports late, the internal discussions that follow are "too open-ended." Too many actors within the Secretariat feel they need to contribute to the final version of reports. Member States have repeatedly indicated that the late issuance of reports is of great concern, but, according to Saha, unless there are sanctions against those who delay the reports, he does not expect much improvement.

Stressing that he is speaking in his personal capacity, Saha admits that the Secretary General is being given more and more tasks by the General Assembly and Security Council. And importantly, when resolutions are passed, they are not accompanied with the required resources. “Money does not come up front.” On the other hand, the Secretariat is continuing its business as usual. It responds to the new tasks by demanding additional posts and other resources. But unless the Secretariat improves its business processes and institutes some real change, things are unlikely to improve. Member States are now expecting considerable improvement in the way the UN does its business: better efficiency, more transparency, less fragmentation, more cohesiveness. Accountability is the fundamental issue and incentives or sanctions will need to be put in place in order to change things.

Issues of accountability are being dealt with by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, Joint Inspection Unit and Board of Auditors. And the newly instituted Independent Audit Advisory Committee is expected to play an important part in reviewing the work of these bodies, hopefully resulting in something “different than business as usual.” Saha feels that these bodies should come up with good ideas and suggestions to improve the way the UN Secretariat operates. Stressing that the ACABQ is an advisory, and not an audit body, Saha feels that the ACABQ has been able to draw conclusions or inferences from the work of these bodies, resulting in pertinent questions which probably should have been noted by them in the first place. For instance, the rate and durations of vacancies in various UN departments is very significant. Why ask for new positions if you have so many vacancies that remain open for such a long time? And positions opened by retirement are known well in advance – why does it take so long to fill them? Also, why have the travel budgets in many departments exceeded the estimated amounts? Can some travel be avoided by more tele-conferencing or electronic communication? When the OIOS will start to ask such questions, “the Secretariat will wake up.”

The most irritation and dissatisfaction felt by the Chairman is caused by lack of mobility of UN staff. Too many staff members in New York enjoy a “cushy” job compared to those in the field and mobility should be better institutionalized and done in a “less opaque,” much more transparent way, to avoid perceptions of unfairness. Reform of Human Resources Management, Saha indicates, will hopefully come up at the second resumed session in May and mobility is expected to be on the agenda.

As to the new system of Administration of Justice, Saha believes that no amount of money or efforts of restructuring the internal system of justice will lead to a better structure unless the basic Staff Rules and Regulations are reviewed. With substantial improvement on rules and regulations, he believes, 50% of the cases will “disappear,” especially those dealing with grievances about hiring and promotions. As to the question of whether daily workers should also have recourse to the new system of internal justice – a view promoted by the G77 – Saha said that anyone working for the UN should have some recourse to justice, but that he imagines that with a proper contract, few cases would actually exist.

While walking back from his offices to the Vienna Café in the UN’s basement, Saha openly wondered how his chairmanship has been perceived by Member States. From the many smiles and nods he received on the way, one would guess he is well-regarded. None of these, however, came from Secretariat staff, as far as I could tell.