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Precedence of representatives to the United Nations: note by the Secretary-General

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1. The precedence of members of diplomatic missions sent by one State to another, which is dealt with in articles 16 and 17 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations¹ done at Vienna on 18 April 1961, is a relatively simple question in comparison with the precedence of representatives to international organizations. In regard to members of diplomatic missions, there are usually only three basic principles² which govern precedence, and they are the following:

- (a) Class in the diplomatic service of the sending State;
- (b) The question whether or not the person concerned is the chargé d'affaires of his mission;
- (c) The date and time at which the person concerned has taken up his functions.

Article 17 provides that the head of the mission shall give notification of the precedence of the members of the diplomatic staff.

2. The precedence of representatives to the United Nations depends upon the combination of a larger number of criteria than those applicable in the case of diplomatic missions sent by one State to another. Two of the criteria are the same, namely, class or rank of the person concerned in the service of his country, and whether the person concerned is the chargé d'affaires of his mission, but both of these criteria require further explanation in the context of the United Nations.

3. As regards the ranks of representatives, the United Nations has a very wide range to deal with, ranging from Heads of State downwards, and including some persons who do not have rank in the usual diplomatic classes.

In accordance with international practice, Heads of State are always given first precedence. Heads of Government follow thereafter, and lower in the order of precedence come deputy Heads of Government, Ministers for Foreign Affairs, and other Cabinet Ministers. On what might be called the ambassadorial level, there are a large number of persons to be dealt with, since there are not only delegations to the General Assembly and other organs, each of which may contain several ambassadors, but also permanent missions to the United Nations, in which it is becoming more and more usual to find several persons of ambassadorial rank. Chairmen of delegations to the General Assembly are given precedence over deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs and over permanent representatives. Within the category of permanent representatives, precedence is accorded in the order of personal diplomatic rank, and chargés d'affaires of permanent missions follow thereafter, also in the order of personal diplomatic rank. Next come representatives to the General Assembly³ of ambassadorial or equivalent rank, then alternate representatives with ambassadorial rank, and finally representatives and alternate representatives without ambassadorial rank, the representatives preceding the alternates. The names of representatives are notified to the United Nations in a certain order, and this order serves as a basis for precedence within the various classes; thus all first representatives of ambassadorial rank have precedence over all second representatives with that rank, all first alternates over all second alternates, etc.

³ Article 9 of the Charter provides that "Each Member shall have not more than five representatives in the General Assembly". Rule 25 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly adds that there may also be not more than five alternate representatives, and as many advisers, technical advisers, experts and persons of similar status as may be required.

¹ United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 500, pp. 104 and 106.

² Apart from the practice in some States, referred to in paragraph 3 of article 16, of according precedence to the representative of the Holy See.

4. As regards *chargés d'affaires*, in diplomatic practice those accredited by letters from their Foreign Ministers to the Foreign Minister of the receiving State are given precedence over *chargés d'affaires ad interim*. This distinction is not made in United Nations practice, since it is not usual for *chargés d'affaires* of permanent missions to be accredited by Foreign Ministers.

5. Apart from the foregoing, there are two other criteria of precedence which are applied in the practice of the United Nations. First, the General Assembly and other organs elect officers, whose position must be recognised by appropriate precedence, at least while the organs are in session. The principal organs of the United Nations are listed in order in Article 7 (1) of the Charter. First comes the General Assembly, and its President is in the practice of the Organization given precedence over all other representatives. Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly with the rank of Foreign Minister or Cabinet Minister are ranked immediately following Heads of Government, and other vice-presidents rank after the presidents of principal organs other than the General Assembly.

6. The foregoing criteria are not sufficient to settle all questions of precedence, since there may be persons of equal rank in almost all classes. When this situation occurs in ordinary diplomatic protocol, precedence is settled on the basis of the date and time at which the person concerned has taken up his functions. This criterion, however, is not well adapted for use in connexion with sessions of the organs of the United Nations, since almost all representatives take up their functions at the same time. Therefore this criterion is never used by the United Nations, but is replaced by the criterion of alphabetical order of the names of States represented. Since it would be inequitable always to give precedence to countries whose names appear early in the alphabet, the name of a country from which the alphabetical order

will start throughout the following year is drawn every year before the opening of the regular session of the General Assembly. This order is used for the seating of the General Assembly and other organs, and may also serve for the order of precedence for official events. At Headquarters the English alphabetical order is used, but when United Nations organs meet in French-speaking countries, the alphabetical order is in French. The wishes of countries concerning their appellations are taken into account and thus there is some variation of practice; for example "Congo (Democratic Republic of)" is alphabetized under "c", but the United Republic of Tanzania" is alphabetized under "u" in English.

7. Under the rules of procedure of the various organs,⁴ the alphabetical order of the names of States is also used in determining the order in which a roll-call vote is taken, the name of Member being called in the English alphabetical order of the names of Members, beginning with the Member whose name is drawn by lot by the presiding officer. In addition, the rules of procedure of the various organs contain several provisions concerning precedence in the order of speaking. As a general rule, the presiding officer calls upon representatives in the order in which they signify their desire to speak.⁵ However, in the General Assembly and its committees, for example, the chairman and rapporteur of a committee may be accorded precedence for the purpose of explaining conclusions arrived at by their committees.⁶

⁴ See, for example, rules 89 and 128 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and rule 61 of the rules of procedure of the Economic and Social Council.

⁵ For example, rules 70 and 111 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and rule 27 of the provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council.

⁶ For example, rules 71 and 112 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and rule 29 of the provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council.