INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE TRIBUNALS
IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Conference

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SUMMARY

FOREWORD ................................................................. 9

OFFICIAL OPENING

J. BARBOZA, Member and former President, UNAT,
President of the Organizing Committee of the Conference ............. 15

ADRESSES

A. TULBURN, Chairman of the Sixth Committee, Administration of justice
at the United Nations ...................................................... 21
A. BARCENA, United Nations Under Secretary-General
for Management .......................................................... 25
B. KINGSBURY, Professor at New York University Law School .......... 29

INDEPENDENCE AND POWERS
OF INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE TRIBUNALS

N. ANGELET / A. WEVERS, Challenges to Immunities on the Basis of the
Right to a Fair Trial ...................................................... 33
A. REINSCH, Administrative Tribunals and Questions of Jurisdiction and
Immunity ..................................................................... 51
B. STERN, The Implied Powers of UNAT in the Discharge of its
Jurisdictional Function ................................................... 73
M. VICEN-MILBURN, The Independence of the UN Administrative
Tribunal and its Legacy .................................................. 105
D.S. WIPUWARDANE, Some Organizational Issues ......................... 119
ACCESS TO JUSTICE / DUE PROCESS

A. K. Baxter / S. Flogaitis, What Process is Due? The Sokoloff Case.............................................................................. 129
K. Haugh, International Administrative Tribunals in a Changing World .............................................................................. 153
D. Ruzie, An Outside View of the Tribunal .................................................................................................................. 159
J. R. Scott / A. K. Baxter, The Persuasion of Powell .................................................................................................. 165
M. Struvenberg, International Administrative Law: Due Process in the Justice System .................................................................................. 173

INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE:
ACCOUNTABILITY AND ADMINISTRATIVE JUSTICE

S. Batti, Political Fragmentation and Administrative Integration: The Role of the International Civil Service ........................................................................ 181
D. Kingsbury / R. B. Stewart, Legitimacy and Accountability in Global Regulatory Governance: The Emerging Global Administrative Law and the Design and Operation of Administrative Tribunals of International Organizations ................................................................ 193
A. Axenidou, An Account of Accountability .................................................................................................................. 221
S. Cassesse, The Constitutional Function of Supranational Courts: From Global Legal Space to Global Legal Order ........................................................................... 231

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

S. Yee, Immunities and Operational Biases:
General Concluding Remarks .................................................................................................................. 251

CLOSING REMARKS

J. Barboza, Member and former President, UNAT,
President of the Organizing Committee of the Conference ........................................................................ 259
IMMUNITIES AND OPERATIONAL BIASES:
GENERAL CONCLUDING REMARKS

Sienho Yee*

It is a great pleasure for me and for us all, I believe, to have been here at the Conference. We have heard a great deal. We have heard from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and the Under-Secretary-General for Management. We have heard from insiders including several members of the Tribunal. We have also heard from outsiders including professors and practitioners. We have learned a great deal, a great deal about the independence and powers of the international administrative tribunals, about access to justice and due process, and about accountability and administrative justice in the international civil service generally. As the presentations and discussions have been excellent, I shall not bore you with a detailed review of any of them. I shall try to draw some general inspirations from them and make some general remarks.

Indeed, as Professor Barboza said in his opening remarks, the Conference is being held at an auspicious time. This is an auspicious time because internally within the United Nations the UNAT is at a pivotal moment when the existing system is sun-setting and a new system will soon be ushered in. This is also an auspicious time because generally international law is perceived to be moving in a direction of co-progressiveness[1], with all-inclusiveness and advancements in ethical and moral terms as the main concern, while the record of progress of international organizations may be a mixed one. There is news about scandal after scandal, not to mention various other lesser issues. This situation is all the more less than ideal in the light of the expectation that international organizations are supposed to be the vanguard of progress in the international community. This situation

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has been described by one commentator as a "clash of operational and
normative activities of international institutions". This indeed may prompt
one to ask whether the international organizations practice what they
preach.

Held at such a moment, this Conference is bound to give us much food
for thought both regarding the immediate concerns with administrative jus-
tice and regarding general concerns with international justice. We know
that in an imperfect world, there is a battle or, to put it more lightly, ten-
sion between peace and justice. Applied to our immediate concerns, it is
the battle between effectiveness and justice. From the presentations, I can
see that the battle ground is on two fronts: immunities and operational
biases in the system of international administrative justice. Each of these is
of great importance.

Regarding immunities, international organizations and their staff are
granted by treaties certain immunities from the jurisdiction of the courts of
States members2, in order to promote the effectiveness of the organiza-
tions. As we know, immunities are always in tension with justice. The con-

clict between immunities and justice almost always results in disadvantages
for justice. This state of affairs, in turn, results in attempts to remove the
immunities of international organizations and/or to pursue reparation
through lawsuits against States members of international organizations.
The presentations made today demonstrate that within the context of the
particular facts presented in the cases, the courts have allowed immunities
if there is an internal justice system within an international organization
which can be deemed a fair alternative to courts. The presentations were
solid and I shall not repeat anything. So here lies the importance of the ad-
ministrative justice system of international organizations. If this system is
not strengthened, there may be one day when it is not considered as "a fair
alternative to courts", leading to unpleasant results for the international
organizations.

Furthermore, I believe the international system as a whole may be inter-
ested in three other issues. That is to say, these issues are not problems that

2 SUH-HEE AAG, "Clash" of operational and normative activities of international
institutions, in: LAURENCE BOISSON DE CHAZOURNES / VERA GOWLLAND-DERBA (eds.), The International Legal System in Quest of Equity and Universality: Liber
Anuario Georges Abi-Saab (2001), 145.

3 Non-State members of international organizations exist and their rights and ob-
gligations may be analogous to those of States members. For simplicity, I will deal
with only States members.
the administrative justice system itself can solve. The first issue is whether the scope of immunities of international organizations and their staff should be reduced. As we know, the immunities of international organizations are normally absolute and the functional immunity of the staff members is all-encompassing as long as a matter is within the scope of his or her function. Currently, there are some US cases in which the question whether functional immunity should be reserved for only the most important function - discretionary function, and not all and sundry functions was presented, although not yet finally adjudicated. This is an issue worth considering.

The second issue is to what extent a State member should be responsible for acts and/or omission of an international organization. If so, a claimant can press his or her grievances against members of the organization, in order to go around immunities of the latter or other inconveniences. On this issue, there is an on-going debate in official bodies as well as in literature and I shall not rehash that debate here except to say that a mature system in the end should leave no injury uncompensated for.

The third issue is how to deal with third parties to an international organization. As the activities of international organizations increase, third parties to an international organization will assume greater importance in the future. To the extent that the immunities of international organizations are more or less a creature of treaty law, third parties have a greater claim to justice and may have an easier task in persuading courts to curtail the privileges of international organizations. As a result, it is important for the international organizations to properly deal with their relationship with third parties.

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Turning to the "operational biases", let me first explain what I mean by that term. "Operational biases" essentially are legal standards that embody a certain system-wide decision favoring or disfavoring one of the players in the system, often by setting up a certain threshold to be surmounted by one side or by tipping the balance at which the opposing sides are almost neck to neck. For example, the famous "Chevron deference"⁶ in US administrative law essentially favors reasonable administrative agency decision-making over judicial decision-making under some circumstances. That bias can be summed up roughly as "Where in doubt, rule in favor of the Administrative Agency".

The presentations made today have presented phenomena that can be re-cast as biases in the system. For example, the reluctance of the UNAT to hold that it has implied jurisdiction to enforce its own decisions, as discussed and criticized by Professor Stern⁷, in my view constitutes such an operational bias. It can be characterized as "Unless expressly provided for, the UNAT has no implied powers to deal with how to enforce its decisions". Interestingly, the UNAT itself seems to be taking a view opposite to that of the International Court of Justice in the Renunciation⁸ advisory powers in order to effectively perform its functions. Another operational bias that has been discussed by more than one speaker is the decision not to award attorney's fees to the complainant except in extreme cases. Often this will make any success in litigation against an international organization a pyrrhic victory.

As we can see, both of these biases embody standards that favor the organizations against the individual, thus making the individuals bear the costs of the administrative justice system, particularly when it breaks down. A fair system, however, should be the other way around: the organizations should bear the costs of the justice system. We must remember that in any conflict between an individual and an international organization, the individual is almost always fighting at a great disadvantage. If an individual is made to bear the costs of the system, he or she has to bear them alone; if the organization is made to bear them, it can pass on the costs to a wide spectrum of players, making it easier for each to bear part of them. In the

⁸ ICJ Reports 1949, 174.
light of this and other factors, I would recommend that the operational biases be thoroughly reviewed, revised and improved upon for greater fairness.

These are my general observations about and, inspired by, the speeches, presentations, and discussions that I have heard today. Let us congratulate the speakers and the organizers on a successful Conference and let us hope the international administrative justice system will become fairer and fairer.