

Topical Issues Procedure

This paper has been prepared as an aid to the Coordinating Committee's deliberations, in response to the Committee's request at its 2 December meeting.

Background

The Coordinating Committee, at its 11 November meeting, agreed "that if delegations sought to make urgent statements regarding topical issues, the Chairperson could at her absolute discretion agree to make available a short period of time for such statements, and responses others might wish to make, at a convenient point in the Forum's business."

Point at Issue

Despite this agreement, when such a procedure was put into operation at the Forum's 4th meeting on 25 November, on the request of one delegation and following consideration by the Chairperson, it appeared that there was not, in fact, consensus among delegations as to how topical issues should be addressed. It was, accordingly, decided that the procedure regulating the making of topical statements should be re-examined by the Coordinating Committee at its meeting on 2 December.

Discussion in Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee discussed this issue at some length.

There was a preponderance of views that it would be preferable to drop the formal procedure of having a particular period in which topical issues could be raised. It was noted that members, including the Chairperson, had the possibility of raising topical issues in the course of general debate. One proposal was that the procedure be dropped in its present format and replaced by a written procedure.

Those in favour of dropping the procedure as agreed on 11 November felt that its use

would not advance the purposes of the Forum as set out in its terms of reference. Where a delegation raised a matter, other delegations might perceive that delegation as potentially gaining an advantage in terms of media and public perception. They might accordingly feel constrained to put on record their own positions or actions on the same or other issues. This could lead to the procedure taking up a disproportionate amount of the Forum's time .

Some delegations, while not necessarily discounting the risks just mentioned, considered nevertheless that the Forum should not be precluded from dealing with topical issues of real urgency and general relevance. It was accepted that in the event of a continuing procedure being decided upon, the Chairperson and secretariat would need very clear guidelines as to admissibility criteria. One possible approach would be to screen issues for admissibility on the morning of the Forum meeting in question at the earlier meeting of the Coordinating Committee. An alternative procedure suggested was on the basis of the adjournment debate in the Dail.

It was suggested that the Chairperson should be able to note or welcome non-controversial issues on behalf of the Forum, e.g. the appointment of the U.S. Government Super-Coordinator.

The decision of the Coordinating Committee in the end was that the procedure as originally agreed should be suspended, and that the secretariat would table a revised proposal on the Forum's approach to topical issues, taking into account the views expressed.

A Possible Approach towards Topical Issues

On the basis of the concerns and views outlined above, the following package of measures is proposed as an appropriate approach by the Forum to issues of topical concern:

1. That there be no provision for the consideration of topical issues by the Forum in a special Chairperson's Time, nor any other formal "grievance time" procedure.
2. That a written procedure be introduced whereby delegations can table topical issues. All such papers can be considered as input informing discussion of the sectoral

issue(s) to which they pertain, e.g. the Sinn Fein paper on the British Army, circulated 25 November is relevant to Policing and Justice Issues.

3. That it be open to other delegations, if they wish, to table a paper on a given topic
4. That the Chairperson may refer to non-controversial topical issues in her opening remarks
5. Delegations would, of course, retain the possibility of raising relevant issues of topicality in the course of general debate.

Forum Secretariat
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