
1. INTRODUCTION

In early 1995, the United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders will be held for the ninth time. These quinquennial United Nations congresses have long established themselves as key events in the shaping of international strategies for the combating of crime and for the development and implementation of internationally recognized norms and standards for criminal justice. They have been called to discuss common problems, share professional experiences and seek viable solutions to crime. Their recommendations were intended to have an impact on the legislative bodies of the United Nations – the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – and on national and local Governments.

The United Nations congresses are unique among major United Nations meetings in that they bring together three categories of participants: representatives of governments, representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and individual experts and scholars of international repute, representing the professional and academic community. This diversity has lent special credibility to the efforts aimed at international cooperation in criminal policy, enriched the congresses and fostered the cross-fertilization of knowledge and know-how between policy-makers, administrators, practitioners, researchers and advocates of justice reform.

In recent years, as reported in an earlier issue of this journal, there have been major changes in the overall United Nations crime prevention and criminal justice programme. How do these changes affect the role of the congresses, and what can be expected of the Ninth Congress in particular under these new circumstances?

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2. CONGRESS IN THE NEW DISPENSATION

The new role of the quinquennial congresses was spelt out by the Ministerial Meeting on the Creation of an Effective United Nations Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme which was held in Paris in November 1991^ and embodied in an annex to a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations.\(^\text{7}\) In this resolution the Assembly specified that the congresses should serve as a forum for

- The exchange of views between States, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and individual experts representing various professions and disciplines;
- The exchange of experiences in research, law and policy development;
- The identification of emerging trends and issues in crime prevention and criminal justice;
- The provision of advice and comments to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice on selected matters submitted to it by the Commission;
- The submission of suggestions, for the consideration of the Commission, regarding possible subjects for the programme of work.\(^\text{8}\)

The emphasis which has been placed on using future congresses as fora for the exchange of ideas represents, in some ways, a return to their historical roots. The modern series of United Nations crime congresses, which started in 1955, developed out of an earlier line of quinquennial international congresses, namely those of the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission (IPPC), which, between 1885 and 1910 and between 1925 and 1935, also sought to bring together representatives of governments and criminal justice practitioners.\(^\text{9}\)

The General Assembly, by its resolution 415(V) of 1 December 1950 mandated the United Nations to take over the function of the IPPC and called for convening international congresses every five years.

Of course, there have been considerable changes since the time of the First Congress. Conferences that serve as fora for the exchange of information have become numerous, especially those organized by non-governmental organizations. The new formula of the Ninth Congress should be considered in this context and, at the same time, as a framework for action-oriented exchange of a more fundamental type: between East and West, and South and North, between representatives of progressive and traditionally oriented criminal justice systems, and between practitioners interested in sharing experiences and offering technical and substantive advice on possible solutions in matters of common concern.

Over the years, the scope of the Congress has increased greatly. While the early congresses focussed on penal reform and juvenile justice, the modern congresses cover almost every issue in the crime field. The congresses also became fora for intergovernmental action. This was reflected in the resolutions and instruments which were approved by the congresses and

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6. The Meeting was held from 21 to 23 November. See General Assembly document A/46/703 of 26 November 1991.