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LEAGUE OF NATIONS

PROGRESSIVE CODIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

OBSERVATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENTS'

Series I.

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¹ Although the Secretary-General's letter (C.L.21.1931.V) to the Governments fixed July 15th, 1931, as the date before which replies should be received, he has felt it would be convenient that he should not wait until this date before communicating the observations which have already reached him. The observations received from other Governments will be circulated as supplements to the present document.



I. NOTE BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

At the Assembly's session of 1930, the First Committee proposed to the Assembly the following resolution which was adopted by it on October 3rd, 1930:

"The Assembly has taken note of the work of the Conference which was held at The Hague in March and April 1930, as a result of the initiative taken by the Assembly by its resolution of September 22nd, 1924, regarding the progressive codification of international law:

'It reaffirms the great interest taken by the League in the development of international law, inter alia, by codification, and considers it to be one of the most important tasks of the League to further such development by all the means in its

power;
"The recommendations made by the Conference contain suggestions of the highest value, and must be taken into account in examining what would be the best methods

of continuing the work which has been begun;

"The Assembly accordingly decides to adjourn the question to its next session; "Requests the Council, in the meanwhile, to invite the Members of the League of Nations and the non-Member States to communicate to it, if they so desire, their observations on these suggestions, in order that these observations may be taken into consideration by the Assembly.

The First Committee further expressed the opinion that the various draft resolutions on the subject of progressive codification which had been submitted to it might be discussed at the Assembly's next session.

The Recommendations of the Hague Conference and the draft Resolutions submitted

to the First Committee of the Assembly in 1930 were in the following terms:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HAGUE CONFERENCE.

I.

The Conference:

With a view to facilitating the progressive codification of international law:

Recommends that, in the future, States should be guided, as far as possible, by the provisions of the Acts of the First Conference for the Codification of International Law in any special conventions which they may conclude among themselves.

II.

The Conference:

Highly appreciating the scientific work which has been done for codification in general

and in regard to the subjects on its agenda in particular:

Cordially thanks the authors of such work and considers it desirable that subsequent Conferences for the codification of international law should also have fresh scientific work at their disposal and that with this object, international and national Institutions should undertake at a sufficiently early date the study of the fundamental questions of international law, particularly the principles and rules and their application, with special reference to the points which are placed on the agenda of such Conferences.

III.

The Conference:

Considering it to be desirable that there should be as wide as possible a co-ordination

of all the efforts made for the codification of international law:

Recommends that the work undertaken with this object under the auspices of the League of Nations and that undertaken by the Conferences of American States may be carried on in the most complete harmony with one another.

The Conference:

Calls the attention of the League of Nations to the necessity of preparing the work of the next Conference for the Codification of International Law a sufficient time in advance to enable the discussion to be carried on with the necessary rapidity and in the light of the information which is essential.

For this purpose the Conference would consider it desirable that the preparatory work should be organised on the following basis:

The Committee entrusted with the task of selecting a certain number of subjects suitable for codification by convention might draw up a report indicating briefly and clearly the reasons why it appears possible and desirable to conclude international agreements on the subjects selected. This report should be sent to the Governments for their opinion. The Council of the League of Nations might then draw up the list of the subjects to be studied, having regard to the opinions expressed by the Governments.

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- 2. An appropriate body might be given the task of drawing up, in the light of all the data furnished by legal science and actual practice, a draft convention upon each question selected for study.
- 3. The draft conventions should be communicated to the Governments with a request for their observations upon the essential points. The Council would endeavour to obtain replies from as large a number of Governments as possible.
- 4. The replies so received should be communicated to all the Governments with a request both for their opinion as to the desirability of placing such draft conventions on the agenda of a Conference and also for any fresh observations which might be suggested to them by the replies of the other Governments upon the drafts.
- 5. The Council might then place on the programme of the Conference such subjects as were formally approved by a very large majority of the Powers which would take part therein.

2. DRAFT RESOLUTIONS SUBMITTED TO THE FIRST COMMITTEE IN 1930.

I. DRAFT RESOLUTION SUBMITTED BY M. ORESTES FERRARA (CUBA).

Whereas the Conference of the Codification of International Law, held at The Hague in 1930, adopted a Convention on Nationality, and some States represented at the Conference did not accept it in its entirety, or submitted reservations in respect of certain articles thereof, and, further, no State has hitherto ratified this Convention;

Whereas the same Conference, after approving the Convention on Nationality, adopted a resolution recommending the States to study the possibility of introducing into their respective legislations the principle of the equality of the sexes in matters of nationality;

Whereas the First Commission is instructed by the Assembly to consider Item 19 of

the agenda regarding the Progressive Codification of International Law:

The Cuban delegation proposes to the Commission to submit to the Assembly, among the other points dealt with in its decisions on Codification, the following resolution:

"The Assembly begs the Council to examine whether it would be desirable to take up again, with a view to the next Conference for the Codification of International Law, the question of the nationality of women.

II. DRAFT RESOLUTION SUBMITTED BY THE IRISH DELEGATION.

The Assembly:

Expressing appreciation of the work done by the first Conference for the Codification of International Law;

Affirming its determination to make an ever-increasing contribution towards the

progressive codification of international law

Desiring that the important work already accomplished, and the efforts to be made in the future for such codification, should be continued and directed in a manner most

likely to produce the best possible results;
And, noting, in this connection, the recommendations of the first Codification Conference as to future action in regard to the progressive codification of international law:

Requests the Council to appoint a Committee to examine those recommendations, and to suggest such further or other measures as may appear most likely to facilitate and encourage such codification, and to prepare a report in sufficient time for submission to the twelfth ordinary session of the Assembly.

III. DRAFT RESOLUTION SUBMITTED BY THE BRITISH, FRENCH, GERMAN, GREEK AND ITALIAN DELEGATIONS.

The Assembly:

Having considered the work of the Conference which was held at The Hague in March and April 1930, as a result of the initiative taken by the Assembly by its resolution of September 22nd, 1924, regarding the progressive codification of international law:

Reaffirms the great interest taken by the League of Nations in the development of

international law, and considers it to be one of the most important tasks of the League

to further such development by all the means in its power.

The Assembly considers that the experience which has been acquired in the process of preparing for the above-mentioned Conference, and as a result of the meeting of the Conference, renders it desirable to recognise a distinction between the gradual formulation and development of customary international law, which should result progressively from the practice of States and the development of international jurisprudence, and the formulation in international Conventions, freely accepted by the States, of precise rules, whether derived from customary international law or entirely new in character, to govern particular relations between States the regulation of which by general agreement is found to be of immediate practical importance.

The Assembly considers that the term "codification" as applied to the work for the development of international law undertaken by the League of Nations should be understood as an activity of the last-mentioned character, and that, in present circumstances, as was shown by the experience of the Conference at The Hague, it is not for the League or the Conferences convened by it to endeavour to formulate the rules which are binding upon States as part of the customary law of nations.

The Assembly notes that, as already recognised in its resolution of September 22nd, 1924, the work of the Conferences convened as the result of the activities of the existing technical organisations of the League constitutes a work of codification in the above-

The Assembly welcomes the recommendations made by the Conference of The Hague in its Final Act as giving suggestions of the highest value regarding the preparation to be

made by the League for future international conferences;
And, being desirous that the eventual development of the organisation of the League, for the realisation of the policy set out in the present resolution, should be considered after full opportunity has been allowed to all the Members of the League to examine the results of the experience already acquired, it decides to consider at an early session in what conditions and by what methods of procedure the work of codification can most usefully be pursued.

IV. DRAFT RESOLUTION SUBMITTED BY THE NORWEGIAN AND SWEDISH DELEGATIONS.

The Assembly:

Having considered the work of the Conference which met at The Hagne in March and April 1930, as a result of the Assembly resolution of September 22nd, 1924, concerning the progressive codification of international law:

Reaffirms the high importance which the League attaches to the development of international law, and expresses the opinion that one of the most important duties of the

League is to encourage such development by every means in its power.

The Assembly is of opinion that the term "codification", applied to the work of developing international law undertaken by the League of Nations, should be interpreted as meaning the embodiment in a series of international conventions, freely accepted by States, of definite rules, either based on customary international law or being entirely new law, to govern such forms of private interstate relations as it may seem immediately practical and important to regulate by general agreement.

The Assembly recognises that the recommendations submitted by the Hague Conference in its Final Act contain most valuable suggestions for the preparation by the League of

future international Conferences.

Requests the Council to institute an enquiry with a view to determining, in the light of past experience, how the work of codification may best be continued, and decides to include this question in the agenda of its next session.

V. PROPOSAL BY M. ROLIN (BELGIUM).

Replace paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of the proposal of the British, French, German, Greek and Italian delegations by the following:

"Expresses the opinion:

"That it is of the essence of any undertaking in the field of codification of international law that it should deal with matters which are wholly or partly governed by international law or by particular conventions;

"But that it has been shown by the experience already acquired in this field by

the League of Nations that it is hardly practicable to assign as the object of codification conventions the determination of the existing customary law, since new elements must necessarily be introduced in any endeavour of the kind in question;

"That, moreover, attempts imprudently undertaken in such a sense involve the risk of enfeebling law which is already in process of formation and of which the consolidation and development may be expected from the progress of international

practice and jurisprudence;

"That, accordingly, while it is advantageous that documentation regarding international practice and jurisprudence should be brought together for the purposes of the preparation for codification Conferences, it will be desirable that henceforth the discussion should be to a greater degree directed towards examination of the value of the rules which it is contemplated to adopt for the future.

VI. DRAFT RESOLUTION SUBMITTED BY THE ITALIAN DELEGATION.

The Assembly:

Considering that the First Conference for the Codification of International Law constitutes the starting-point in the work of codification and that this work should be

Considering that the suggestions and recommendations made by the Conference, and the results of the Conference, are deserving of most careful examination and consideration with a view to ascertaining the best methods of pursuing the work which has been commenced:

Decides to adjourn the question to its next session.

On January 19th, 1931, the Council instructed the Secretary-General to invite the Members of the League, and the non-member States which were invited to the Hague Conference, to present observations on the question of the progressive codification of international law and to examine in this connection the recommendations of the Hague Conference and the draft resolutions presented to the First Committee of the Assembly in 1930. It further suggested that the consideration of the question by the Assembly would be greatly facilitated if "it were able to approach its task, having before it positive suggestions as to the organisation to be adopted and the procedure to be followed in the future work of codification ".

OBSERVATIONS SUBMITTED BY GOVERNMENTS.

Cuba.

(Letter of May 9th, 1931.)

[Translation].

In your letter now under reply you ask the opinion of our Government concerning the four recommendations quoted above: these impressed us as being eminently satisfactory and acceptable — this without prejudice to the comments made below on the subject matter of Recommendation IV. No. 1.

Two methods can be adopted in the progressive codification of public international law. One of them consists in the selection of those questions which are of topical interest and usually of greatest difficulty — because the different States are not agreed about them with a view to drafting uniform laws to deal with these, which laws would be submitted for the consideration of the nations and discussed later at a codification Conference. The little practical success obtained by the Conference held at The Hague a year ago and by others which might be mentioned, proves that this method does not yield the most immediate and positive results. The other method consists in preparing a kind of synoptic table of all matters susceptible of international agreement in public international law and in choosing from among these, first, all those presenting no substantial difficulty; secondly, those open to doubt on account of differences in practice or in standpoint; and thirdly, those involving serious disagreements in doctrine, in practice and in diplomatic spheres. The codification of the first mentioned would be comparatively simple and would in turn assist the preparation of the others, until finally a code of public international law was arrived at which would be acceptable to the great majority of States.

This is the comment on Recommendation IV. No. 1 of the Hague Conference of 1930 to which we referred at the beginning. Once this general scheme had been prepared and submitted for examination to the various nations concerned so that they might make any additions they deemed desirable and at the same time indicate the order in which they would prefer the questions to be dealt with, it would be very easy for a permanent organisation to give definite form to the drafts, so that later these might be subjected to the procedure fixed in Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the said Recommendation IV of the Conference

of 1930.

The word "codification" should be understood as implying not a mere recapitulation of existing practices, but a genuine legislative operation prepared by States in these codification Commissions through the competent organs, and then submitted to what might be described as a referendum, pending definitive and individual acceptance by each of the countries concerned. This last may demand some active propaganda on the part of the competent organs of the League of Nations, which should be directed, not to seeking points by which the will of each nation should be influenced, but to making direct request for international action by the aforesaid supreme organs.

I have pleasure in communicating this to you for your information and especially for

that of the competent Technical Committee of the Secretariat.

Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

(Letter of April 28th, 1931).

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS.

1. The resolution on the subject of the Progressive Codification of International Law, adopted by the Eleventh Assembly of the League of Nations on October 3rd, 1930, after taking note of the work of the Conference held at The Hague in March and April 1930, and reaffirming the great interest taken by the League of Nations in the development of International Law, called attention to certain suggestions made by the Conference in question and invited Members of the League of Nations and the non-member States to communicate to it their observations on these suggestions. His Majesty's Government

in the United Kingdom desire accordingly to lay certain observations on the subject of the codification of international law before the States referred to in the above resolution. In so doing they assume that it was not the intention of the Assembly that any observations which States might desire to make should necessarily be confined to the specific recommendations made by the Hague Conference.

2. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom desire to preface their observations by reaffirming their view that the development of international law constitutes one of the most important tasks which fall within the activities of the League of Nations. In their view, relations between the Members of the community of nations will only be truly satisfactory in so far as they are based upon the firm foundation of recognised and binding law, and they therefore desire to promote the authority, to extend the scope, and to increase the precision of the system of international law. It is because they hold this view that they are anxious that the future action of the League in this connection should proceed upon lines which are calculated to produce the most satisfactory results. The observations which follow are based, not on any intention to disparage the value of the work which has already been done, but on a desire to make suggestions as to the methods by which this task can most usefully be pursued in future.

METHODS OF DEVELOPING INTERNATIONAL LAW.

- 3. There are three processes by which the development of international law can be forwarded. The first is the gradual establishment of rules of international law by the crystallisation of principles resulting from the general practice of nations and by the development of the jurisprudence resulting from the decisions of international tribunals, in particular the Permanent Court of International Justice. This process is a continuing one and is independent of any action taken by the League; in it the work of professors of international law and of the authors of treaties on the subjects can play a valuable part.
- 4. The second process consists in the free acceptance, by means of law-making conventions, of certain rules by which the parties to such conventions agree to abide in their mutual relations. Such rules may be identical with principles which have already resulted from the operation of the first process, or they may be new, but in either case the purport of the convention is not to lay down what international law already is, but to prescribe certain rules by which the parties to the convention agree thereafter to be bound.¹
- 5. The third process consists in the ascertainment and establishment in precise and accurate legal phraseology of rules of international law which have already come into existence by the operation of the first and second processes. In existing conditions this can only be done by adopting the form of an international convention, but such a convention does not, strictly, have the effect of making new law. Such conventions differ from those made under the second process in that they do not prescribe rules by which the parties agree to be bound in future, but state rules which the parties recognise as already binding upon them. The function of a conference convened for the purpose of drawing up conventions of this character should be confined to ascertaining the precise scope and effect of the rules in question and clothing them in appropriate language.
- 6. The distinction between the second and third processes given above must not be pressed too far. The present state of international law is such that there are few subjects where there is not room for minor differences of opinion as to the existing state of the law, and it may well be that such differences can only be resolved by means of negotiations and agreement at a Conference. But the broad distinction between the two processes is clear.
- 7. The word "codification" can be and has been employed to describe both the second and the third processes. The second process would be accurately described as "legislative codification" and the third as "consolidatory codification". In view, however, of the importance of making clear the distinction between them, it is convenient to employ a separate short title for each, and in the observations which follow "codification" will be used to denote the second process and "consolidation" to describe the third.

RESULTS OF THE HAGUE CONFERENCE.

8. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom are of opinion that much valuable work was done at the recent Hague Conference and that the experience which has been gained should be most valuable for the future development of international law. They think it, however, very important that the situation resulting from the Conference should be carefully examined.

¹ In international law, a treaty or convention is the form which has to be adopted both for the purpose of legislating (i.e., of laying down general rules of conduct) and for the purpose of making a contract about a particular case (i.e., the grant of a privilege or the settlement of a dispute). Consequently, treaties or conventions may fall either into the class of international legislation or into the class of particular contracts, and in some cases one and the same convention may contain some provisions which fall into the one class and others which fall into the other. This distinction between law-making or legislative provisions and particular contracts has to be borne in mind when such provisions are being studied in relation to the development of international law.

- 9. It seems clear that the careful preliminary work which led up to that Conference proceeded on the basis that the task of the Conference was that of consolidation and not codification; and the three subjects assigned to the Conference were chosen, after most careful examination, on the ground that they were generally considered to be those most "ripe" for consolidation. But it can hardly be disputed that on the whole the Conference itself proceeded on the basis that its work was that of codification; and the attitude of many delegates made it clear that, in their view, their task was not so much to assist in the establishment in precise language of already existing principles of international law, as to state and defend certain rules by which their country was prepared to be bound.
- 10. On the subject of nationality, a convention and three protocols were drawn up and signed at the Conference. While far from covering the whole of the subject, these instruments, if generally accepted, will no doubt prove of great utility. But the point to which it is desired to draw special attention is that these instruments constitute almost entirely an example, not of consolidation, but of codification. It is true that the earlier articles in Chapter I of the Convention may be regarded as statements of existing international law. But the great bulk of the instruments in question consists quite plainly of new rules by which the signatories agree for international purposes to be bound; to a large extent they constitute an undertaking by the parties to ensure that their municipal nationality laws contain certain provisions, and this, though it is a valuable procedure, is not laying down existing rules of international law. So far, therefore, as concerns this question, the value of the Conference is not that it has consolidated already existing international law, but that it has laid down certain rules which, if generally accepted, would ameliorate a situation for which existing international law provides no remedy.
- 11. The articles dealing with the Legal Status of the Territorial Sea drawn up by the Conference may be regarded to a large extent as constituting consolidation. But it is to be observed that, even as regards these provisions, the Conference was not able, possibly owing to lack of time, to reach the stage of signature; the provisions in question were only "drawn up and provisionally approved with a view to their possible incorporation in a general convention on the territorial sea." Moreover, the provisions in question cover only a part of the subject with which the Conference was intended to deal; as regards some most important parts of the subject, the proceedings of the Conference showed that no general agreement existed as to the present state of international law. It is plain, therefore, that, except within the limits indicated above, the Conference failed to effect a consolidation of international law on the subject.
- 12. The proceedings of the Conference in relation to the Responsibility of States are the most striking of all. It had appeared before the Conference to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom that, if there was one subject of international law which was ready for consolidation, in the sense that a mass of material existed, in the shape of the decisions of international tribunals and the works of textbook writers, from which it should not be difficult to extract a large number of generally accepted rules, that subject was the Responsibility of States. But the Conference failed to reach agreement even on the most fundamental points. It is useless to disguise the fact that a great part of the proceedings of the Conference in relation to this subject consisted of diplomatic negotiations, ultimately unsuccessful, with the object of finding a common factor on which, as the result of mutual concessions, agreement might be possible.
- 13. If the Conference had been proceeding on the basis that its work was of the nature of consolidation, such a failure to reach agreement would have been, in the opinion of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, not only undesirable in itself but harmful to the gradual development of international law by the process of judicial decisions. Since international tribunals can only proceed on the basis of existing international law, they may, if the result of a Conference is to throw doubt on rules which had hitherto been believed to command general acceptance and of which the consolidation and development might be expected from the progress of international practice and jurisprudence, be deprived of the power to apply those rules to the circumstances which come before them.
- 14. The result of the Conference was, therefore, that, although the three subjects were selected as being most suitable for consolidation, such a result was only partially effected in the case of one of them. It is probable that more useful work might have been done if it had been recognised from the outset that what was required in the case of all three subjects was not consolidation but codification.
- 15. The recommendations made by the Conference are consistent with, and even appear to be based on, such a view. It is, moreover, plain that the effect of the recommendations under Head IV would be so far as possible to ensure that no Conference would be summoned until it had been ascertained by careful preliminary enquiry that a sufficient agreement existed to render progress possible. It may be added that the recommendations in question (with which His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom fully agree) are to a large extent identical with the existing practice of the League in relation to such Conferences.

CONCLUSIONS.

- 16. In the light of the above considerations, it seems possible to draw certain conclusions as to the methods to be adopted in future. The process of codification, —i.e., the development of international law by means of law-making conventions is being actively pursued under the auspices of the League, and, while such development must necessarily be dependent on the extent to which conventions of this nature command general acceptance, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom are inclined to regard this method as being the one by which progress can best be realised in existing circumstances. The various organs of the League are actively engaged in work of this nature, especially in economic and technical matters, and it would seem perfectly feasible somewhat to extend the scope of their operations with a view to including in them matters of a legal character which have not yet formed the subject of conventions, but in relation to which progress may, as the result of careful preliminary enquiry, seem possible. It may be hoped that the general acceptance of conventions of this nature will be facilitated by the resolutions adopted by the Eleventh Assembly on the Ratification of International Conventions concluded under the Auspices of the League of Nations. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom believe that the full application of these resolutions, both in the letter and in the spirit, by all the Members of the League would greatly increase the efficacy of the method of codification above discussed, and would thus be in itself an effective means of promoting the development of international law which is desired.
- 17. Consolidation, on the other hand, should be reserved for subjects as to which it can be shown that so large a measure of agreement as to the present state of the law exists that the work of consolidation can usefully be undertaken. It is for the League to decide whether, and if so by what means, the search for such subjects should be pursued; but His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom are themselves disposed, in the light of the experience which has now been gained, to doubt the likelihood of important branches of international law being found to which the application of this method would at present be useful.
- 18. The above statement is the result of long and careful consideration, and is based upon the experience of the six years' work in the domain of codification which the League of Nations has already done. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom are hopeful that it may be followed by statements, equally full and frank, of the views held by other Members of the League. They believe that such statements would greatly facilitate the deliberations of the Assembly on the subject, and might well assist in securing a common understanding and a general agreement concerning this most important matter.

For their part, they are satisfied that it is on the lines above discussed, coupled, of course, with the continuous operation of the first process mentioned above, that a steady and fruitful development of international law seems most likely to be attained; and they would, therefore, suggest that it is to the possibility of progress in this direction that the attention of the League, and of the non-members States concerned, should primarily be directed

They desire to conclude these observations by reaffirming once more their belief that, f the other Members of the League are in agreement in the general views above put forward, a great work for the development of international law can be accomplished through the instrumentality of the League.

India.

(Letter of May 11th, 1931.)

While the Government of India have no detailed observations to offer, they consider it doubtful, in the light of the results achieved by the First Conference on this subject held at The Hague last year, whether further attempts at codification in the near future would yield any practical results. In their view it would be preferable for the present that international law should be left to develop by the existing methods, such as the adoption of conventions through the machinery of the technical organs of the League, the decisions of the Permanent Court of International Justice, and of International Arbitral Tribunals, and the agreements which are entered into by limited groups of States.

The Government of India consider it prudent therefore that the codification method should not be further employed until conditions would appear to be more favourable, and the prospects of its successful employment in particular cases is more assured.

Lithuania.

(Letter of April 7th, 1931.)

[Translation.]

The Lithuanian Government has no objection to the work for the progressive codification of international law being continued on the lines of the recommendations of the First Codification Conference, held at The Hague in March and April 1930.

Poland.

(Letter of May 27th, 1931.)

[Translation.]

In reply to Circular Letter 21.1931.V. from the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, dated February 27th, 1931, the Polish delegation has the honour to inform him that the Polish Government agrees that it is expedient to continue the work for the progressive codification of international law.

Further, the Polish Government thinks it would be well to convene a special Committee

of Legal Experts to prepare for further work in this field, in accordance with the proposal submitted to the last Assembly by the Government of the Irish Free State.



