

Policy Guidelines

Official travel: Compliance with the advance purchase policy

OHR/PG/2024/5 – 03 July 2024

General provisions

1. These OHR Policy Guidelines provides information on the implementation of General Assembly (GA) resolutions 75/253B and 77/263B on the advance purchase policy. These resolutions have been incorporated into the organization's policy framework through ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 on *Official travel*, which came into effect on 1 July 2024.
2. It should be noted as well that in its resolution 77/263B, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to provide detailed disaggregated statistical information (by entity and travel category) for all travel requests not compliant with the advance purchase policy through the biennial report on standards of accommodation for air travel. This includes all non-compliant travel, regardless of class of travel.
3. These guidelines do not replace the applicable Staff Regulations and Rules and relevant administrative issuances, which prevail in case of conflict with the provisions in these Guidelines. They will remain under continuous review and be revised as necessary.

Scope

4. These guidelines apply to all travellers whose travel is funded by the Organization. This includes staff and non-staff (including consultants, individual contractors, and individuals without any contractual relationship with the Organization such as meeting participants). However, it is important to note that these guidelines do not apply to members of subsidiary organs, committees, councils and commissions of the United Nations, which are administered as per ST/SGB/107/Rev.6 on travel of members of organs or subsidiary organs.
5. The process for exceptional approval by USG/DMSPC for travellers who are not entitled to travel above economy to upgrade their standard of accommodation via the TTS. 3 form remains unchanged and is outside the scope of these guidelines. Notwithstanding, in cases where travel above economy class has been exceptionally approved via a TTS.3 form, the travel requests should still be submitted 21 days before the start of travel. However, in the event of late submission, the traveller is still entitled to travel in the class as approved in the TTS.3 form.
6. These guidelines apply to all types of travel funded by the Organization including HR travel e.g., initial appointment, reassignment and separation.

Definitions

7. For the purpose of these guidelines:
 - a) **Travel and Shipment Approver (TSA):** the official with delegated authority to certify travel requests for the entity (including for the head of entity) in accordance with ST/SGB/2019/2 on *Delegation of Authority in the administration of the Staff Regulations and Rules and the Financial Regulations and Rules* and as recorded in the delegation of authority portal. A TSA is a certifying officer under Financial Rule 105.5.
 - b) **HR Partner:** The official who reviews eligibility for HR and/or entitlement travel in accordance with the relevant HR policies.
 - c) **Travel Processing Officer (TPO):** the official approving the travel request after TSA certification. A TPO is an approving officer under Financial Rule 105.6.
 - d) **Travel administrator (TA):** the official who may raise a travel request on behalf of a traveller. As such, references in these guidelines to “travellers” also include “travel administrator”.

Policy provision

8. According to section 3.3 of ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 on *Official travel*, travel arrangements for all travellers should be finalized 16 calendar days before the start of official travel (the advance purchase policy). Compliance with the advance purchase policy is regulated as follows:
 - “(a) Travellers are requested to submit their travel request a minimum of 21 calendar days before the commencement of the official travel;
 - (b) In the case of home leave, family visit and education grant travel, failure of staff members to submit their travel request a minimum of 21 calendar days in advance of travel will disqualify the staff members, regardless of their level, from requesting that the Organization purchase the tickets for such travel. The staff members will only be eligible to receive a lump sum;
 - (c) In the case of other types of official travel, where the traveller is entitled to travel above economy class under normally applicable rules, a prerequisite for undertaking travel above economy class for all United Nations travellers, except at the level of Assistant Secretary-General and above (and eligible family members), is the submission of their travel request a minimum of 21 calendar days in advance of travel, subject to the following:

- (i) In situations where travel documents are delayed and the travel request has not been submitted a minimum of 21 calendar days in advance of travel, the head of entity has discretionary authority to approve travel above economy class. Such approval must be recorded in Umoja for accurate reporting to the General Assembly;
- (ii) In events such as critical incidents or natural disasters, unforeseen circumstances, late invitations from Member States, emergencies or other immediate or urgent operational requirements necessitating immediate travel and therefore resulting in non-compliance with the advance purchase policy, the head of entity has discretionary authority to approve travel above economy class. Such approval must be recorded in Umoja for accurate reporting to the General Assembly.”

Consequence for non-compliance with the 21 days requirements

- 9. It is always recommended that travellers submit their travel requests in UMOJA as early as possible. If a traveller becomes aware that they cannot submit the request 21 calendar days prior to the anticipated travel date, they should discuss the situation with the TSA. This discussion should explore whether physical travel is necessary, if travel dates can be adjusted, and if not, what is the appropriate ‘late submission reason’ to be selected and explanation to be entered in UMOJA. Taking this proactive approach may result in a faster approval process by avoiding any time-consuming exchanges between the parties involved, which might further delay the finalization of travel arrangements.
- 10. The current policy framework allocates five calendar days from the time of the submission of any travel request until approval by the Travel Processing Office (TPO); namely, three days for the TSA/HR Partner and two days for the TPO.
- 11. The UMOJA system will include the below categories for travellers to choose from when explaining their delay in submitting their travel request. Cases of non-compliance will be reported to the General Assembly as per these categories:

Category	Description of category
1. Travel document delay*	The delay was a result of the late provision of a travel document
2. Late invitation from Member States*	The delay was a result of a late invitation from a UN Member State
3. Emergencies/Exigency of service/operational circumstances*	The delay was caused by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • medical/DSS approved security evacuation; • critical incidents or natural disasters; • immediate or urgent operational requirements

Category	Description of category
4. Late nomination of traveller	The delay resulted from the late nomination/substitution of the traveller
5. Delayed confirmation by traveller	The traveller did not confirm the travel details with sufficient time to ensure the travel request is submitted in time on their behalf
6. Trip budget/funding issue	The delay was a result of an issue related to budget/funding details and/or budget insufficiency
7. Late event planning	The delay was a result of the organizer's late finalization of the event
8. Late submission by traveller	The delay was a result of late submission by the traveller, not related to any of the other listed justifications.

** Discretionary authority under section 3.3 of ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 on Official travel can only be exercised if the traveller selected category 1, 2 or 3.*

Exercise of discretionary authority under the delegation of authority framework

12. Heads of entity have authority to authorize travel using the entity's financial resources, and such authority may be subdelegated within the entity. The above table notes that there are three scenarios where discretionary authority can be exercised. Heads of entities must ensure that they, or the TSA exercising certifying authority certifying travel requests on their behalf, have determined that one of the scenarios has occurred.
13. To aid TSAs in reflecting the entity's decision in UMOJA, we strongly recommend that heads of entity internally determine and communicate to their respective TSAs the circumstances under which they could apply the three scenarios. This would include the situations that can be considered emergency/exigency of service/ operational circumstances. The TSA will justify their decision and record the non-compliance in Umoja. Since the exercise of discretionary authority is not considered an exception, there is no need to report such decisions to BTAD in the exception log.
14. Although Section 3.3 of ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 allows Heads of entity to exercise discretionary authority under the three scenarios, such authority must be exercised with the utmost responsibility and within the boundaries of the Organization's principles, objectives and mandate. Heads of entity should also be ready to provide any additional justification if requested by the ACABQ or the Fifth Committee.

IMPORTANT:

Discretionary authority can only be exercised to approve travel in the class above economy for travellers who are entitled to travel above economy class under normally applicable rules, despite not submitting their travel request 21 days before their travel.

Discretion can only be exercised if the reason for delay falls into one of these categories:

- Travel document delay
- Late invitation from a UN Member State
- Emergencies/Exigency of service/operational circumstances

Therefore, the discretionary authority cannot be exercised if the traveller selected any other category except of the above three. **No exception can be made as this is a General Assembly resolution.**

Impact

15. When travellers who are entitled to travel above economy class under normally applicable rules do not submit their travel request 21 days prior to their official travel, they lose their entitlement to travel above economy class and no longer have the option to voluntarily downgrade, unless the entity exercises their discretionary authority and approves the travel above economy class.
16. If travellers submit their completed and accurate travel request on time (i.e. a minimum of 21 calendar days prior to travel but the Organization does not process their request within the 16 days limit required by the GA resolution, travellers are not penalized, and are still allowed to travel above economy class (e.g. business class) including premium economy class where available if the voluntary downgrade indicator had been selected upon request submission. The 16-day deadline is calculated based on the TPO approval date. Therefore, all HR Partners/TSAs/TPOs are strongly encouraged to use the 'Priority' column in their inbox/work center to sort travel requests by priority levels: very high, high, medium, and low. These priorities are based on how close the trip start date is and may aid that travel requests are approved 16 days prior to the date of travel when operational circumstances permit.
17. If travellers who are entitled to travel above economy class under normally applicable rules, submit their travel request prior to the 21 days limit and subsequently request an amendment of the initial request after the 21 days limit has passed, their request may still be considered in compliance if the TSA is of the view that the amendment is justified in accordance with the circumstances under which their respective entity applies discretionary authority, and raises the same in Umoja. The TSA approving the changes should be mindful of the potential financial implication of such last-minute amendments. The Organization should strive to process such changes in accordance with the advance purchase policy.

18. If a travel request submitted before the 21 days limit is returned by HR Partner/TSA/TPO to travellers as incorrect or incomplete and travellers re-submit the request less than 21 days before their travel begins, the travellers will no longer be eligible to travel in a class above economy class, unless the head of entity/TSA/delegate exercises their discretionary authority in accordance with section 3.3 (c) of ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 on Official travel.

ANNEX I Practical Examples

1. Travel document delay*

The delay was a result of the late provision of a travel document.

All travellers must ensure that their travel documents (e.g. national passport, UNLP, visas) are valid at all times. Prior to undertaking travel, they must check that their documents have at least six months validity from the intended departure date of the country to be visited. As a general rule, staff members should aim at a validity of their travel documents of about one year.

Each case must be reviewed by the TSA on its own merits. TSA should take into account the circumstances of the delays, i.e., whether it is beyond the control of the travellers, or whether the delay could have been anticipated/prevented.

Scenario 1:

The Traveller submitted a request for renewal of his travel document in a timely manner. While the renewal is still pending, the traveler is asked to go on an official mission in the coming weeks. In such a scenario the traveller should submit the travel request. The process will continue, **the entity may use their discretionary authority in this case to approve travel above economy class**, if the traveler is entitled to travel above economy class under normally applicable rules. In the event the travel document is not obtained on time for the scheduled departure date after the ticket is issued, the traveller must cancel the travel immediately to minimize the loss to the organization.

Scenario 2:

In the case of onboarding new personnel, a travel request cannot be submitted 21 days before the official travel because the entry visa for the duty station is still pending. However, as soon as the visa is released, personnel are expected to travel to take up their assignment as soon as possible due to operational requirements. As such, **the entity may use their discretionary authority to approve travel above economy class where the traveller is entitled to travel above economy class** under normally applicable rules.

2. Late invitation from Member States*

The delay was a result of a late invitation from a Member State.

Scenario:

Traveller could not submit travel request within the 21 days limit because invitations for a UN member state organized meeting (e.g. related to finalization of a donor agreement) were issued less than 21 days before the date of travel.

The entity may use their discretionary authority to approve travel above economy class where the traveller is entitled to travel above economy class under normally applicable

rules. The Member State should be referenced when recording the non-compliance in UMOJA.

3. Emergencies/Exigency of service/operational circumstances*

The delay was caused by:

- medical/DSS approved security evacuation;
- critical incidents or natural disasters;
- immediate or urgent operational requirements.

Scenario 1:

Traveller submitted the travel request less than 21 days before the start of travel as a member of the crisis response team on an urgent trip to the country that just experienced a severe earthquake.

Scenario 2:

Traveller submitted a travel request less than 21 days before travel to respond to a complex emergency for which the executive head of a UN organization has requested the support of the UN.

For both scenarios, **the entity may use their discretionary authority to approve travel above economy class where the traveller is entitled to travel above economy class** under normally applicable rules

4. Late nomination of traveller

The delay resulted from the late nomination/substitution of the traveller.

Travellers could not submit the travel request until informed of nomination to attend by their supervisor which was less than 21 days before the travel date.

Scenario:

An office selected a staff member to accompany a senior official to a conference only two calendar weeks prior to travel. If the invitation is not from a Member State, or there is no emergency/exigency of service/operational circumstances requiring the traveller to attend the conference, **this is not a scenario where the entity has the discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class** because this scenario would fall outside the scope of section 3.3 of ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 on *Official travel*. Therefore, even if the traveller is eligible for travel above economy class under normally applicable rules, the traveller is no longer eligible to do so as the travel request was not submitted 21 days before the travel date.

5. Delayed confirmation by traveller

The traveller did not confirm the travel details with sufficient time to ensure the travel request is submitted in time on their behalf.

Traveller failed to provide in the TA the necessary information to raise the travel request 21 days before the travel date.

Scenario:

Traveller provided necessary information to travel administrator less than 21 days before the start of travel. If the invitation is not from a Member State, or there is no emergency/exigency of service/operational circumstances requiring the traveller to travel, **this is not a scenario where entity has the discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class** because this scenario would fall outside the scope of section 3.3 of ST/AI/2013/3/Rev.1 on Official travel. Therefore, even if the traveller is eligible for travel above economy class under normal rule, the traveller is no longer eligible to do so as the travel request was not submitted 21 days before the travel date. In this scenario the entity may not exercise discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class .

6. Trip budget/funding issue

The delay was a result of an issue related to budget/funding details and/or budget insufficiency.

Traveller could not submit travel request because of lack of budgetary funds.

Scenario:

The traveller was not able to obtain the fund code to raise the travel request 21 days before the travel date. If the invitation is not from a Member State, or there is no emergency/exigency of service/operational circumstances requiring the traveller to travel, **this is not a scenario where the entity has the discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class**. Therefore, even if the traveller is eligible for travel above economy class under normal rules, the traveller is no longer eligible to do so as the travel request was not submitted 21 days before the travel date. In this scenario the entity may not exercise discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class.

7. Late event planning

The delay was a result of the organizer's late finalization of the event.

Traveller could not submit travel request within the 21 days limit because the event/meeting details were confirmed by the organizer less than 21 days before the start of travel.

Scenario:

Traveller was invited to present at a conference less than 21 days before the start of the meeting. The invitation is not from a Member State, or there is no emergency/exigency of service/operational circumstances requiring the traveller to attend the conference, but it was deemed important that the traveller is present. **This is not a scenario where the entity has the discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class**. Therefore, even if the traveller is eligible for travel above economy class under normal rule, the traveller is no

longer eligible to do so as the travel request was not submitted 21 days before the travel date. In this scenario the entity may not exercise discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class.

8. Late submission by traveller

The delay was a result of late submission by the traveller, not related to any of the other listed justifications.

Scenario 1:

Traveller could not submit the travel request within the 21 days limit due to Umoja system unavailability.

Scenario 2:

Traveller could not submit the travel request due to illness.

As these scenarios do not involve an invitation from a Member State nor an emergency/exigency of service/operational circumstances, **the entity does not have the discretionary authority to allow travel above economy class**. Therefore, even if the traveller is eligible for travel above economy class under normally applicable rules, the traveller is no longer eligible to do so as the travel request was not submitted 21 days before the travel date.