

Statement on behalf of staff of the United Nations Secretariat, Funds and Programmes to the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly

Item 137, Human Resources Management,

Tuesday 18 November 2014

Delivered by Ian Richards, on behalf of the staff unions of the UN Secretariat, funds, programmes and tribunals

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Introduction

It's a pleasure to speak here once again, this time on human resources issues affecting my 70,000 colleagues in the United Nations, its secretariat, tribunals, funds and programmes. These 70,000 colleagues, on whose behalf I speak today, work tirelessly, day in day out, helping people from the scourge of conflict, unrest and disease, giving a step up to the vulnerable, providing shelter to the dispossessed. They put into action the fast-multiplying resolutions, mandates and agreements reached within these walls, working under the glare of media and global public scrutiny.

Against this increased workload, the decision was taken last year to reduce the headcount and staff costs. Fewer colleagues therefore now do more for less, risking their lives in more dangerous places, bringing their expertise to where it matters.¹ They don't ask for much in return. Only to be treated with dignity and respect. To be recognized for the work they do. To be provided with proper safety and security. To not be stigmatized when returning from the frontline against ebola in West Africa. To be given a chance to prove themselves and in return receive a fair wage, a secure contract and a decent and just environment in which to work.

Budget cuts

For this reason, we would like to start with ongoing and upcoming budget cuts, and put on record our strong concerns with the manner in which over one hundred of our UNDP colleagues have been laid off, some given little time to move themselves and their families out of New York, pull their children out of school, and return back home to their countries. The cuts have been brutal and unprecedented, and we strongly condemn them.

Meanwhile at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a 30 million dollar hole in the 2015 budget was discovered only two months ago. Many hard-working staff there don't know whether they'll be reporting back to the office in January.

¹ According to data from the Controller's office and the Peacekeeping Finance Division

We are also concerned for our colleagues in the UN's administrative service, who face a budget cut of 2.5 percent for 2016; a cut that management has justified on the basis that the new Umoja enterprise software has made their work redundant. However, Mr. Chairman, as you know, Umoja is still being rolled out and has yet to reach much of the UN. We therefore question the mandate or basis on which the cuts and their size have been pre-determined.

Performance management

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, against a background of constant downsizing, you have heard this morning about the new performance appraisal system that will be put in place next year and on which the staff unions have been consulted. It is important to recognize and reward good performance and make sure that everyone in the team contributes their share.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, the one tool used elsewhere to reward good performance – called promotion – is excluded at the UN. Furthermore, current staff have no preference over outsiders when being considered for posts, unlike in many governments, and past performance, usually a good predictor of future performance, is not even taken into consideration. While the new policy certainly improves on the past, we also need to improve the staff selection system.

Continuing appointments

Mr. Chairman, earlier this year the first review of continuing appointments was completed and staff were notified of whether they had been successful. Sadly the review took so long – two and a half years – that a number of staff failed to qualify simply because they had taken a brief period of special leave without pay during that period. Most of these staff were women, who had extended their maternity leave. In an organization that seeks to retain women, denying working mothers a continuing appointment is unfortunate and I trust can be addressed.

In addition, staff who changed positions and as a result sometimes had performance appraisals of less than twelve months – something allowed under the current performance management system – also failed to obtain their continuing appointments, despite being eligible. We therefore hope that you will support the proposals on this being suggested by the Secretary-General.

Hot desking

A big item this year is the long-term office space needs of the UN, in New York, Geneva and elsewhere.

The organization has decided to take a first step by ripping out the newly installed and already compact office furniture and partitions on the 18th floor, replacing them with café tables, common workspaces and designer sofas. This new approach is called hot-desking. Staff, G, P but not D arrive in the morning and take whatever space is free, collecting their laptop and papers from their

locker, and spending up to a quarter of an hour to set up their work area. Last week, they ran out of space and our colleagues were seen working in the entrance lobby and in the cafeteria.

The research literature on hotdesking is hardly encouraging. The workers who have tried it elsewhere don't like it. And not only will we see a marked increase in absenteeism, a decrease in the quality of output and a reduction in productivity. We will also witness sensitive human rights investigations, confidential Security Council reports and delicate legal opinions being drafted by staff crammed on common sofas or huddled together in the cafeteria, papers strewn everywhere, for passers-by to take a look at. This hardly seems to be in the best interest of the organization.

Mr. Chairman, all the evidence shows that staff work best when they have their own space and don't have to worry every morning where they will have to sit. In an organization that demands so much of its staff, is a personal workspace, which studies show enhances productivity, too much to ask?

Furthermore, given that the pilot has now been extended to the 19th floor, with new office modifications elsewhere in the building prohibited unless they too conform to the new hotdesking model, we question whether this is still a pilot and ask what mandate has actually been given to convert the rest of the UN to hot-desking.

Lack of whistleblower protection

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, let me now turn to our concerns about the lack of whistleblower protection at the UN. You may be familiar with the case of Mr. James Wasserstrom, who was arrested, probed and sacked for revealing fraud at the UN mission in Kosovo. Despite requesting the Ethics Office to provide him with protection against retaliation, this was not done.

He went to the UN Dispute Tribunal, which found that he had suffered "humiliating and degrading treatment," and the organization had failed to provide the protection he deserved. The Secretary-General appealed the judgment and won.

This creates a dilemma for staff. As you may know my colleagues are required to report any misconduct they witness, and the Ethics Office is expected to protect them from retaliation. However, our research shows that since it was set up, the Ethics Office has protected less than 1 percent of the 343 staff who have come to it for help.² We therefore call for an urgent review of the Office, that it be made independent from the organization in order to avoid conflicts of interest and that retaliators against whistleblowers be disciplined. Until then, there will exist no functioning mechanism to protect whistleblowers at the UN and we doubt staff will come forward to report fraud.

² see link:

<http://staffcoordinatingcouncil.org/attachments/article/245/Whistleblowers%200618.doc>

Staff management relations

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

As you will have noted, management has re-established the Staff-Management Committee and relations between staff and management have been constructive and productive. We would therefore like to thank you for your support last year for our campaign to re-establish social dialogue at the UN.

Unfortunately, as relations have improved at the UN, they have deteriorated elsewhere. In September, the Director-General of WIPO fired the president of its staff association, Moncef Kateb, on the eve of the organization's general assembly. Mr. Kateb, along with other colleagues in the staff association had blown the whistle on a number of problems at WIPO, for which the Director-General has now been placed under formal investigation. We hope you can work with your counterparts in Geneva to ensure Mr. Kateb's full reinstatement.

In conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, allow me to pay tribute to the 70,000 staff for whom I speak today. The vast majority of whom are in the field, many in hardship locations and a significant number in hazardous zones, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea.

They work hard, each in their own way, risking their lives every day, to give action to the organization's goals and hope to the most vulnerable. Despite the difficult economic environment, the organization owes it to them to recognize their contribution in the many ways it can, and to examine how, at a time of growing mandates, unprecedented in our history, the UN can better provide the fair, just and decent working environment that staff require to perform their functions as effectively as possible.

I thank you.