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Introductory Statement by John Barkat, United Nations Ombudsman,
on the report of the Secretary-General on the Activities of the Office
of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services
(A/67/172)

*Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Delegates,*

It is a pleasure for me to be here today to introduce the report of the Secretary-General on the Activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (UNOMS) for the period 1 January to 31 December 2011.

Based on the principles of independence, informality, impartiality and confidentiality, UNOMS strives to support the UN workplace around the globe by productively mitigating the direct and indirect consequences of conflict.

The report before you provides an update on the main trends in workplace related concerns brought forward by the constituencies covered by the ombudsmen and mediators of the funds and programmes, UNHCR and UN Secretariat.

The report also contains information on efforts to harmonize standards and practices between the three entities; the types of services offered; the root causes of conflict; and outreach initiatives to enhance conflict resolution competence among managers and staff.

As the present report emphasizes, the added value of informal dispute resolution arises from its potential to not only resolve individual conflict but also to detect issues early and to resolve them before they escalate into full-blown conflicts.

Figures and trends

In 2011, UNOMS received over 2,200 cases globally. This marks a 28 per cent increase compared to 2010 (when 1,764 cases were brought forward).

It was primarily staff in locations away from Headquarters who used the informal system. Staff in the Professional category constituted the largest group of users.

Of the over 2,200 total number of cases, about 1,500 emanated from staff in the Secretariat. This represents about 3.2 per cent of the UN Secretariat population.

In seeking the services of an ombudsman, staff and managers were mostly concerned with: 1) job and career, 2) interpersonal issues and 3) questions related to compensation and benefits, in that order.

Observations on root causes of conflict

Apart from seeking to resolve individual cases, the Office continued its work to analyze the root causes of conflict and enhanced its methodology of providing relevant feedback to the Organization.

The current report covers selected systemic issues that are of a cross-cutting nature and thus permeate larger parts of the system within the UN Secretariat. These are issues related to performance management, the downsizing of missions, and investigations and disciplinary processes.

For more sustained impact, we have engaged in strategic partnerships with the Organization on those issues. Just to give you an example:

In the past year, we have worked intensively on the issue of performance management across the entire spectrum of decision makers: from providing feedback to the respective operational units in the Office of Human Resources Management to bringing the issue to the Management Performance Board under the oversight of the Chef de Cabinet.

Equal access for all staff – the regional impact

In response to the General Assembly's repeated emphasis on providing equal access to all staff, our Office uses a diversified approach.

The combined efforts of the seven regional branches (Bangkok, Entebbe, Geneva, Kinshasa, Nairobi, Santiago and Vienna), the on-call ombudsmen and mediators, as well as a system of regular rotation through missions and other offices, enables the Office to cast a wider net to meet the demand for informal conflict resolution.

For example, in 2011, ombudsmen and mediators visited staff in missions in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and Iraq (UNAMI) for the first time. On both occasions, most cases were resolved during the mission visit while on the ground.

However, as noted in previous reports, the lack of dedicated staffing and travel resources for UN Secretariat ombudsmen and mediators to serve staff in special political missions in a comprehensive manner remains a serious concern. Every such unaddressed conflict comes at a cost to the Organization, directly or indirectly.

The reform and strengthening of the informal system has provided the foundation for an advanced conflict management system.

Much has been achieved in implementing the mandated reform. Yet, there remains room for informal conflict resolution to reach its full potential and to become an integrated part of the daily toolkit of all in the Organization.

Therefore, the Assembly may wish to continue to place emphasis on conflict prevention, informal conflict resolution, good managerial practices and an overall collaborative culture.

The better the Organization operates internally, the more effectively it can serve the people around the world who rely and count on the work of the United Nations.

I am pleased to note that this year we celebrate ten years since the Ombudsman function was created in the Secretariat. I invite you to join us as we celebrate this important milestone.

It is with your continued and sustained support that we have laid this strong foundation, which values preventive early resolution of disputes at early stages and collaborative mediation when conflicts progress further.

I thank you deeply for this support and ask for your commitment as we build on this strong foundation in the years ahead.
