



United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017
www.usunnewyork.usmission.gov

Statement by Ambassador Isobel Coleman
on
Agenda Item 141:
UN Common System
Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly
Tuesday 10 November 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My delegation would like to thank Mr. Kingston Rhodes, Ms. Bettina Bartsiotas, and Mr. Carlos Ruiz Massieu for introducing their reports. We would also like to thank the staff representatives for their statements.

Mr. Chairman,

This session, we have the opportunity to consider a new compensation package for UN professional staff, the result of a three-year comprehensive review undertaken by the Commission and representatives of the staff and organizations of the UN common system. The comprehensive review marks the first time in 26 years that the package for UN professional staff has been reassessed.

At the outset of this compensation review process, my delegation joined other member states in requesting the Commission to design a more “simple, modern and cost effective” compensation package. The existing package is none of those things - with its overlapping and redundant allowances, an outdated emphasis on family status rather than performance and a complicated system of administration, among other drawbacks. As we have noted in previous sessions, the rising cost of the existing package over the past decade has created a growing crisis for the twenty-four organizations of the UN common system: budgets are being squeezed, mandates are being endangered, and posts are being left unencumbered. To date, the governing councils of a full one-third of UN common system organizations have noted that “rising staff costs are having a considerable impact on the[ir] financial sustainability,” and they have asked the General Assembly and the Commission to “consider the need for greater vigilance with regard to increases in staff costs across the [c]ommon [s]ystem, particularly within the context of the ongoing comprehensive review.”

We have given, and continue to give, the proposed package careful consideration. While we believe that the package meets the core objective of being more “simple, modern and cost effective” than the current one, the review could have gone much further. The package for those who serve in the field is simpler, but the proposal leaves the mobility allowance—an unnecessary incentive for international professional staff who, by definition, must be mobile—intact. We applaud that the package introduces a modern performance pay element, but are

disappointed that it only starts biennial step increases in Step 7, not in Step 1. The package rationalizes some elements, but leaves other significant elements, like the education grant, largely untouched. The package, however, is a small step in the right direction, even if not the giant leap we were hoping for.

Conversly, we find some critiques of the new package unpersuasive and in some cases misleading. We see little evidence that the new field package will negatively impact field work, or that the new salary scale unjustly enriches Director-level staff over Professional-level staff, and plenty of evidence that changes in each of these areas was measured and necessary. We will continue to give these critiques, and others, further review, but neither the numbers nor the policy arguments convince us at this stage.

On balance, the General Assembly relies on the Commission to make recommendations that are both technical in nature and in keeping with the needs of the staff and organizations. We wish the Commission had gone further, even as others wish the Commission did not go so far, but we should all agree that when it comes to reforming the existing package, change must start somewhere. We therefore believe it would be best to adopt the package now, bearing in mind that the Commission plans regular opportunities to improve it over time, and that robust transitional measures have been included to minimize risk.

The alternatives are fraught: opening the package—the product of countless difficult technical discussions between the stakeholders over three years—will produce unintended consequences, and will undermine the holistic nature of the review. Delaying a decision this session postpones needed financial relief to many organizations, and prevents all organizations from taking advantage of an improved package to attract and retain talent needed to implement critical mandates.

Mr. Chairman,

This session we also have the opportunity to consider the recommendation to increase the mandatory age of separation for existing staff to age 65 starting in 2016 or latest 2017. My delegation continues to support an increase in the mandatory age of separation in principle but we have significant concerns about this recommendation, as its financial implications, its effect on ongoing strategic workforce planning efforts and its ability to be applied across the system in a compressed time frame remain unclear at this stage.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, we look forward to engaging constructively on these important issues in the coming weeks. We view this issue as particularly timely and important, as the work of UN staff members, including those who serve in difficult and dangerous environments, is essential to the success of the organizations of the UN common system.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.