

73rd Session of the General Assembly, Fifth Committee
Agenda item 147: Administration of Justice at the United Nations

Introductory Statement by Ms. Shireen Dodson, 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/73/167)

Distinguished Chair and Delegates,

This marks my first appearance before your esteemed Committee as United Nations Ombudsman. Having served as an ombudsman for many years, I have experienced repeatedly that when staff are stuck in conflict, it is very difficult for them to be productive. It is no different at the United Nations. I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to thank you first for your continued support of, and advocacy for, the informal and peaceful resolution of workplace disputes. It is my firm belief that addressing conflict early before it festers is the most effective way to achieve conflict resolution.

The report before you (A/73/167) summarizes the activities carried out by the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (UNOMS) in 2017. We continue to be guided by a holistic approach which brings together three key areas of work that are interdependent: 1) confidential and impartial assistance to resolve workplace disputes; 2) identification of the root causes of conflict and systemic feedback to the Organization for remedial actions; and 3) raising awareness and building of conflict competence skills to help manage conflict in the workplace and prevent it from escalating.

As you will note in the report, 2017 was marked by a continued upward trend in caseload, with a total of 3, 247 cases across the three pillars (secretariat, funds and programs and UNHCR), an increase of 23 per cent over the previous year. Of those, 2, 579 cases (80 per cent) originated in the Secretariat, with the highest demand (nearly 82 per cent) in field operations, field offices and Offices away from Headquarters.

We recognize that conflict is a natural part of life. What makes a difference is how we respond to the conflict. With successful conflict resolution there is minimal interruption and maximum attention to the mandates entrusted to staff by Member States. An estimated 440 outreach activities were carried out within the Secretariat globally. This is important on two fronts: first, we continue to raise awareness about our services, which remains a challenge in the deep field, and, second, we help managers and staff to navigate conflict by providing them with the tools necessary to engage in meaningful conversations and manage conflict effectively.

At its last session, the General Assembly welcomed with appreciation the high-resolution rate of cases mediated and requested our Office to continue its efforts in informal dispute resolution. In this context, I am pleased to note that the resolution rate of the 101 cases mediated

and closed in 2017 across the three pillars (Secretariat, funds and programs and UNHCR). has remained high at 84.9 per cent. In the Secretariat, 89.7 per cent of mediated cases resulted in a successful outcome. This reinforces our understanding that when parties in dispute have an opportunity to engage - in a facilitated dialogue - willingly, informally and confidentially - interests are clarified and solutions that are mutually acceptable to the parties can be achieved.

I understand that access by non-staff personnel to our internal justice system has been at the forefront of discussions under this agenda item for some time. Although the mandate of UNOMS does not cover non-staff personnel of the Secretariat, in practice, we have used our good offices in trying to help. In 2017, our Office handled 225 cases from non-staff personnel, which represents an increase of about 48 per cent from the year before. It has always been my approach as Ombudsman not to turn people away. As Secretary-General Guterres has often emphasized, staff are the Organization's biggest asset and we value everyone. As the new UN Ombudsman, I am committed to maintaining this approach. We will, therefore, continue to use our good offices to help provide services to non-staff personnel within existing resources. I should like to emphasize, however, that should caseload levels reach or exceed 350 per annum, we may need to request additional resources to sustain this effort. I rely on your understanding and support in this area.

The systemic analysis of trends and the feedback we provide to the Organization allows it to reconsider, adjust or initiate new approaches and policies. The predominant concerns center around job and career, compensation and benefits and evaluative relationships. In addition, an upward trend was observed in sub-issues connected with service delivery, organizational values and restructuring. I look forward to collaborating with relevant stakeholders regarding on-going reform and change management initiatives so that our work on systemics can help inform these transformational processes.

Distinguished Chair and Delegates,

The dedicated staff of the Organization continue to operate in some of the most challenging areas of the world where they are exposed to hardship, security threats, and risks to physical and psychological health. For the United Nations to deliver on its important mandates, fostering a supportive, respectful and well managed workplace is mission critical. My team and I stand ready to continue to be the pressure relief valve which contribute to a harmonious workplace. Given the Secretary-General's reform efforts, we will also focus on resilience and change management as a top priority. I look forward to your continued engagement and support on these common objectives.

Thank you, Distinguished Chair and Delegates.