

6 November 2020

Statement to the Fifth Committee
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Report of the Secretary-General
on the Activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services

(A/75/160)

Distinguished Chair and Committee Members,

It is my pleasure to appear today before the Committee to introduce the report of the Secretary-General on the Activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (UNOMS), A/75/160.

Allow me to acknowledge right from the start that the past eight (8) months have been an extremely challenging time for the global community, including for the staff of the United Nations Secretariat. As ombudsman, we are hearing from staff about the tremendous challenges and sacrifices that are posed working fully remotely and juggling many tasks on the personal and professional fronts.

Staff are working harder and longer with few boundaries between work and home. Many have spoken of experiencing a deep sense of loss, of loved ones who have succumbed to COVID-19, of the support and camaraderie which going to the office had provided, and of a way of life which many fear will never be the same again. Some staff are expressing anxiety at the uncertainty of what lies ahead in the new work environment and about their health and safety. Nevertheless, UN staff continue to serve the global community with a deep sense of purpose. As the Ombudsman's Office, we stand by their side to navigate the challenges.

Now, let me turn to the report before you which describes the period 1 January to 31 December 2019. I also wish to highlight how my Office adapted its operations in response to the pandemic.

As you may recall, the work of the Office for Ombudsman and Mediation Services focusses on three key areas: 1) confidential and impartial assistance to resolve workplace disputes; 2) identification of the root causes of conflict and systemic feedback to the Organization; and 3) awareness and building of conflict competence skills. The broad range of ombudsman services we provide include discussing individual workplace concerns; identification of options for resolution; providing conflict coaching one-on-one or to groups; shuttle diplomacy; facilitation of difficult conversations; and more emphasis on structured mediation.

In 2019, the UNOMS team assisted in a total number of 2238 cases in the UN Secretariat. This figure includes 112 structured mediations and 78 facilitated dialogues.

While the results in the area of ombudsman services are excellent, I believe that my Office can have more impact in the area of mediation through further decentralization as has been the case with the ombudsman regional offices. Although 112 mediations were conducted in the Secretariat during the reporting period, only one of those came from a referral of the UN Dispute Tribunal (UNDT). I believe, and I trust that the Committee will agree, that further efforts need to be dedicated to increasing the number of UNDT referrals, which will ultimately save the Organization time and resources. I have therefore put before you a proposal to increase our capacity in the duty stations of Geneva and Nairobi, where two UN Dispute Tribunals are located.

The top areas of concern in 2019 continued to center around evaluative relationships, job and career, and compensation and benefits. The pandemic has exacerbated some of the issues. As observed before, times of significant changes tend to create uncertainty, which in turn often translates into poor behavior and an increase in incivility. Our ongoing Dignity through Civility campaign continues to raise awareness in this regard. Staff have additional exposure to this topic through the Leadership Dialogue discussions this year.

As requested by the General Assembly in resolution 74/258 (para. 2), the report also offers further details on the pilot project to provide informal conflict resolution services to non-staff personnel. 2019 showed a further increase of non-staff cases to 332 compared to 304 in 2018. In this regard, it would be beneficial to extend the duration of the pilot project in its current set-up and to conduct a cost-analysis for the consideration of the General Assembly in the context of possible mandate expansion.

A key driver for the successful delivery of our services is our ability to conduct outreach missions in particular to staff in remote locations. While in 2019 outreach missions were very successful, in 2020 the efforts were significantly hampered by travel restrictions due to COVID-19. The Office quickly implemented a virtual outreach programme to minimize potential disruptions in service delivery. Between March and September 2020, 15 virtual missions were conducted to field offices in 67 countries. In testing this approach, the Office experienced severe limitations of conducting informal conflict resolution in the virtual space, both in terms of connectivity challenges, and in the comfort level of staff reaching out to the office online. This has potentially left some conflicts unaddressed.

To conclude, allow me to mention that in promoting harmony and dignity in the workplace, the Office is now also engaged in supporting the Secretary-General's initiative to address racism and to promote dignity for all in the UN. As a neutral convenor of dialogue, the Office will be responsible for discussion facilitation aimed at raising awareness as part of the broader anti-racism campaign within the Organization.

Distinguished Committee Members,

I am humbled during this most difficult time in the world to hold a position that allows me to facilitate dialogue and raise awareness. Policies do not change people but dialogue and awareness do.

I am deeply thankful to the Committee for the continued support to provide all staff with access to a fair and cost-effective dispute resolution system.
