

UNHCR'S HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

I. BACKGROUND

1. The past year has been marked by a significant number of post discontinuations resulting from Action 2, as noted in UNHCR's last update on human resources management, shared with the Standing Committee at its 21st meeting last June.¹ Other major features have included the reorganization of the management structure for Africa and the evolving situation in and around Afghanistan. These events have had a significant impact on the human resources management function at the operational level.

2. At the same time, several human resources policy issues continue to demand the attention of UNHCR's management and of the Staff Council. Some are of immediate concern, while others are of longer-term importance. External developments within the United Nations Common System, most notably the efforts at reforming the pay and benefits structure, will also impact upon UNHCR's management of its human resources. The United Nations and its funds and programmes are seeking better ways of recognizing the contributions of individuals as well as team performance and of rewarding results rather than seniority. A major renovation of the post classification system is being considered, which would rely more heavily on the competencies that are required to perform tasks and duties. UNHCR has been actively involved in these reform plans, as they complement its own efforts at improving efficiency and accountability through better management of its staff resources. Examples of these efforts include competency-based selection in recruitment and placement, merit-based promotions, a comprehensive learning strategy, and on-going efforts to enhance performance management at all levels.

II. IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

3. An extraordinary placement session, known as the Accelerated Postings Process, was conducted in mid-2001, to deal with the delays that had accompanied the introduction of the new postings system one year before. Two hundred and three staff members were placed and the backlog in postings was resolved. The timely filling of vacancies remains a priority for UNHCR, especially in emergency situations, hardship duty stations and for particular functions (notably protection and administration/finance). This is being addressed through a more consistent, transparent and proactive management of the posting process. The related issue of staff remaining unassigned to a post for a variety of reasons, is also a matter of immediate concern.

4. During the latter half of 2001, an Early Retirement and Voluntary Separation programme was implemented to facilitate the separation of staff affected by the post discontinuations arising from Action 2. To support staff during this difficult period of transition, a dedicated Help Line was established, special training was offered to human resources staff, and practical resource materials on career transition were distributed to managers and to all concerned staff. Exit interviews were also piloted. The total number of posts abolished under Action 2 included some 120 in the Professional category and some 600 in the General Service category. Fifty-three Professional and 242 General Service staff benefited from the combined Early Retirement/Voluntary Separation packages.

5. In response to the emergency requirements in Afghanistan, and taking into consideration lessons learned from evaluations of the Kosovo and Timor emergencies, a special effort was made to staff the

¹ EC/51/SC/CRP.20

Afghanistan operation fully and in a timely and sustained manner. Fifty international one-year positions were advertised and filled within two months through the official appointment process, with due regard to competencies and to gender and geographic diversity. These staff members were deployed to their assigned offices in Afghanistan within six weeks of appointment. A very important recruitment drive took place within Afghanistan, and among refugees in neighbouring countries of asylum, to fill all General Service and National Officer positions. The Division of Human Resources Management also worked very closely with the Bureaux and with the Emergency and Security Service to meet staffing requirements in West Africa and elsewhere.

III. POLICY ISSUES UNDER REVIEW

6. The time and staff needed to address these immediate concerns, coupled with changes at the senior management level, resulted in limited attention being given to longer-term issues associated with the introduction in prior years of the Career Management System and the new policies on contracts, promotions and postings. A small task force was therefore constituted, in November 2001, to review the agenda of UNHCR's human resources management issues. The results were discussed by senior management and joint staff-management bodies. Main recommendations on the human resources review were in four broad areas.

Posting process

7. UNHCR's posting process has been the subject of considerable scrutiny since its introduction in 2000. The current process represents a significant change compared to the previous process and adjustments are still being introduced. The principle of assigning available staff to available jobs based on competency and ability is a major step forward for UNHCR. Likewise, the principle of managerial responsibility in the posting process has been re-confirmed as an integral part of UNHCR's continuing effort to enhance the supervisory role at all levels. There are ongoing consultations involving senior management and staff representatives on a number of process-related aspects of the system, as well as on how to improve implementation of policies on diversity, rotation and staff welfare. These discussions have led to a number of changes, including the clarification of the role of the Appointments and Postings Board (APB) and, most recently, the introduction of a quarterly compendium. Standard job descriptions are available on the Intranet and may be sent by e-mail to field offices, upon request. Further efforts at streamlining and improving the system, including the introduction of more regular and transparent reporting methods, are expected to reduce dramatically the delays that have been observed in the past and ensure fair and consistent application of simpler rules.

Rotation

8. A study of UNHCR's approach to the rotation of internationally recruited staff was conducted in the course of 2001. It included staff surveys and the involvement of specialist consultants as well as detailed interviews with various stakeholders in UNHCR. There is broad agreement that rotation in some form is not only necessary for UNHCR to conduct its business, but also desirable from a human resources management perspective. Rotation provides a degree of cross-fertilisation and transfer of professional experience and know-how, which is one of UNHCR's major strengths. The report of the Working Group on Rotation proposed a number of different options for the management of rotation. This report, which raises a number of complex and inter-linked issues, is now under consideration by senior management. A key question to be answered is the extent to which an individual's rotation history should govern the next type of post for which that person may be considered, or whether ability should continue to be the overriding principle.

Workforce profiling

9. UNHCR is interested to pursue a workforce profiling initiative as a tool to more efficient human resources management planning, including the development of a recruitment strategy. Initial studies suggest that workforce profiling would enhance the use of existing human resources and promote a responsive approach to staff development and career management. It would involve a review of the

standards being applied for office structures and post classification, where some anomalies have already been identified. In parallel with this undertaking, a skills inventory would be established that would list and validate every staff member's educational background, skills, languages, and experience both inside and outside the organisation. By comparing the results of these two exercises, UNHCR would have a powerful tool at its disposal to identify skills gaps or overlaps, and thus be in a better position to adapt and anticipate its human resources requirements over the coming years. However, such a comprehensive workforce profiling will require additional resources.

Career management System (CMS)

10. CMS is often the subject of criticism, but is generally on track in terms of the distribution of performance ratings. There is also a better Performance Appraisal Review (PAR) rate of compliance, compared to that of the previous system. Three-quarters of all staff were appraised in 2000 compared to a 62% average compliance rate for the 1995-1997 PAR cycles. The data for 2001 are being analysed. UNHCR's policies and procedures on managing performance are of critical importance to the overall functioning of the organisation. The system requires dialogue between staff and their supervisors, underlining the importance of honest communication and regular feedback on expectations, development and learning needs. The performance management system provides internal administrative measures that respect due process and enables management to take decisions that are fair, equitable and consistent with rules and regulations. There is a generally recognized need to ensure that appraisals are more honest and timely so that the contributions of staff, as well as the consequences of under-performance, lead to proactive human resources interventions. The recent elaboration of a Code of Conduct reflects the importance assigned by the Office to ensuring that all staff maintain the highest standards of integrity in fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

11. The competency framework introduced almost five years ago is also under review. The aim is to simplify the model, so that it is better aligned to career planning and staff development, and serves to: i) facilitate individual and institutional performance appraisal, ii) ensure high quality recruitment, postings and promotion decisions, iii) identify and develop skills/competencies in order to build a flexible, high-performing and motivated workforce, and iv) foster career development. The review will identify a number of options, with their resource requirements, that will inform the model which UNHCR will adopt.

Other policy issues

12. These include measures to reinvigorate UNHCR's recruitment strategy in order to respond to short-term operational needs as well as to strengthen UNHCR's entry-level cadre, especially in the fields of protection and administration and finance. There is a reservoir of qualified talent among Junior Professional Officers, UN Volunteers and others experienced in UNHCR's field operations that can be tapped, with due regard to the priorities accorded to gender equity and geographical diversity.

13. Last autumn, a team was constituted to coordinate support to staff members who find themselves between assignments. The team serves as the focal point for such staff by providing information and assisting with referrals to the relevant service to address their needs. The team members provide career guidance based on the individual profiles of staff members between assignments and try to identify available resources for missions and other temporary assignments pending an eventual appointment. The work of this team has been welcomed by concerned staff members and has led to a reduction in grievances. All but a handful of staff between assignments are fully occupied. The team was also tasked to analyse the root causes of the increase in the number of staff in this situation and to make recommendations aimed at minimising their numbers. It is recognised that as a rotational organization, UNHCR inevitably expects to have some staff in between assignments at any given time.

IV. STAFF DEVELOPMENT

14. UNHCR has finalized its learning policy and guidelines, which demonstrate the importance and high-level organizational support given to staff learning. Current developments include the launching of the new organisation-wide induction and orientation process under the slogan "A staff member's right and duty, a manager's responsibility". The nine-month Learning Programmes (Middle and Senior Management, Protection and Operations Management) have all been piloted and as at mid-May this

year, 1,504 staff members were undertaking one of these challenging programmes. In 2001, UNHCR received an international award for best practice in distance learning for its Effective Writing course. The policy of "democratizing" learning and moving it increasingly out of the classroom to the workplace is having a noticeable impact and has been well-received by staff, particularly in the field. UNHCR is also playing an active part in influencing learning throughout the United Nations system by contributing to the revitalization of the United Nations System Staff College and by participating in its Learning Managers Network. UNHCR also chairs the IASC Task Force on Training.

V. STAFF WELFARE

15. Staff welfare is an important element of UNHCR's human resources management system. As concerns staff safety, the increased number of staff welfare officers and counsellors is improving the organizational capacity to respond faster to critical situations. Cumulative stress and burnout need to be prevented to the extent possible. Other indicators of the improved response are closer collaboration with the Field Staff Safety Section, revival of the Peer Support Personnel Network (which now includes 38 volunteer staff trained in basic counselling skills), and regular sharing of information with other United Nations agencies. A CD-ROM on staff safety, health and welfare is being designed in close inter-agency co-operation.

VI. CONCLUSION

16. A variety of measures and policy initiatives are being introduced and consolidated so that human resources are managed in a cost-effective and meaningful way. While human resources requirements must be adapted to the operational priorities of the Office, it is also recognized that the conditions of service and the opportunities for personal and professional development are also essential to building and retaining a motivated workforce.