

**Staff Council Statement at Standing Committee – 27 June 2006**  
*(Unofficial translation from French original)*

**Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Distinguished Representatives of non-governmental organizations, Ladies and Gentlemen**

It is an honour for me to address this Committee on behalf of the Staff Council of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The Staff Council wishes to encourage the High Commissioner to continue to strengthen the Office's relations with all the different humanitarian actors and particularly with non-governmental organizations, whose experience and presence in the Field is the key to the success of our operations.

**Mr. Chairman,**

We wish first and foremost to pay tribute to our colleagues in the Field who are exposed on a daily basis to danger, and in particular to those who, despite numerous attempted and actual attacks, continue to maintain UNHCR's presence in the Field.

Since 1987, 22 of our colleagues have lost their lives, the last in March 2006 in Yei, Sudan. Following this terrible event, the High Commissioner personally committed himself to ensure that before the end of the year 2006 minimum standards of security would be in place in all locations declared to be in security phase 3 or above, and in all operations by the end of next year.

The Staff Council welcomes the efforts made by UNHCR to strengthen staff security and encourages its management to follow this imperative in all of its operations, whatever security phase is in place and despite the difficult financial situation in which the Office finds itself.

UNHCR's Staff Council welcomes the High Commissioner's initiatives with regard to relations between his Executive Office and the Staff Council and is determined to spare no effort to ensure that the dialogue between management and staff is fully respected. Like the High Commissioner, we believe it is essential that Management and the Staff Council work together on a basis of trust and transparency.

Disregard for this rule can only hurt everybody. If, together, Management and the Staff Council respect this rule, we will succeed in reducing if not eliminating disagreements.

In the meantime, we wish to encourage the High Commissioner to ensure that Management listens to staff. We hope that the High Commissioner's stated intentions with regard to consultation and total transparency in decisions affecting personnel are not hidden by the opaqueness of recent decisions taken without prior consultation with the Staff Council.

The Staff Council is particularly concerned by a recent initiative to concentrate the powers given to the High Commissioner with regard to internal justice. We note that

this question has not yet been the subject of consideration by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC). We hope this will soon be the case and that a coherent system of “checks and balances” will be implemented to ensure the rights of staff are respected and not violated in any way.

I made reference earlier to the difficult financial situation in which UNHCR finds itself. While the Staff Council understands the challenge to resolve this situation and the eventual need to restructure our organization, we would not wish to see this reform consist of a simple post-cutting exercise, not to say head-cutting.

There also we were assured that the Staff Council would be consulted at all times during this exercise; meanwhile some of our colleagues at headquarters have already been informed, to their great surprise as well as ours, that their posts will be outposted at the end of the year.

We wish to have assurances that all options are being considered and to know, for instance, if the advantages offered by a certain country could not equally be offered here ... and if the future moves will really be beneficial, in terms of savings and in terms of efficiency.

We would like to invite Management not simply to respect the commitments of transparency and consultation made by the High Commissioner and the assurances made by the Director for Structural and Management Change, but also to be imaginative in seeking alternative solutions for those colleagues whose posts are cut or whose posts will be considered for cutting. The Staff Council is at Management’s disposal to help find solutions.

**Mr. Chairman,**

The Staff Council will welcome any initiatives taken by this Committee with a view to enhancing a culture of accountability as well as strengthening control mechanisms to counter abuse wherever it may occur.

**Mr. Chairman,**

The Staff Council over which I have the honour jointly to preside was elected at the end of March 2006 and it would be premature to report on these first three months.

The Staff Council has, since its election, considered that its efforts should give priority to the situation of colleagues in the Field where the majority of staff are and who sometimes or even often, are called upon to work in very difficult conditions where isolation and danger are their daily lot. On this subject, we are very concerned about recent changes to the length of staff assignments in certain locations, extended from two to three years, without taking into account the existing conditions of work and life. We must not forget the necessity for all of us, but particularly for colleagues in difficult locations, to find a balance between our professional and private lives. These extensions in time requirements are likely to compromise this balance and, consequently, to provoke additional and unnecessary stress.

**Mr. Chairman,**

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that refugees and other persons of concern to the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees who need our assistance should remain at the heart of our work. However, the success of our mission depends to a great extent on the men and women who, often at great personal expense, dedicate themselves to this task.

It is therefore incumbent on us, collectively, to ensure these staff are heard.

I thank you for your attention.

Bernadette VEGA  
First Vice Chairperson  
UNHCR Staff Council