

Statement of the Chairperson of UNHCR Staff Council, Mr. Guy Avognon, at the 68th Session of the Executive Committee, Geneva, 5 October 2017

(Check against delivery)

Madam Chair,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I take the floor before you this afternoon to share a host of views and concerns of UNHCR staff, who strive around the globe including in the remotest parts of the planet to provide assistance to the persons of concern to the organisation

First of all, I would like to express appreciation to you Madam Chair, for your leadership of the Executive Committee over the past year; and to newly elected members of the Executive Committee.

Duty of care

Allow me to begin on a positive note by expressing our appreciation for the efforts being currently invested by UNHCR into initiatives aiming at enhancing the duty of care of the organisation towards its personnel, especially in difficult work environments. The security and well-being of UNHCR personnel was, is, and will remain the number one priority and concern of the Staff Council and we can only be happy to see that UNHCR is playing a lead role in the common system in making sure that we think outside the box when it comes to ensuring an increased duty of care towards both international and national personnel who continuously risk their lives in the line of duty.

The new recruitment and assignment policy

I would also like to acknowledge the High Commissioner's stated objective to streamline the management of Human resources in UNHCR, an objective that has been recurrent over the years, without necessarily yielding the desired results. In his introductory remarks he cited in particular the recently adopted recruitment and assignments policy, aimed at "ensuring a flexible, highly-qualified workforce with the right profile, skills and expertise, and to further promote inclusion, diversity and gender equity". While staff are appreciative of the consultation process that preceded its adoption, many are concerned that the policy does not offer enough safeguards for the career development of staff who are at the fore front of service delivery to persons of concern and who have to constantly worry about keeping their jobs, because of the increased leeway the policy gives managers to hire who they want. While we fully agree that an organisation constantly needs new competencies for its survival, an adequate monitoring mechanism is needed for the appropriate implementation of the new recruitment and assignments policy in order to avoid that current staff are left by the way side.

Revision of contractual arrangements for staff

Mr High Commissioner, when you took office early last year, we brought to your attention the need to revisit the UNHCR contracts policy. Your response then was that the revision of the recruitment and assignment policy was your priority. Now that this policy has been adopted, we consider that one of your next objectives should be to adopt a contracts policy that is supportive of the long-term retention of staff. For this to materialize, the Staff Council would once again like to call for the elaboration of a contracts policy that takes into account the fundamental aspirations of staff for stability and job security, while addressing the necessity to adjust the workforce to the needs of the organization. We know this is achievable and we are ready to work with our management to reach this goal in the mutual interest of the organization and its staff.

Conditions of service of staff

UNHCR staff are among the most dedicated humanitarians in the world. More than 82% of them work in some of the world's most dangerous and remote areas.

Yet staff are deeply troubled by the steady and relentless erosion of their rights and conditions of service under the purported pressure of member countries. Over the past five years, virtually every single new policy and executive decision taken in the UN common system has been a departure from an erstwhile inclusive, staff-friendly approach. There has been a clear shift towards limiting, reducing or weakening staff rights and conditions of service. All of this comes at a time when staff are called upon to work in ever more difficult and dangerous locations, hours on end and often at the expense of family. The above points appear to reflect a paradigm shift towards less transparency in decision-making processes by bodies such as the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) that is entrusted with regulating our conditions of service.

UNHCR staff acknowledge the need for the ICSC to play its role of assessing and regulating staff employment conditions in a transparent manner, with industry accepted methodologies, to ensure fair compensation and long-term predictability and stability. Sadly however, staff have gradually lost faith in the ICSC. A couple of years ago, we deplored the decisions it took to curtail staff benefits, with the hardest hit being colleagues working in deep field locations, thereby also affecting the capacity of the organization to attract staff to those locations. Furthermore, the ICSC, which should normally be conducting objective cost of living reviews on the basis of proven methodologies, seems to have taken an approach aiming at reducing staff pay by deliberately manipulating the findings of its salary surveys, ostensibly under the pressure of member countries. It has recently rejected a peer review of the shortcomings of its recent surveys in selected countries around the world.

In light of this, UNHCR staff, like other UN staff, are questioning the integrity and accountability of the ICSC and are concerned that this body is acting more like a political entity which is entirely out of touch with the reality on the ground. These concerns are further amplified by the marked gender and age imbalances in the Commission's membership, in stark contrast with the proclaimed principles of the United Nations.

This is the reason why we take the opportunity of this address to raise your awareness on the negative impact of un-transparent decisions of the ICSC on staff morale. By way of example, it has been recently reported that 53% of UN workers experience increased stress and anxiety at the workplace, resulting in lost working days which in turn costs the UN up to 11 million dollars a day! Such an amount surpasses by far the very gains and savings the ICSC tries to make through the unfair erosion of our conditions of service, as they further fuel more stress, and we find it important to bring this to your attention.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to remind you that UNHCR personnel are nationals of your own countries. When you send your own citizens to serve internationally, I trust you make sure that their safety, well-being, work conditions and rights are protected. Why would your nationals working for UNHCR and the UN be treated differently?

These are selected concerns that we have decided to bring to your attention with the hope that you will help us convey them to the right entities including to decision makers in your respective countries as appropriate.

I thank you for your attention.