

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

UNITED NATIONS STAFF UNION

Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of the Staff Union, I wish you a prosperous new year. As we look back at 2009, we are humbled by the passing of colleagues and friends from both natural causes and, especially, deliberate attacks while in the line of duty. But we also look back with pride about the role of the United Nations staff in the world and for us, at the Staff Union, our brief of enhancing the staff's working conditions and welfare.

The implementation of the new system of administration of justice on 1 July 2009 almost capped the decades-long protracted struggle for the staff to have an independent justice system at the United Nations. Nonetheless, the Office of Staff Legal Assistance (OSLA) is undermanned. Our challenge this year is to equate the arms of staff defense with the arms of the Secretary-General, especially in this precedent-setting period. The Staff Union is in the process of hiring two staff defenders to represent its membership.

Human resources management remains as contentious as ever. The fits and starts in human resources management are symptomatic of the policy measures that are driven less by the long-term needs of the Secretariat than the ambition to achieve something during the officials' limited term in office. The staff are thus constantly on a roller coaster.

The promise of a continuing contract in lieu of the permanent contract remains elusive and appears to be trotting into a debacle. It should be recalled that the streamlining of contracts was initially cast as improving administrative efficiency. The Staff Union maintains its opposition to the continuing contract. The staff should continue to be eligible for an offer of a permanent contract after serving on a fixed-term contract for five years. The fixed-term contract should be lengthened to at least five years to realize administrative efficiency.

This year, 2010, is a human resources year for the General Assembly. We are perhaps on the cusp of a big change in human resources management, that is, if the General Assembly decides to appoint an independent human resources redesign panel of human resources experts to review and recommend the overhaul of human resources management. The almost decade-long patchwork of human resources management that has passed off as reform is now being exposed and challenged in the context of the new system of

administration of justice. For many staff members, the attempted reframing of the Secretariat's scope and functions portend hopes and promises that may not be fulfilled. Nonetheless, the Staff Union shall continue to be engaged to assure the posterity of the Secretariat and its staff.

The Capital Master Plan (CMP) is underway with such zeal that the health of the staff is being compromised to compensate for cost overruns. The CMP has dispensed with the earlier promise that asbestos abatement would only begin after all the staff were relocated to the swing space. It is now apparent that saving money is more important to the CMP project than the anxiety of staff regarding the long-term possible effects on their health. Reportedly, the Secretary-General has "complete confidence in the ability of the CMP team to abate asbestos in the Secretariat Building." However, he abandoned the "ship" and relocated to the new building just before asbestos abatement was about to begin; which suggests that the Secretary-General does not have confidence that the CMP team can **safely** abate the asbestos. The Secretary-General would allay the fears and anxiety of the staff by staying put with the staff while asbestos is being abated. That would be leading by example.

The Staff Union has hired an independent air-monitoring consultant during the CMP project. The Staff Union will also hire a consultant to monitor the electromagnetic pulse activity in the Secretariat building, whose levels have not been determined or made public.

The Staff Union will not forbear on these issues, including the now delayed conversion of the fixed-term contracts to permanent contract for the eligible staff. The Staff Union is assuaged by the General Assembly's recent decision to defer the implementation of the mobility scheme that had been tied to the eligibility for promotion.

Best wishes in the new year.



Stephen Kisambira
President, United Nations Staff Union

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