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UNMEE PUBLIC INFORMATION

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TELEPHONE BILLING IRREGULARITIES AT UNMEE

As a general rule, United Nations peacekeeping missions provide to its mission personnel, access to long-distance telephone calls, to facilitate the work of the missions.

Since most mission staff are living and working away from home and loved ones, the additional privilege of access to personal long distance calls is usually extended, upon application by the staff member, who is then issued a pin code for this purpose. Charges for these calls are in turn carefully charted and billed to the staff member at the end of each calendar month, and taken from their wages.

In October 2003 there were initial reports of possible “presumptive fraud” with regard to the use of the pin codes. Over the following months, the Mission investigated the matter further.

In December 2003, the Chief Administrative Officer was officially informed by the Senior Communications Officer of the extent of the PIN code abuse. In his memo he outlined three areas of abuse: a) use of stolen PIN codes officially issued to senior personnel of the mission; b) distribution of these stolen PIN codes for fraudulent use in other areas of the mission and c) multiple connection of under one minute from telephone extensions located in contingent locations (a one minute “grace period” was in place which covered calls made that did not go through). It was also identified that the abuse was primarily being perpetrated by UNMEE’s peacekeeping contingent members, and a small number of UNMEE civilian personnel.

In January, the “grace period” was discontinued, and on 10 February 2004, UNMEE’s Resident Auditor initiated an investigation in this topic. As a result of the subsequent auditor’s report, widespread abuse of UNMEE telephone billing system was confirmed, and the OIC Internal Audit Division in UN Headquarters sent a letter to the Head of Mission, SRSB Legwaila Joseph Legwaila officially informing him of their findings. On 19 February Administrative Circular No. 04/07 was issued, which reinforced and expanded the management and accountability of UNMEE’s telephone billing system.

In early March of 2004, SRSB Legwaila sent a letter to New York responding to the OIC’s letter from Headquarters, and advising that “all efforts should be made to recover the costs of these telephone calls through their Permanent Mission rather than

for UNMEE to absorb the costs.” On 24 March, an initial notification was then sent by UNMEE to the Controller and to the headquarters Financial Management Support Service (FMSS) advising of the alleged abuse to UNMEE telephone billing system.

Over the following months, the Mission undertook several internal initiatives to recover the outstanding telephone charges. This process was painstaking and complex, involving the manual verification of 1.4 million lines of computer billing data.

The total phone charges in question came to the amount of \$503,381.00. Of that amount, UNMEE has been able to bill the contingents for the confirmed charges of \$364,000 through their Permanent Missions in New York. So far, the Mission has recovered just over \$14,000 of the monies. The recovery of the full amount is an ongoing process, in which UNMEE’s Communications, Finance and Administration sections are working in close collaboration with UN Headquarters.

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