



Fact Sheet:
Strengthening the Department of Political Affairs

*“Strengthening the UN's capacity to step in - to resolve conflicts earlier rather than later
- is among the smartest investments we can make.”*

*Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
Address to the Fifth Committee on the 2008-2009 Budget
25 October 2007*

Rationale

In presenting his budget for 2008-2009, the Secretary-General requested budgetary increases in support of his plans to strengthen and reorganize the Department of Political Affairs, saying that: “We have re-organized our worldwide peacekeeping operations. Now it's time to turn our attention to conflict prevention and peace-building, with special emphasis on Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Let us rethink our approach to preventive diplomacy. Let us exploit to the fullest our potential for good offices and international mediation --in the broadest spirit of the Charter.”

The Secretary-General's proposals to strengthen DPA aim to do just that – to allow the United Nations to be more proactive and more effective at preventing and resolving conflicts through political means, particularly through the use of preventive diplomacy in cooperation with Member States and regional organizations.

The proposed enhancements would redress chronic resource shortages, providing DPA with the minimum staffing and mobility it needs to adequately assist the Secretary-General in detecting potential crises, and in mounting timely diplomatic initiatives.

The proposals also respond to growing requests by Member States for a more effective and systematic effort at conflict prevention. Improving the Organization's capacity to prevent and resolve conflict is a better investment than dealing with the costly aftermath of wars and armed conflicts, in which vast sums spent on development -- by Member States, the international financial institutions and the United Nations itself -- have been wasted.

Key Proposals

The Secretary-General's proposals to strengthen DPA are described in detail in the report numbered A/62/521, delivered to the ACABQ on 2 November. The key elements of the plan are as follows:

- Strengthening and reorganizing DPA's regional divisions for enhanced capacity to provide early warning of potential conflict situations, to identify opportunities for UN assistance and to propose and support preventive diplomatic initiatives;
- Rationalizing DPA's field presence through the establishment, in close consultation with Member States, of a limited network of regional offices that would assist Member States and regional organizations with preventive diplomatic efforts; these offices would be modeled roughly on the current UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA).

- Enhanced DPA capacities for policy planning and mediation support through the formation of a Policy, Partnerships and Mediation Support Division.
- Enhanced DPA management, executive and oversight capacity.
- In addition, a follow-on proposal will be forthcoming to establish a support account arrangement that would ensure proper headquarters oversight and support for DPA-managed special political missions in the field.

Estimated Cost and Staffing Impact

The proposed reforms to DPA have an estimated initial cost of \$21 million spread over the 2008-2009 biennium, covering the expense of 101 additional staff as well as an increased budget for travel of officials to areas of conflict or potential conflict. DPA currently has 220 staff based at Headquarters and a current biannual budget of approximately \$64 million.

Background

The Department of Political Affairs plays a strategic role within the UN Secretariat as the backbone for preventive diplomacy, mediation and good offices by the Secretary-General – core Charter responsibilities of the United Nations -- and through its supervision of political missions operating in conflict zones in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Important current responsibilities include management and oversight of UN political missions and offices for Iraq, Lebanon and the Middle East Peace Process, Nepal, Somalia, West Africa, Guinea-Bissau and the Central African Republic.

The Department also provides advice and support to diplomatic efforts by numerous envoys of the Secretary-General, including those currently active on Myanmar, Northern Uganda, Darfur and Western Sahara. In addition, DPA is the lead UN Department for electoral assistance and provides staff support to the Security Council and standing committees of the General Assembly on the question of Palestine and Decolonization.

Numerous independent reports – including most recently by the UN’s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) -- have documented chronic resource constraints that hamper the ability of DPA to carry out its core functions, to the detriment of the effectiveness of the Secretariat as a whole in carrying out its charter obligations in peace and security. Confirming the growing demands on the Department, OIOS calculated a six-fold increase since 1990 in United Nations preventive diplomacy missions. Calls for strengthening DPA date back to the so-called “Brahimi Report” on UN Peace Operations (2000), and were echoed strongly by the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2004) and the Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit.

The growing demand for conflict prevention, preventive diplomacy, and the Secretary-General’s good offices, not to mention the existing demands on the Department for political advice and a coordinating political role, has left the staff and leadership of DPA impossibly overstretched. By remedying this situation, the Member States will be the beneficiaries of a Secretariat that is better prepared, better staffed and better situated to assist them, when and where the need arises, in taming problems before they become larger and more costly ones.

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*Department of Political Affairs
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