

Before: Judge Agnieszka Klonowiecka-Milart

Registry: Nairobi

Registrar:

Abena Kwakye-Berko

APPLICANT

v.

SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

JUDGMENT

Counsel for the Applicant: Self-represented

Counsel for the Respondent: Isavella M. Vasilogeorgi, AAS/ALD/OHR Jacob van de Velden, AAS/ALD/OHR

Introduction

1. On 1 June 2020, the Applicant, a former Light Vehicle Driver, at G-3 level, working with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali ("MINUSMA"), based in Bamako, filed an application before the Dispute Tribunal.¹ He contests a disciplinary measure of separation from service with compensation *in lieu* of notice and with 25% of the termination indemnity otherwise applicable, in accordance with staff rule 10.2(a)(viii).²

2. The Respondent filed a reply on 13 July 2020.

3. The Tribunal held a hearing on the merits of the case on 17 and 18 November 2021, where it heard the Applicant and one witness, Mr. Luc Nijs, an Investigator of the Office of Internal Oversight Services ("OIOS"), who was responsible for the investigation of the case. The Respondent was unable to produce direct witnesses to the impugned conduct.

4. The parties filed their closing submissions on 10 December 2021.

Facts established by the investigation

5. On 15 May 2017, the Officer-in-Charge ("OiC") of MINUSMA's Fuel Unit, informed the Chief of MINUSMA's Security Investigation Unit ("SIU"), of a possible fuel fraud at Vivo Energy Fuel Stations in Bamako and she requested for an in-depth investigation into the matter.³

6. On 23 June 2017, the SIU commenced the investigations into the matter.⁴ On 15 August 2017, the SIU provided the OIOS with all the documentation related to its preliminary investigation. Specifically, SIU informed OIOS that the Applicant had

¹ Application, section I.

² Reply, annex 6.

³ Reply, annex 3, para. 4.

⁴ Ibid, para. 5.

requested that Vivo Energy personnel should falsify fuel pump delivery records to show that more fuel was put into United Nations vehicles than was actually dispensed at Vivo Energy Fuel Stations in Bamako.⁵

7. Upon receipt of the information stated above, OIOS started its own investigation of the case and produced a report on 4 October 2019.⁶

8. There was a wide-spread scheme of false fuel transactions. OIOS investigated similar reports of possible misconduct involving other 17 national staff members at MINUSMA and two Individual Contractors.⁷ Further, OIOS interviewed 11 Vivo Energy employees; 9 of them confirmed that they colluded with about 15 national staff members at MINUSMA to commit fraudulent fuel transactions, from which both benefitted monetarily.⁸ In addition, the Vivo Energy personnel explained that the fuel scheme had been committed exclusively by Malian nationals, since the start of the contract between the United Nations and Vivo Energy in late 2015.⁹

9. The OIOS established that the false fuel transactions scheme involved the following actions. When a MINUSMA driver arrived at a Vivo Energy station, a Vivo Energy employee first scanned the bar codes of the fuel pump, the driver's United Nations identification and the United Nations vehicle. After pumping the fuel in the United Nations vehicle, the Vivo Energy employee would manually alter the fuel volume requested by the MINUSMA driver on the fuel pump display, photograph the displayed volume and confirm it manually, via a scanning device. When entering the false fuel volume manually, the pump display would not show the price but would remain blank. The Vivo Energy employee would also fill out the transaction log sheets with the inflated fuel volume which the MINUSMA driver would sign.¹⁰

⁵ Reply, annex 2, (OIOS investigation report), para. 2.

⁶ OIOS investigation report, 4 October 2019.

⁷ Reply, annex 1, para. 4; OIOS investigation report, para. 11.

⁸ OIOS investigation report, para. 18.

⁹ Ibid, para. 23.

¹⁰ OIOS investigation report, paras. 19-21; *see* also Mamadou Niafo interview transcript, 4 September 2017, lines 139-144 (Doc. 117).

10. At the time, the price per 20 litres of fuel was West African CFA Franc ("CFA") 12,000. A MINUSMA driver would receive CFA10,000 (at the time, approximately USD17) per 20 litres of fuel that was fraudulently added, leaving CFA2,000 (approximately USD3.40) for the assisting Vivo Energy employee. Vivo Energy then charged the United Nations the inflated amounts.¹¹

Involvement of the Applicant in the fuel fraud scheme

11. OIOS found the Applicant to have systematically participated in the reported fraud scheme.¹² Eleven (11) Vivo Energy employees were interviewed. Three of the interviewees, namely, Mr. Mamadou Niafo, Mr. Issaka Kane and Mr. Cheickne Kante identified the Applicant as one of the MINUSMA drivers involved in the false fuel transactions from the photo arrays. ¹³ Mr. Niafo stated that the Applicant used to request him to inflate the fuel volume with 20 to 30 litres above the fuel volume actually dispensed to the vehicle that the Applicant was driving. Messrs. Kane and Kante did not provide specific details about the Applicant's involvement in the fraud.¹⁴

12. OIOS analyzed the electronic fuel monitoring system ("EFMS") records for the Applicant, reflecting the fuel transactions registered with his United Nations badge. It identified 74 fuel transactions at different Vivo Energy stations in Bamako between 28 August 2015 and 12 May 2017. It further found that analysed the quantity photo of each transaction and found that 23 of them had no price indication and thus considered them to be possible fraudulent transactions.¹⁵

13. During his OIOS interview, the Applicant reviewed the Vivo Energy fuel transaction logs corresponding to 25 fuel transactions completed at gas station ACI 2000 between October 2016 and January 2017 and registered under his badge. The Applicant recognized his signature on 13 transactions on the Vivo Energy log sheets.

¹¹ Reply paras. 19-22

¹² Ibid, para.42.

¹³ OIOS investigation report, pages 43-63.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 7, para. 29.

Upon comparing the 13 identified transactions with the photos contained in MINUSMA's EFMS records, OIOS found that for nine of these transactions the photos of the pump display showed the fuel volume but not the price.

14. OIOS, moreover, noted overconsumption for the United Nations vehicle registration number UN-23992 when driven by the Applicant. OIOS established that the average consumption for the said vehicle varied between 13 and 17 litres per 100 kilometres, when fuelled at the stations within MINUSMA compound. However, when UN-23992 was fuelled at Vivo Energy, the average consumption was up to 33 litres per 100 kilometres, approximately twice the standard average consumption.¹⁶

15. The Applicant was interviewed by OIOS on 15 August 2019.¹⁷ During the interview, the Applicant, confirmed that while at MINUSMA, he used badge No. LO 0010.¹⁸ During the Applicant's tenure, the said badge was never stolen, lost or even lent to another driver.¹⁹ The Applicant explained the procedure that he followed to fuel the vehicle as follows: On arrival, he would park the vehicle near the pump and the pump attendant would scan the vehicle's bar code and the driver's badge and then proceed to fuel the vehicle.²⁰ After fueling the vehicle, his role was to verify if the figures on the screen corresponded with what the pump attendant had recorded in the register, he would then sign and leave.²¹ The Applicant denied to have connived with anyone to commit the fuel fraud as alleged.²²

16. On 4 October 2019, OIOS, referred the investigations report to both the Office of Human Resources Management ("OHRM") and to the Office of Legal Affairs ("OLA").²³

17. On 18 November 2019, the Applicant received a letter notifying him of the

¹⁶ OIOS investigation report, para. 32.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 944.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 958, ln. 315.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 963, lines 402-418.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 967, lines 506-518.

²¹ Ibid, p. 976, lines 714-717.

²² Ibid, p. 975, lines 695-696.

²³ Reply, annex 1.

formal allegations of misconduct. The Applicant was informed that on one or more occasions between October 2016 and January 2017, (i) he participated in a scheme by which volumes of fuel pumped into United Nations vehicles were inflated in the records of Vivo Energy and MINUSMA, resulting in an increase of the amount paid by the Organization to Vivo Energy, from which he monetarily benefited sharing cash with Vivo Energy employees for the fuel which was not dispensed but was charged to the Organization; (ii) signed falsified Vivo Energy transaction logs relating to the volume of fuel dispensed to United Nations vehicles.²⁴

18. By the same letter, the Applicant was invited to submit comments on the allegations of misconduct within one month.²⁵ On 30 January 2020, the Applicant provided his comments and he denied the allegations. He emphasized that he never knowingly participated in a scheme to charge inflated fuel volumes to the Organization.²⁶

19. By letter dated 19 May 2020, the Applicant was notified of the contested decision.²⁷

Submissions

Applicant's submissions

20. The Applicant submits that he never knowingly participated in a scheme to charge inflated fuel volumes to the Organization. He was not responsible for taking the photos of the pump. His role during the refuelling of the vehicles was to check whether the litres indicated in the pump display were the same as recorded in the log sheets and to sign the latter. If there was any discrepancy between the amount of the fuel charged and the amount that filled the vehicle's tank, he did not know.

²⁴ Reply, annex 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Reply, annex 5.

²⁷ Reply, annex 6.

21. The Applicant further contends that the administration favoured inculpatory evidence and ignored potential exculpatory factors.

22. As a remedy, the Applicant, requests the Tribunal to direct the Administration to change its decision separating him from service because he did not commit the fraud.

Respondent's submissions

23. The Respondent's position is that there is clear and convincing evidence that, between September 2016 and February 2017, the Applicant took part in a scheme whereby fuel volumes that were charged to the Organization were inflated above the actual volume dispensed in the United Nations vehicles, that he intentionally falsified official records entrusted to him by virtue of his functions with the Organization and monetarily benefited from his actions.

24. The Respondent denies that there were flaws in the investigation process. The Applicant has not provided any evidence to demonstrate that the Organization failed to discharge its duty of conducting a fair and unbiased investigation.²⁸

25. The Respondent requests the Tribunal to dismiss the Application in its entirety.

Considerations

Scope of judicial review

26. It is well-established case law that the role of the UNDT in disciplinary cases is to perform a judicial review of the case and assess the following elements:

- a. Whether facts giving rise to the disciplinary measure were established by clear and convincing evidence;
- b. Whether the staff member's due process rights were observed;
- c. Whether the facts amount to misconduct; and

²⁸ Reply, para. 38.

- d. Whether the sanction is proportionate to the gravity of the offence.
- 27. Below, the Tribunal will address the Applicant's submissions on point.

Whether the facts were established by clear and convincing evidence

28. The Tribunal notes that the operation of the fraudulent scheme across Vivo Energy gas stations is undisputed and, in any event, well established by copious evidence assembled in the investigation.²⁹

29. The Applicant faults the investigator's analysis of the EFMS. He avers that the EFMS photographs that were missing the price could be a result of technical failures. The Applicant also submits that some of the photos that allegedly indicate his fraudulent transactions are not of good quality or taken from such a short distance which makes it difficult to appreciate whether the price was not shown on the display. In any event, these photos were taken by the Vivo Energy attendants without the Applicant's intervention.

30. On this point, the Tribunal recalls that OIOS performed an on-the-spot investigation and collected photographic evidence of the effect of manual modification of the fuel dispensed volume on the pump displays. This evidence corroborated the testimony of Vivo Energy employees and the MINUSMA drivers who admitted to having participated in the scheme. The Tribunal notes that indeed, some of the photos of suspicious transactions show the pump display from such proximity that it is impossible to ascertain whether the display had shown the price box as blank or not.³⁰ However, the Tribunal finds that the bizarre enlargement on the photo of the volume box while concealing the box of price is also indicative of manipulation; moreover, there is a stark difference between photographs pertinent to suspicious transactions and the regular ones. Regarding the averment of a technical failure, not only had there never been any report by Vivo of the technical failure on the pump displays, but OIOS confirmed that there was no technical failure affecting the Vivo Energy gas station

²⁹ Reply, annex 4; Reply, annex 2 (Investigation report).

³⁰ Respondent's annex RS 5

network, by randomly verifying the presence of the price on the pump display for fuel transactions that occurred immediately before or after the suspicious transactions.³¹ Finally, Mr. Nijs confirmed in the direct testimony before the Tribunal that he had ascertained the effect of manual modification of fuel volume on the pump display and that there was no technical failure affecting the Vivo Energy gas station network.³²

31. Against this background, the Tribunal agrees that the EFMS transaction records where photographs of pump displays do not show the price of the dispensed fuel create a strong presumption that these transactions involved fraudulent manipulation.

32. The charges against the Applicant were moreover based upon specific entries in the records. The Applicant expressly stated that, at the time, he was using badge No. LO 0010³³ and the said badge was never stolen, lost or even lent to another driver.³⁴ This rules out the possibility that another person used the Applicant's driver's license for the impugned transactions. The Applicant confirmed his signature on the Vivo Energy log sheets in reference to nine transactions, which, unbeknownst to him, had been marked by OIOS as fraudulent. A comparative table presented by the Respondent lists the 13 transactions recognized by the Applicant as his, and among them the nine impugned ones.³⁵ It demonstrates that eight of the transactions which were qualified as fraudulent show discrepancies between the odometer reading at refuelling³⁶, documented by photographs by Vivo Energy that were supposedly taken at the time of the refuelling³⁷ and the CarLog system entries that are automatically generated and that were therefore not subject to fraud.³⁸ Such discrepancies can only be explained by manipulation of the odometer readings and photographs taken at refuelling, since the odometer reading at refuelling involving genuine transactions would have to be a number higher than the odometer reading at the start of a vehicle's use and lower than

³¹ Reply, para. 31.

³² Luc Nijs' testimony 17 November 2021.

³³ OIOS investigation report, Applicant's interview, 15 August 2019, lines 502-518 (Doc 120).

³⁴ Ibid, p. 963, lines 402-418.

³⁵ Respondent's annex RS 1.

³⁶ Respondent's annex RS 2.

³⁷ Respondent's annex RS 5.

³⁸ Respondent's annex RS 3.

the reading at the end of use. Transactions nos. 1-8 present such discrepancies.

33. The same table further shows that on two transactions³⁹ discrepancies between the time of refuelling according to the EFMS Vivo Energy transaction sheets⁴⁰, and the time of the start and end of use of the vehicle recorded in the CarLog system entries that are not amenable to manipulation. The Tribunal agrees that such discrepancies also can only be explained by fraud involved in the fuel transactions concerned, since genuine transactions could only have taken place while the vehicle was in use. The Tribunal notes that an explanation for an apparent lack of chronology in certain transactions in a similar case UNDT/NBI/2020/001, that is, that CarLog had a time stamp one hour earlier due to the change of time, does not apply here, as in both instances the time of the start of the use of the vehicle and the end of it and the alleged refuelling fall within the same hour and discrepancies concern minute values which defy chronology.

34. The Applicant contests the evidence of three Vivo Energy employees, Messrs. Kante, Niafo and Kane, who identified him as a participant in the scheme. He maintains that since the three witnesses confessed to having participated in a scheme that defrauded the Organization, it undermines the credibility of their testimony. On this point, the Tribunal agrees that ethical stance of the witnesses is questionable, this, however, does not automatically render them irrational. The Applicant did not provide any reason for which any one of the witnesses would want to falsely implicate him, let alone why would the three of them conspire to do so.

35. The Tribunal further finds that the method of identification applied in the investigation, albeit clearly inferior to a live parade, was not objectionable in light of the accepted standards.⁴¹ The record demonstrates that the witnesses were shown photo arrays of both male and female locally recruited staff members, with all photos having been taken against the same background. All photos were numbered and anonymized,

³⁹ Respondent's annex RS 1, transactions No 2.

⁴⁰ Respondent's annexes RS2 and RS 4.

⁴¹ Oh, 2014-UNAT-480, para. 56; Mobanga, 2017-UNAT-741, paras. 26-28.

and the placement of each photo differed between the arrays. Mr. Kané was shown two photo arrays, the first containing 54 photos and the second 82 photos.⁴² Mr. Kante was shown two photo arrays, the first containing 55 photos and the second 82 photos.⁴³ Mr. Niafo was shown one photo array containing 111 photos. The Applicant contends that the photos on the photo arrays were different size. On the photo arrays showed to Mr. Kané and Mr. Kante, the Applicant's photo is slightly smaller. However, there are other photos which are smaller and therefore the Applicant's photo does not stand out. The photos on the photo array showed to Mr. Niafo all were of the same size. The Applicant's photo was not duplicated on any photo array. The Tribunal concludes that the photo arrays were not unfairly suggestive with respect to the Applicant.

36. Further, the Applicant raises the argument that the witnesses did not provide any information that corroborated his participation in the scheme. None of the witnesses was able to provide the Applicant's name or give any particulars of how he became a participant in the scheme. Mr. Niafo states that the Applicant would ask for an inflation of 20 or 30 litres for each transaction. This is exactly the same information Mr. Niafo provides about 10 other alleged participants in the scheme. Mr. Kane states that the Applicant used to refuel at Vivo Energy station but that he then disappeared and did not come anymore. The Applicant argues that all MINUSMA drivers received instructions to stop refuelling at Vivo Energy in May 2017. Therefore, when Mr. Kane alleges that the Applicant had not been going to Vivo Energy for long time, an allegation he did not make about any of other drivers although they all must have stopped refuelling there at the same time, he must have confused the Applicant with another driver that stopped refuelling at Vivo Energy much earlier. As concerns Mr. Kante, the number that corresponds to the Applicant's photo in the photo array is not listed in Mr. Kante's statement where he identified drivers implicated in the scheme. This casts doubts on the reliability of the identification and the method used to conduct it. Further, among the 18 drivers whom Mr. Kante identified as participants in the

⁴² OIOS investigation report, Issaka Kané statement, 23 June 2017, (Doc. 14).

⁴³ OIOS investigation report, Cheickne Hamala Kante statement, 23 June 2017, (Doc. 13).

scheme, there were five other drivers that no other witness identified. This could indicate that Mr. Kante was identifying drivers randomly and puts in question the reliability of his identification.

37. The Respondent submits that Mr. Niafo's statement that the Applicant and about 10 other alleged participants in the scheme asked for the volume of fuel to be inflated by 20 to 30 litres indicates that the drivers were using a similar approach. Such approach was confirmed by participating MINUSMA drivers themselves.⁴⁴ Mr. Kane's statement that the Applicant stopped going to the gas station is accurate. The Applicant stopped going to the ACI 2000 gas station in April 2017, one month before other drivers were instructed to stop going there and five months before Mr. Kane's interview. Contrary to the Applicant's claim, Mr. Kane did not state that the Applicant stopped going "much earlier" than other drivers. Rather, Mr. Kane stated that the Applicant disappeared, and it had been a long time since he had seen him, which does not discord with objective facts. Finally, Mr. Kante's statement records that he had circled the Applicant's photo. That the corresponding number was not listed only shows a mistake in the transcription of the circled photo in the statement. Mr. Kante confirmed his identification of the Applicant during his interview with OIOS. Additionally, that among the 18 drivers that Mr. Kante identified as participants in the scheme, there were five that no other witness identified does not constitute exculpatory evidence.

38. The Tribunal heard Mr. Nijs who testified that witnesses identified the Applicant based on a photograph at his presence, and in accordance with the procedure described. The Tribunal finds that the lack of the Applicant's name or particulars of his involvement in the scheme in the statements of Vivo employees is not surprising, given that under the scheme the interactions between MINUSMA drivers and Vivo employees needed not be intense or individually specific. The statement of Mr. Kane, nevertheless, clearly demonstrates that his identification of the Applicant was not

⁴⁴ Reply, annex 2 (Interview of Moriba Sambala Diallo (6 March 2018), lines 268-272 (Doc. 124); interview of Ibrahim Doumbia (7 March 2018), lines 541-543 (Doc. 124).

random. That the Applicant was also identified by two other witnesses, adds to the probability that his identification was reliable.

39. Based on the totality of evidentiary material, EFMS transaction records, Vivo Energy transaction logs, and the identification by witnesses heard in the investigation, the Tribunal is satisfied that the Applicant's participation in the fraudulent scheme has been shown by clear and convincing evidence.

Whether due process was observed

40. The Applicant faults the conduct of the investigation on the ground that the investigators favoured inculpatory evidence and ignored potential exculpatory factors. The Tribunal notes that the Applicant does not allege any specific procedural right to have been infringed nor any exculpatory fact ignored. All the specific averments of the Applicant have been addressed under the heading of sufficiency of evidence, the Tribunal, therefore, needs not entertain procedural matters any further.

Whether the facts amount to misconduct

41. The sanctioning letter invokes violation of staff regulations 1.2(b) and 1.2(q) and staff rules 1.2(i) and 1.7.

42. Staff regulation 1.2(b) requires staff members to "uphold the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity. The concept of integrity includes, but is not limited to, probity, impartiality, fairness, honesty and truthfulness in all matters affecting their work and status". Participation in a fraudulent scheme is clearly irreconcilable with the concept of integrity. Staff regulation 1.2(q) provides that staff members "shall use the property and assets of the Organization only for official purposes and shall exercise reasonable care when utilizing such property and assets."

43. The Tribunal agrees with the Respondent that the Applicant improperly used United Nations property for his personal gain in a matter affecting financial interests of the Organization. Accordingly, the Tribunal finds that the Applicant's acts constituted a misconduct.

Whether the sanction is proportionate to the gravity of the offence

44. The Respondent maintains that through his actions, the Applicant undermined the trust and confidence placed in him by the Organization; which are essential for the continuation of the employment relationship. Moreover, whereas there is no link between this case and the global pandemic of Covid-19, on an *ex gratia* basis, the Organization considered the pandemic in mitigation. Accordingly, the imposed sanction, was not the most severe at the Organization's disposal.⁴⁵

45. The Applicant does not expressly make submissions on the issue of proportionality of the sanction.

46. In accordance with staff rule 10.3(b), a disciplinary measure imposed on a staff member must be proportionate to the nature and gravity of his or her misconduct. The United Nations Appeals Tribunal ("UNAT") has elaborated that:

In the context of administrative law, the principle of proportionality means that as administrative action should not be more excessive than is necessary for obtaining the desired result. The requirement of proportionality is satisfied if a course of action is reasonable, but not if the course of action is excessive. This involves considering whether the objective of the administrative action is sufficiently important, the action is rationally connected to the objective, and the action goes beyond what is necessary to achieve the objective.⁴⁶

47. The Tribunal finds that the sanction letter dated 19 May 2020 demonstrates a proper consideration of the nature of the Applicant's actions. The Tribunal concurs that retaining the Applicant in service would be irreconcilable with the values of the Organization. The practice in the past cases is consistent in that disciplinary measures have been imposed at the strictest end of the spectrum, namely, separation from service

⁴⁵ Reply, section VII, para. 35; Reply, annex 6.

⁴⁶ Akello 2013-UNAT-336, para. 41, citing Sanwidi 2010-UNAT-084, para. 39.

or dismissal in accordance with staff rule 10.2(a).⁴⁷ Therefore, the Tribunal finds that the disciplinary measure of separation from service with compensation *in lieu* of notice and with 25% of the termination indemnity in accordance with staff rule 10.2(a)(viii) was proportionate to the offence committed.

JUDGMENT

48. The application is dismissed.

(Signed) Judge Agnieszka Klonowiecka-Milart Dated this 28th day of February 2022

Entered in the Register on this 28th day of February 2022

(Signed) Eric Muli, Legal Officer, for Abena Kwakye-Berko, Registrar, Nairobi

⁴⁷ See e.g., Aghadiuno 2018-UNAT-81; Djidda UNDT/2020/014; Branglidor UNDT/2021/004; *Mulongo* UNDT/2019/001; see moreover, ST/IC/2016/26, ST/IC/2015/22, ST/IC/2008/41, ST/IC/2005/51 and ST/IC/2002/25 (Practice of the Secretary-General in disciplinary matters and cases of criminal behavior).