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72nd Session of the General Assembly, Fifth Committee
Agenda item 146: Administration of Justice

Introductory Statement by John Barkat, United Nations Ombudsman,
on the report of the Secretary-General on the Activities of the Office
of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (A/72/138)

Distinguished Chair and Delegates,

This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the informal dispute resolution system in the United Nations Secretariat. This important milestone inevitably guided our efforts to prepare our annual report for the current session of the General Assembly. It also provided a unique opportunity for us to take stock of achievements, reflect on important trends and look ahead into some of the challenges faced by the Organization.

As noted by Secretary-General Guterres in his first address to staff, “if the UN is the main pillar on multilateralism, UN staff is the main pillar of the UN.” I would add -- they are our most important resource. By establishing our practice and supporting our efforts throughout the years, you have helped to foster a culture of dialogue and provide staff with the support and tools they need to better manage their workplace concerns and focus more effectively on their substantive work. With a steady fifteen-year upward trend in caseload, and 2600 cases received in 2016 alone, our ombudsman and mediation practice is now well established, our reach more global and our regional expertise more prominent. We count on your continued support as we implement our mandate and strategic approach in three main areas: prevention, intervention and feedback. I will briefly review each.

In the area of prevention, we have pursued and intensified our efforts around the globe to promote informal resolution of workplace disputes and help staff and managers build and enhance their skills on how to manage workplace conflict effectively. In 2016, a total of 171 workshops, training and information sessions were conducted for staff and managers globally. UNOMS will continue to promote such initiatives, with particular emphasis on the deep field.

The Office further expanded its strategic use of data and analytics by conducting focus groups on factors that impact resilience and the ability of staff and managers to cope with difficult or stressful situations. We have also conducted confidential, anonymous and multilingual pre-mission surveys in 38 Secretariat departments and peacekeeping missions across 19 countries. Over 60 per cent of staff surveyed experienced workplace conflict which they felt impacted their productivity and wellbeing

and levels of stress above what they considered acceptable. These findings have strengthened our resolve and mission to work with management and relevant stakeholders to seek appropriate remedial actions and yield better decisions. They have further reinforced the need for regular and frequent visits by UNOMS to hardship locations to provide support to staff and, also, to demonstrate the caring of the Organization. Given the valuable data collected, these pre-mission surveys now form an integral part of our mission preparations.

Intervention efforts to help resolve workplace concerns at an early stage when possible are also preventive in nature and constitute one of our core objectives. I am pleased to report that dispute resolution efforts by ombudsmen and mediators throughout the Organization covered over 1600 cases in the Secretariat alone during the reporting period, the majority of which (81%) originated in peacekeeping missions, special political missions and offices away from headquarters. These numbers signal greater awareness and comfort on the part of managers and staff in seeking informal resolution of their workplace concerns. Consistent with past trends for over a decade, the predominant concerns on the minds of staff relate to job and career, evaluative relationships and compensation and benefits.

The systemic issues we identify and the feedback we provide to stakeholders on a bilateral basis and, more broadly, in our annual reports to the Assembly, form a core component of the work that we do. The section on systemic issues in our report this year includes an overview of the major systemic issues reported by the Ombudsman to the General Assembly since 2002. I should like to take this opportunity to welcome the response provided by the Organization regarding progress made in the implementation of the Ombudsman's recommendations [Annex III of the Secretary-General's report on the Administration of Justice (A/72/204)]. We encourage the continuation of such requests by the General Assembly for regular and annual feedback from the Organization regarding the broad range of systemic issues observed by the Ombudsman.

Distinguished Chair and Delegates,

By dealing with the concerns of managers and staff on a daily basis, we are able to test the pulse of the Organization, provide much needed support and pave the way for systemic change. UN personnel across the Organization continue to grapple with a wide range of challenges, including hardship, security threats, job security, dealing with change and transitions as well as risks to their physical and psychological health. As the Organization continues to deal with challenges on the global stage and as it embarks on new initiatives, it would be critical to ensure that the staff--our

Organization's "main pillar"-- are properly equipped to serve, that their rights are preserved and protected and that their well-being is promoted and safeguarded. As the designated informal pillar of the internal justice system, we remain deeply committed to working with all concerned, including and especially our partners in the formal system, in furtherance of these common goals.

My term as UN Ombudsman is nearly coming to an end. So, in this, perhaps my last appearance before your esteemed Committee, I wish to express my profound gratitude to you and, more broadly, to the General Assembly, for your advocacy and unflinching support of the informal system.
