

UN Ethics Office
Statement by Ms. Elia Yi Armstrong, Director,
before the Fifth Committee
1 March 2021

Mr. Chair,
Distinguished Members of the Committee,

The latest Report of the Secretary-General on the *Activities of the Ethics Office* from 1 January to 31 December 2019 (A/75/82 and A/75/82/Corr.1) is before you. As requested in the General Assembly resolution 63/250, the Report also includes information on the activities of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (EPUN).

The UN Ethics Office, as an independent office, had the privilege to continue assisting the Secretary-General to enhance the Organization's culture of ethics, transparency and accountability.

2019 was the busiest year for the Ethics Office, having responded to 2,141 requests for services, an increase from 1,966 in 2018. The Office continued to advise on due diligence, reputational risk management and best practices in corporate compliance programmes.

Through the Financial Disclosure Programme, which assists filing staff to identify and manage personal conflicts of interest, 6,157 disclosure statements were reviewed. The Programme contributed to enhancing staff awareness about conflicts of interest and protecting the Organization's reputation and operational integrity. At the same time, a large number of filers adds to the strain on the Programme financing in view of the budget liquidity challenges. 111 or 73% of 152 senior officials participated in the 2019 Secretary-General's Voluntary Public Disclosure Initiative. We count on sufficient budget support for this important Programme.

As a key outreach activity, the Ethics Office facilitated the 2019 Leadership Dialogue on "*Conflicts of interest: why do they matter?*". Around 32,800 participants discussed this important topic, through cascading facilitation by managers -- the largest number since the launch of the annual exercise in 2013.

In implementing the policy on protection against retaliation for reporting wrongdoing and cooperating with audits and investigations, the Ethics Office received 204 requests, about a 50 per cent increase from 2018. To prevent retaliation for protected activities, the Office responded to 12 referrals from the Office of Internal Oversight Services. It conducted 44 preliminary reviews with 12 prima facie retaliation case determinations and found three cases of retaliation after investigation.

To ensure coherence in the application of ethical standards, the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (EPUN) met 11 times, chaired by myself. The UN Ethics Office took part in planning

and participated in the 11th meeting of the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations. The Ethics Office also continued to support the Secretariat in reviewing relevant policy provisions.

Mr. Chair and Distinguished Committee Members,

Allow me now to turn to a matter that has been pending for some time: strengthening the independence of the Ethics Office.

As you may recall, upon the request by the General Assembly in its resolution 71/ 263 for proposals to strengthen the independence of the Ethics Office, the Secretary-General made proposals in his 2017 report (A/73/89, paragraph 94). There were three for the approval by the General Assembly and three to be noted.

The three for approval, and the rationale and relevant best practices, are reiterated in paragraphs 61 to 68 of the 2019 report (A/75/82). They include:

- 1) direct presentation of the annual report by the Ethics Office to the General Assembly,
- 2) an enhanced role of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee to strengthen the accountability framework through adding a reporting line from the Ethics Office to the Committee and a consultation role on matters pertaining to the Secretary-General wherein he may have a conflict-of-interest, and
- 3) raising the rank of the Head of the Ethics Office to the level of Assistant Secretary-General (starting with the next Head, if approved).

The three to be noted are presented in paragraph 94 (d), (e) and (f) of the 2017 report (A/73/89):

- 1) term limits,
- 2) security of tenure, and
- 3) re-employment restrictions.

Mr. Chair and Distinguished Committee Members,

About the three proposals for approval by the General Assembly, I would like to highlight their merits.

First, direct presentation of the annual reports by ethics offices to their agency governing bodies, thus allowing for the receipt of reports directly from the offices rather than through the executive heads, has been supported by numerous reports of the Joint Inspection Unit. Moreover, the proposed direct presentation of the UN Ethics Office's annual report would be consistent with the current practice of five out of eight member ethics offices of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations.

Second, an additional reporting line of the Ethics Office to the Independent Audit Advisory Committee would allow the Ethics Office to bring matters, on which the Secretary-General would not be in a position to receive directly, to the attention of the Committee. It would also enhance the accountability of the Ethics Office, by giving the Committee a mandate to oversee certain aspects of the work of the Ethics Office. This proposal is supported by the

Committee in its reports to the General Assembly (A/73/304, paragraph 110; see also A/74/280, paragraph 9(k)).

Third, increasing the rank of the Head of the Ethics Office (starting with the next Head if approved) would promote greater acceptance by senior leadership of ethics advice if such advice were provided by a peer at a comparable level. The increased rank would reinforce, and be seen to reinforce, the importance of the ethics function in the Organization.

As has been advocated in the 2015-16 Secretary-General's report (A/71/334, paragraphs 78 and 79):

“In an operating environment that is marked by increasing complexity, the United Nations faces new and increasing challenges. The proliferation of stakeholders in its work; innovations in technology that impact how the world communicates and conducts business; and new human, physical and cyber security risks call for a United Nations served by an international civil service, fit for purpose. Looking ahead, the Ethics Office needs to strengthen its independence. At the same time, the Office needs to continue working with other offices in fulfilling its mandate and staying on message. A reminder of service to the public will assist to rally staff to recommit themselves to the vision and purpose of the United Nations.”

Finally, I take this occasion to thank my colleagues in the Ethics Office for their dedicated work.

I welcome any questions that you may have.