

UN Ethics Office
Statement by Ms. Elia Yi Armstrong, Director,
before the Fifth Committee
9 March 2022

Mr. Chair,
Distinguished Members of the Committee,

I am pleased to present the 2020 Report of the Secretary-General on the *Activities of the Ethics Office (A/76/76)*. As requested by the General Assembly in its 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.

Mr. Chair and Distinguished Committee Members,

Allow me to start with the Secretary-General's proposed measures for strengthening the independence of the Ethics Office, which have been in his four consecutive reports. Independence is critical to the work of the Office in enhancing integrity, transparency and accountability in the work of the Organization and also helpful for Member States in overseeing that work.

The General Assembly in its resolution 71/ 263 asked for proposals to strengthen the independence of the Ethics Office. The Secretary-General initially made his proposals in his 2017 report (A/73/89, paragraph 94). There are three for the approval by the General Assembly and three to be noted.

The three measures for approval include:

- 1) direct presentation of the annual report by the Ethics Office to the General Assembly, which allows the Office to communicate directly to Member States;
- 2) an enhanced role of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee to strengthen the Secretariat's accountability framework and for the Ethics Office to be able to consult the Committee on matters pertaining to the Secretary-General wherein he or she may have a conflict-of-interest and which may need further attention of the General Assembly, 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), thereby giving greater access for the head to higher levels of decision-making and peer status with senior officials, whom the head advises.

The three to be noted include 1) term limits, 2) security of tenure, and 3) re-employment restrictions for the head of the Ethics Office.

The 2020 report once again highlighted the merits of and rationales for these measures. Strengthening the independence of the Ethics Office is a governance rather than a budgetary measure. As previously observed by the Secretary-General in his 2015-16 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. ... (They) call for a United Nations served by an international civil service, fit for purpose. Looking ahead, the Ethics Office needs to strengthen its independence...”

Mr. Chair and Distinguished Committee Members,

Before closing my statement, permit me to share with you key achievements of the Office in 2020. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ethics Office responded to 1,681 requests, using mostly remote means of communications.

The largest category, 691 requests, was for ethics advice on mainly conflict-of-interest matters.

The Financial Disclosure Programme contributes to mitigating conflicts of interest and protecting the Organization's credibility. For the 2020 filing cycle, 5,904 disclosure statements were reviewed. Of the 158 eligible senior officials, nearly 80% participated in the Secretary-General's Voluntary Public Disclosure Initiative.

As a key annual outreach activity, the Ethics Office facilitated the 2020 Leadership Dialogue with the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services on “Acknowledging dignity through civility: how can I communicate for a more harmonious workplace?” About 40,000 United Nations personnel participated, the largest number since the launch of the Dialogues in 2012-13.

The Ethics Office handled 138 enquiries on the policy on protection against retaliation for reporting misconduct or cooperating with duly authorized audits or investigations. The Office responded to 7 proactive referrals from the Office of Internal Oversight Services, upon its assessment of a risk of retaliation. The Ethics Office completed 30 preliminary reviews and made 3 prima facie retaliation determinations, with referrals for investigation. The Office made 3 final determinations of retaliation after investigation of past referrals.

To ensure coherence in the application of ethical standards among its member agencies, the Ethics Panel held 10 formal sessions and a special informal session. The UN Ethics Office also took part in planning and participated in the 12th meeting of the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations.

Finally, I thank my colleagues in the Ethics Office for their continued dedicated work.

I welcome any questions that you may have.