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Administration of justice at the United Nations

Activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In its resolution [78/248](#), the General Assembly reaffirmed that the informal resolution of conflict is a crucial element of the system of administration of justice, emphasized that all possible use should be made of the informal system in order to avoid unnecessary litigation, without prejudice to the basic right of staff members to access the formal system, and encouraged recourse to the informal resolution of disputes.

As requested by the General Assembly, the present report covers the activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services in the Secretariat for the period from 1 January to 31 December 2023. It provides an overview of the use of informal conflict resolution and the Office's awareness-raising and capacity-building activities; and contains systemic observations.

The General Assembly is invited to take action as set out in paragraph 80 of the present report.

* [A/79/150](#).



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I. Introduction

1. The year 2023 marked a period of significant activity for the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services. Over the year, the Office witnessed a substantial increase in cases brought to its attention, reflecting the trust placed in its services by United Nations personnel and their reliance thereon. The demand for the Office's services not only underscores the relevance of the Office's work, but also indicates a growing awareness and recognition of informal resolution mechanisms among United Nations personnel.

2. In 2023, the General Assembly reinforced its support for the "informal first" approach, emphasizing the alignment of the approach with the broader United Nations agenda with a view to fostering a culture of dialogue and connection within the workplace. The "informal first" approach is aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts early, and maintaining dignity and respect in the workplace. Under this approach, alternative conflict resolution methods are prioritized over formal complaints, marking a significant step in the collective commitment to dialogue and understanding, thereby enabling a more productive working environment.

3. The Office's vision – to help to keep the peace internally so that United Nations employees can keep the peace in the world – was particularly relevant in 2023. By resolving conflicts and mitigating disputes through informal means, the Office empowers United Nations employees to focus on their essential roles on the global stage. The foundational work of the Office ensures that the internal operations of the United Nations are as harmonious and effective as the peace efforts it champions worldwide.

4. Guided by the core principles of independence, neutrality, confidentiality and informality, the Office seeks to maintain the highest standards of service delivery across all operational areas. To ensure service accessibility across all areas of operation of the United Nations, the Office has a presence beyond Headquarters. Today, the Office serves a global workforce from eight strategic locations, as well as through mission visits and virtual engagements.

5. The network of ombudsmen and mediators serving organizations that are part of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, chaired by the United Nations Ombudsman, gained significant momentum in 2023, enhancing collaboration and driving standards across United Nations organizations. The network provides a platform for the harmonization of conflict resolution services across the United Nations system, ensuring that all United Nations personnel have access to effective informal conflict resolution services. Acting under the One United Nations initiative, the network facilitates the exchange of insights, collaboration on common issues and the promotion of best practices among its member organizations.

6. The present report contains a comprehensive overview of the Office's key activities in 2023, illustrating the pivotal role of the Office in cultivating an environment of dignity and respect within the Secretariat. The activities and achievements of 2023 highlight both the challenges and successes in navigating the complexities of workplace conflict resolution within the Organization. The Office's systemic observations provide an informed description of trends and patterns pertaining to the United Nations workplace. Moving forward, the Office renews its pledge to promote the informal resolution of workplace conflicts, ensuring that its internal practices empower United Nations personnel to lead by example in the global arena.

II. Conflict resolution services

A. The “informal first” approach

7. The aim of the organizational ombudsman function in the Secretariat, established under General Assembly resolution [55/258](#), is to provide the services of an independent, neutral, confidential and informal Office to address employment-related concerns of United Nations staff members. The Office serves as the informal component of the United Nations internal justice system.

8. The essence of the “informal first” approach lies in recognizing that not all conflicts require formal interventions. Indeed, most workplace disputes can be effectively resolved through open communication, avoiding escalation and lengthy processes. The benefits of the “informal first” approach are numerous: it is amicable, confidential, cost-effective and time-efficient; and it allows for creative solutions and gives individuals control over the process, providing a holistic understanding of how workplace concerns are addressed and the resolution process is navigated. Ultimately, informal resolution benefits both the Organization and individuals by promoting a productive workforce that prioritizes dialogue as a means of addressing discord.

9. In its resolution [77/260](#), the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to increase awareness among staff of the possibility of having conversations with the Office to explore informal resolution, including mediation, as a first step, where feasible, prior to filing a formal complaint.

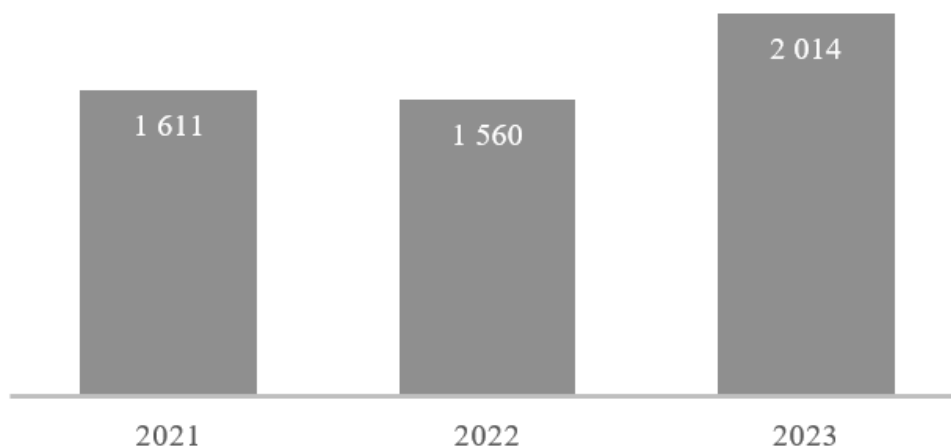
10. A significant milestone in this respect was the submission of a memorandum by the Chef de Cabinet to heads of entities across the Secretariat, entitled “Informal conflict resolution: the preferred first step in resolving workplace concerns”. This initiative underscores the Organization’s commitment to prioritizing informal resolution as the initial approach to addressing workplace conflicts. As requested by the General Assembly, throughout the year, the Office worked closely with senior managers to identify strategies to promote the “informal first” approach. In addition, the Office collaborated with relevant stakeholders, such as the Office of Administration of Justice, staff counsellors, staff federations, conduct and discipline focal points, human resources officers and medical services stakeholders, to promote the approach. The strategy is being replicated across the United Nations system through the network of ombudsmen and mediators.

11. In addition to its efforts to strengthen the “informal first” approach, the Office acknowledges with appreciation the ongoing efforts under the formal mechanisms to encourage the use of informal means, as described in the report of the Secretary-General on the administration of justice at the United Nations ([A/79/127](#), paras. 98–106).

B. Overview of case volume and trends

12. In 2023, the Office received a total of 2,014 cases, including 124 mediation cases (see figures I and V). These numbers represent a significant increase compared with 2022, when 1,560 cases, including 100 mediation cases, were received. Based on trends during the first two quarters of 2024, it is expected that the case volume will remain at a similar level in 2024.

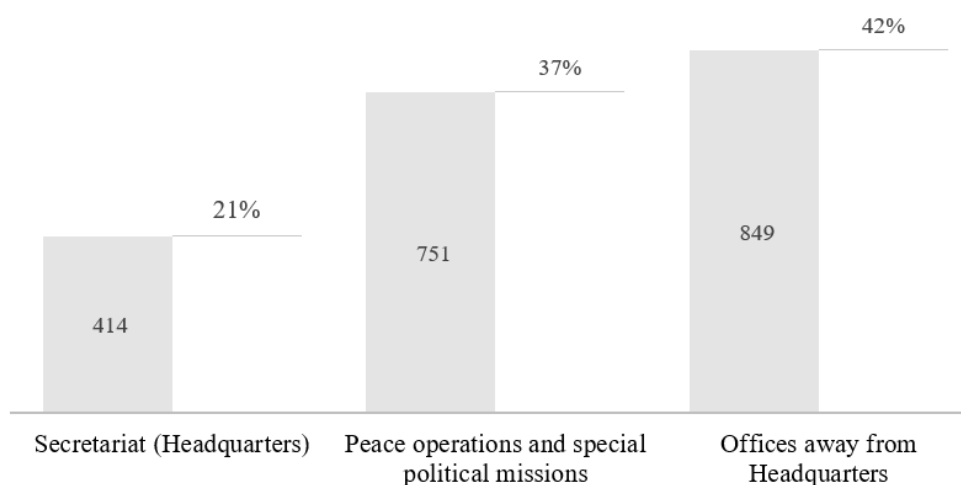
Figure I
Number of cases received in the Secretariat, 2021–2023



13. Each case presents a unique set of considerations, necessitating tailored approaches for resolution. A case may entail several issues involving multiple parties; each case varies in terms of complexity and the scope of the interventions required to address it. The time taken to work with one visitor may range from a minimum of one hour to several sessions with different parties over several weeks, depending on the number and complexity of the issues.

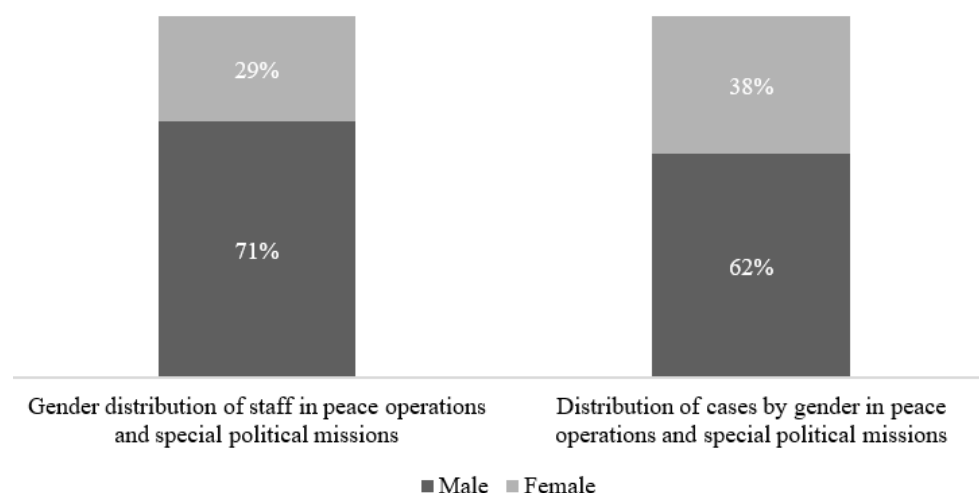
14. The Office offers the following conflict resolution services to individual visitors and groups of individuals: discussion of options, conflict coaching, mediation, shuttle diplomacy and team processes. A description of the services is set out in the annex to the present report, which complements the in-depth illustration of the ombudsman process provided in a previous report ([A/77/151](#), sect. II.A).

Figure II
Distribution of cases by location across the Secretariat, 2023



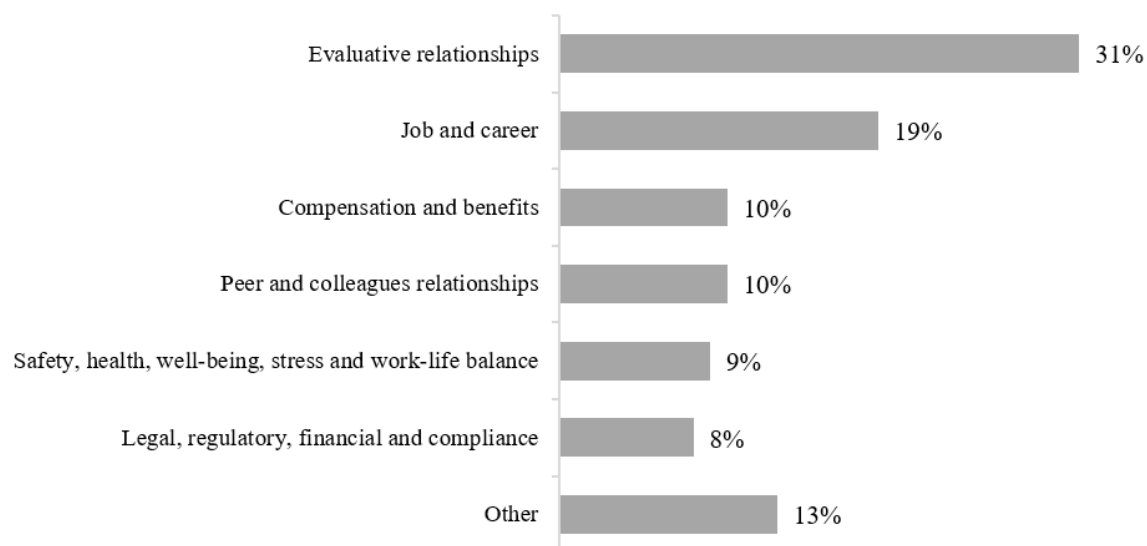
15. Of the total number of cases, 21 per cent (414) were brought forward by staff at Headquarters, 37 per cent (751) by staff in peace operations and special political missions, and 42 per cent (849) by staff at offices away from Headquarters (see figure II).

Figure III
Distribution of cases by gender in peace operations and special political missions, 2023



16. Compared with the overall demographics across the Secretariat (see [A/78/569](#)), a higher proportion of female staff utilized the informal conflict resolution services provided by the Office. This trend remains consistent across all duty stations. For instance, while women constitute only 29 per cent of the total staff population in peace operations and special political missions, they represented 38 per cent of the cases received by the Office (see figure III), which aligns with past trends, underscoring the Office's ongoing significance as a vital resource and safe space for female staff serving in challenging duty stations.

Figure IV
Distribution of cases by categories of issues across the Secretariat, 2023



17. The categories of issues most frequently brought to the attention of the Office in 2023 were: “evaluative relationships” (31 per cent), involving issues between supervisees and supervisors or managers related mainly to perceived abusive managerial practices, poor team management, misuse of performance feedback and

poor people management skills; “job and career” (19 per cent), where concerns raised related to working conditions, applications for posts, transparency in recruitment and employment terms; “compensation and benefits” (10 per cent); and “peer and colleague relationships” (10 per cent), which included grievances about dismissive or rude behaviour, lack of trust and poor communication, leading to interpersonal conflicts and low team morale (see figure IV). Unlike in previous years, there was an increase in cases related to the category “safety, health, well-being, stress and work-life balance”; several of these cases identified stress from work-related tension or prolonged conflict. The “other” category includes issues related to services and administration; organization, leadership and management; and values, ethics and standards.

Update on mediation services

18. Mediation is a core part of the Office’s work. The objective of mediation is to facilitate communication, in an impartial manner, between parties in order to assist them in resolving disputes and reaching mutually acceptable agreements. Mediators create a safe space for raising concerns, encouraging constructive dialogue and exploring creative solutions. By providing structure and clarity, mediation enables parties to work together even after experiencing poor communication, negative assumptions and distrust.

19. In paragraphs 16 and 17 of its resolution [77/260](#), the General Assembly reaffirmed the central role of mediation, recognizing it as a core part of the work of the Office and as a cost-effective method of informal conflict resolution. In paragraph 23 of the same resolution, the Assembly requested the Office to provide, on an annual basis, a statistical overview with data on mediation cases, including on case volume and trends, and the resolution rate of cases mediated by the Office and information on cases with full resolution, and to report thereon to the Assembly.

20. Of the total number of cases mentioned in figure I, 124 were mediation cases, marking an increase of 24 per cent compared with the previous year. Most of the cases (55 per cent) included issues related to evaluative relationships, followed by job and career (14 per cent) and peer and colleague relationships (12 per cent).

21. During the reporting period, 86 per cent of the cases were resolved successfully. Of these, 88 per cent were closed within 90 days, and 75 per cent within 60 days. Only 9 per cent of cases extended beyond 90 days. The expediency of the mediation process is contingent upon the availability of all parties and decision makers. Improved collaboration among parties and stakeholders significantly enhances the likelihood of a prompt resolution.

Increasing opportunities for mediation

22. In paragraph 17 of its resolution [77/260](#), the General Assembly underlined the importance of increasing the use of mediation services and encouraged improved communication between all parts of the system of administration of justice to increase opportunities to address underutilized mediation.

23. With the aim of increasing the use of mediation services, as encouraged by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in paragraph 54 of its report on the administration of justice at the United Nations and activities of the Office ([A/78/580](#)), the Office delivered regular presentations to global audiences, in different languages, to raise awareness and increase understanding of mediation services in the Organization. Over 500 participants attended such information sessions in 2023, and 95 per cent of respondents to the feedback survey noted that they would recommend the presentation to a colleague.

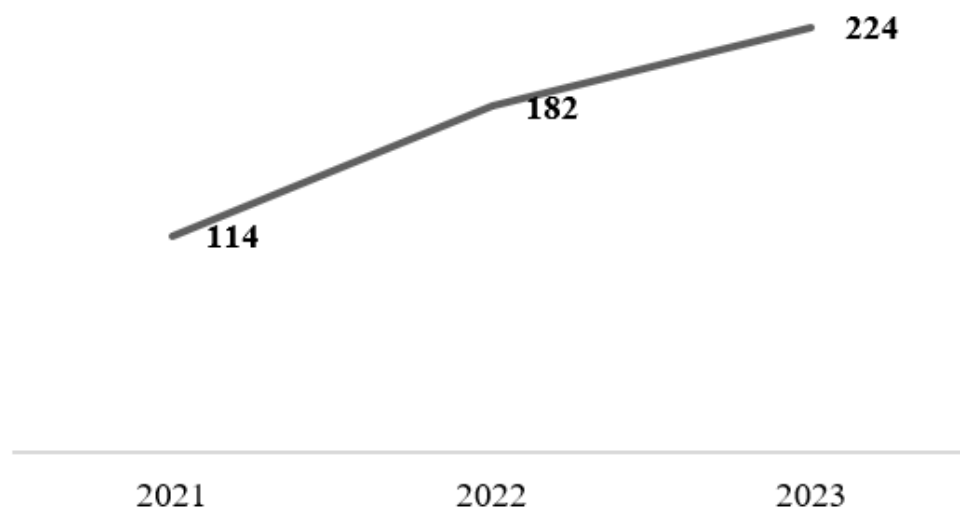
24. Furthermore, as a testament to the improved communication between all parts of the system of administration of justice, the Office collaborated successfully with several stakeholders, including the Office of Staff Legal Assistance and the Management Advice and Evaluation Section, with a view to increasing referrals to the Office, where appropriate.

25. In 2023, the United Nations Dispute Tribunal referred three cases for mediation to the Office. Of those, one was withdrawn following mediation; in the other two cases, the applicants chose to continue the proceedings before the Dispute Tribunal. According to article 10 (3) of its statute, the Dispute Tribunal can refer cases to the Office for mediation: “At any time during the deliberations, the Dispute Tribunal may propose to refer the case to mediation. With the consent of the parties, it shall suspend the proceedings for a time to be specified by it. If a mediation agreement is not reached within this period of time, the Dispute Tribunal shall continue with its proceedings unless the parties request otherwise.” The Office has a presence at all Dispute Tribunal locations, in New York, Geneva and Nairobi. The Office looks forward to receiving additional referrals from the Dispute Tribunal.

Update on services for non-staff personnel

Figure V

Number of cases opened for non-staff personnel in the Secretariat, 2021–2023



26. In its resolution [78/248](#), the General Assembly decided to regularize the pilot project to enable non-staff personnel to access the Office’s services within existing resources. Although the regularization was not yet in effect during the reporting period, the Office observed a significant increase of 37 per cent in the number of cases received from non-staff personnel (from 182 cases in 2022 to 224 in 2023), the majority of which emanated from peace operations. The categories of issues most frequently reported were evaluative relationships (23 per cent), job and career (19 per cent) and compensation and benefits (17 per cent). As the Secretariat continues to rely on non-staff personnel, the Office expects that cases reported by that group will continue to increase.

C. Accessing services

27. In paragraph 4 of its resolution 77/260, the General Assembly stressed the importance of ensuring access for all staff members to the system of administration of justice, regardless of their duty station. With a decentralized presence in eight locations, the Office is committed to inclusivity and accessibility. Regional offices in New York, Bangkok, Entebbe (Uganda), Geneva, Goma (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Nairobi, Santiago and Vienna, and a temporary presence in Beirut, as well as frequent mission visits, ensure equitable access for personnel in remote duty stations.

28. To meet the needs of visitors and stakeholders for in-person assistance, the Office has consistently organized face-to-face interactions, which are effective in resolving conflicts and fostering a harmonious work environment, especially for staff in remote or challenging duty stations. Mission visits allow personnel to discuss workplace issues directly and enable practitioners to engage effectively with stakeholders and senior management to promote the “informal first” approach within their entities. Such visits are vital for maintaining connections, especially for personnel working and living in isolated, hardship and stressful conditions. However, the decrease in travel resources has hindered the Office’s ability to provide in-person services, sometimes leaving issues unresolved or making the Office reliant on other entities to fund the cost of mission visits, which could affect the perceived independence of the Office. To ensure continued service delivery and complement in-person visits, the Office uses virtual platforms for both outreach activities and remote conflict resolution services.

29. In paragraph 7 of its resolution 77/260, the General Assembly noted that multilingualism within the system of administration of justice contributes to efficient and effective dispute resolution and increased outreach and awareness-raising. In that light, the Office delivers informal conflict resolution services in all six official languages. Throughout 2023, the Office continued to prioritize the provision of information on informal conflict resolution in the six official languages through key communication materials, including internal and external websites, which are regularly updated. In addition, the Office has made significant efforts to enhance accessibility by updating all its materials to ensure that they are accessible to personnel with disabilities, in accordance with United Nations guidelines.

D. Effectiveness of services

30. To measure the effectiveness of its services, the Office conducts regular satisfaction surveys. In 2023, 85 per cent of respondents felt that the ombudsman or conflict resolution officers had assisted them in exploring and evaluating options, a notable increase from 68 per cent in 2022. Furthermore, 79 per cent of respondents reported that they had received valuable information and strategies from their interactions with the Office, an increase from 67 per cent in 2022. Lastly, 73 per cent of respondents stated that they were better able to navigate and address their concerns after working with the Office, compared with 63 per cent in 2022. Overall, these trends suggest that visitors see the Office’s services as effective, providing valuable workplace information, strategies and help in addressing workplace concerns. The analysis of feedback received also reveals respondents’ appreciation for the sense of empowerment that they felt as a result of their visit. The comments emphasized the approachability and informal character of the Office. Visitors recognized the Office as a safe space and valued the “feeling of support”. Respondents also noted the Office’s adherence to its principles of confidentiality and independence. The principle of independence allows the Office to operate without external influence, maintaining trust and credibility among personnel at all levels.

III. Awareness-raising and capacity-building

A. Promoting the informal resolution of workplace conflicts

31. In accordance with General Assembly resolution [77/260](#), the Office intensified its efforts to promote informal resolution as the primary approach to addressing workplace conflicts. The results of the satisfaction survey conducted by the Office in 2023 show a notable increase in awareness of the Office's services among United Nations personnel, with a total of 90 per cent of respondents stating that they were familiar with the Office. Furthermore, the understanding of the type of concerns that can be brought to the Office has shown an upward trend, with 80 per cent of respondents stating that they had a better understanding in 2020, 83 per cent in 2022 and 87 per cent in 2023.

32. These positive trends can be attributed to the extensive awareness-raising efforts of the Office in 2023 and in previous years. Leveraging both online and in-person channels, the Office organized targeted interactive awareness-raising sessions, including town hall meetings and briefings, facilitating direct engagement with personnel.

33. In 2023, regional offices held more than 150 information sessions, which included targeted outreach visits, using a mix of in-person and virtual formats. This innovative hybrid outreach model emphasized equal access to services for staff based in remote locations and successfully reached personnel from various entities across the targeted regions, who were able to attend in person and online. Positive feedback highlighted improved feelings of inclusion and belonging.

34. Following the circulation by the Chef de Cabinet of the memorandum on the "informal first" approach, the Office intensified its engagements with senior officials of the United Nations. The endorsement by the Management Committee of the terms of reference for the "informal first champions" communications toolkit represented a reinforced commitment by leadership to informal conflict resolution within the Organization. Recognizing the pivotal role that managers play in promoting informal conflict resolution, the Office developed the toolkit in order to support senior managers in effectively communicating with personnel on the informal resolution process.

35. In addition, the Office collaborated with other organizational units on initiatives to amplify its messages and to mainstream awareness of informal conflict resolution across the Secretariat. For example, the Office worked with the Department of Operational Support to support the newly launched global orientation programme (GO2UN) for onboarding new staff and closely collaborated with the Office of Human Resources on an induction programme for senior leaders. Regional ombudsmen regularly participated in local induction programmes and in civilian predeployment programmes. The Office also contributed to a new basic awareness training programme under the strategic action plan for addressing racism and promoting dignity for all. The Office supported the launch and promotion of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy for 2024 and beyond, in collaboration with the Implementation Board of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. Through such collaboration, the Office ensures that references to the Office as a resource and the "informal first" approach are incorporated into organizational initiatives.

B. Dignity for all in the United Nations workplace

36. The principle of dignity is a cornerstone of the United Nations, deeply enshrined in its foundational documents. The principle is highlighted in the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations, in particular the determination to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small. It is further reinforced in the United Nations staff regulations, in particular in regulation 1.2 (a), which provides that “staff members shall uphold and respect the principles set out in the Charter, including faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women”.

37. In the systemic observations contained in its previous annual reports, the Office has consistently highlighted concerns related to issues of dignity and respect. Those observations have also pointed to the impact of such issues on team climate and morale, stressing the need to foster an inclusive and respectful work environment.

38. Recognizing that behaviour has an impact on workplace dynamics, the Office has been committed to equipping individuals with skills for positive interaction with colleagues. Central to fostering harmony is the ongoing effort to cultivate conflict competence skills and prevent escalation. Initiatives such as the Dignity through Civility campaign and dialogues on racism in the United Nations workplace promote awareness and action with a view to improving behaviour and nurturing respect.

39. The workshop on dignity, which the Office continues to deliver across the Organization, is focused on the connection between dignity and civility in the workplace; it explores how communication enhances or undermines dignity, and invites participants to brainstorm as to how to build work communities that support the notion of dignity. With a firm footing in the Charter of the United Nations, the workshop serves to illustrate a new dynamic of workplace interactions, provide participants with language to describe this dynamic, shift mindsets towards civility and inspire participants to take concrete action. In 2023, approximately 100 such workshops were conducted, thereby promoting dignity and respect in daily interactions and contributing to a healthy work environment.

IV. Systemic observations

A. Introduction

40. A primary responsibility of an ombudsman is to enhance organizational learning and development by highlighting trends and patterns (systemic observations) that may contribute to workplace conflict and thereby impede organizational goals. Early detection of such trends allows the Organization to respond in an adaptive and holistic manner that can help to manage present and future conflicts. Systemic observations stem from a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, including the experiences of visitors who reach out to the Office, exchanges with stakeholders; and information and lessons learned from complaints mechanisms.

41. While individual cases can often be resolved through direct intervention and problem-solving, many conflicts can be traced to systemic issues, such as gaps or inconsistencies in the Organization’s policies, procedures, systems or structures. Taking a collaborative approach, the Office shares systemic observations with stakeholders in the Organization on an ongoing basis to inform their thinking and contribute to discussions aimed at addressing often complex workplace problems.

42. As in past years, the Office worked with the administration, staff representatives and others to provide insights and brainstorm as to how to foster a harmonious workplace. Such ongoing engagement has proved to be a good practice, as it allows the Office to share timely insights. In 2023, the Office frequently participated, in an ex officio capacity, in a variety of forums, such as meetings of the Management Committee, the Implementation Steering Group on Addressing Racism and the Implementation Board of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. The Office was frequently consulted in the development and review of new policies, initiatives and learning programmes. The Office appreciates the engagement of the many stakeholders, including staff representatives and individual staff members, who shared their workplace insights.

B. Workplace context

43. In an address to staff in 2023, the Secretary-General noted: “Working together is humanity’s best hope, and that is a vision which the women and men of the United Nations make a reality every day”. Enabling United Nations personnel to work together so that they can deliver to the world is the daily work of the ombudsmen and mediators in the Office.

44. The year 2023 was highly volatile for the United Nations and people worldwide, which created a difficult context for personnel – who faced rising insecurity and uncertainty. Within the Secretariat, significant challenges arose in relation to the liquidity crisis, including recruitment freezes and understaffing, which resulted in increased workloads for existing personnel and tested their physical and mental resilience. The closure and downsizing of entities further heightened concerns about job security, adding to anxiety among personnel.

45. In addition to the general sense of insecurity, uncertainty and fatigue, common themes in conversations with visitors included increased levels of stress, the desire for acknowledgement and appreciation of one’s contribution and dignity, challenges in balancing the demands of work and personal life, and difficulties in reconciling differences in values and beliefs that staff bring to the workplace. The Office noted that, when the United Nations values of inclusion, integrity, humility and humanity are upheld in daily interactions among personnel, as well as in managerial and administrative decision-making processes, there can be a positive impact. These values apply to all staff – no matter their rank, role or location. Implementing them consistently will help to mitigate conflict and its escalation.

Resource constraints and their impact

46. Protecting staff from the consequences of the liquidity crisis was a stated priority for the Organization in 2023. In that regard, the Organization imposed hiring restrictions as one of the measures to safeguard resources. The impact of the restrictions manifested in the workplace in a variety of ways, one of which was the need to reassess and redistribute workloads. As reported by visitors, the adjustment was particularly challenging in entities already burdened by high vacancy rates and those with existing heavy workloads, posing challenges for staff at all levels, including managers. The suspension of hiring also negatively affected career opportunities for current staff, including those working at downsizing entities, adding to an overall strain within the workforce. Practitioners of the Office observed that the cumulative effect of the resource constraints extended beyond workload and career, and included negative consequences for health and well-being, as well as for morale, among personnel. This situation, in turn, often translated into strained workplace communications and negatively affected behaviour among colleagues.

47. In speaking with the Office, personnel at all levels, including those in managerial positions, shared concerns about the pressures they experienced to deliver in a resource-scarce environment and the difficulties of balancing results with the well-being of teams. In the face of high workloads, a frequent sentiment that staff expressed to the Office was their need to be treated with humanity – the United Nations value that emphasizes acting with empathy, compassion and kindness. This is in line with previous observations, in which the Office found that, in about 40 per cent of the cases brought to its attention, there was an underlying behaviour related to lack of civility, including a lack of respect and poor treatment, and issues related to communication, negative team climate and low morale.

48. Another concern frequently expressed to the Office related to the timeliness and quality of services provided to personnel, including services directly affecting employees, such as queries relating to work-life balance, allowances and benefits, dependants or other administrative and human resources-related matters. The service providers, however, expressed concerns about their ability to serve staff effectively owing to existing resource constraints and staffing shortages. Meanwhile, personnel approached the Office about what they felt were unreasonable delays in responding to requests or providing insufficient explanations to sometimes complex queries. In some cases, the matter escalated, adding further stress to an already fraught situation.

49. On a positive note, the Office observed that, despite the challenges, many staff members in supervisory functions had started operationalizing the United Nations values in their work and were using available tools to boost morale and well-being in their teams. Service providers made efforts to educate personnel about human resources and administrative matters through virtual briefings, broadcasts and resource hubs, such as the Knowledge Gateway. These formats have proved helpful in increasing communication and transparency, thus helping to alleviate concerns and fears among personnel.

Mental health and well-being

50. In 2023, the Office continued to observe an increase in issues related to safety, health, well-being, stress and work-life balance, a trend that has been exacerbated since the onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Recognizing these challenges, the Organization undertook significant efforts to address mental health and well-being through the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. In the Strategy, it is acknowledged that United Nations personnel face numerous psychosocial risk factors at work, resulting in high rates of symptoms consistent with mental health conditions, which is in line with what the Office has observed in cases brought by visitors.

51. The Strategy for 2024 and beyond incorporates several of the systemic observations made by the Office in previous years. These observations include the need for: access to counselling services for staff, especially in hardship duty stations; efforts to reduce the stigma related to mental health challenges; and better incorporation of mental health considerations into the workplace through improved mental health literacy, in particular for staff in supervisory roles.

52. During the reporting period, several visitors to the Office attributed mental health challenges to workplace dynamics, including perceived harassment or abuse of authority. Cases were also brought to the Office by managers who had experienced upward harassment from their supervisees. Some visitors said that they had chosen to remain on sick leave for longer periods to avoid returning to the workplace. A recurring concern voiced by visitors was the return-to-work process and available options for reasonable accommodations that would account for mental health considerations. In most cases, staff returning to work did not feel comfortable or

empowered to discuss their mental health situation or need for accommodations and kept silent. Such complex cases often required the Office to engage in shuttle diplomacy between various stakeholders, including staff counsellors, who are critical partners in such cases.

53. The Strategy for 2024 and beyond takes these challenges into consideration and includes indicators for the use of reasonable accommodations and structured case management with the goal of enabling a dignified workplace for affected personnel. The Office will continue to work with stakeholders of the Implementation Board of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy to address such complex situations in order to support staff in effectively contributing to the work of the Organization upon returning to the workplace.

Fostering a harmonious workplace within entities

54. The responsibility for fostering a harmonious workplace within the Secretariat rests with the heads of each entity, as outlined in various workplace policies, including the policy on addressing discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority ([ST/SGB/2019/8](#)), and as referenced in their compacts with the Secretary-General. To support heads of entities in carrying out this responsibility, the Organization provides them with a variety of tools, such as the global staff engagement survey, and mechanisms, including the network of conduct and discipline focal points and teams. Initiatives, such as the United Nations Values and Behaviours Framework, the Leadership Dialogue and United to Respect dialogues, have been put in place to instil a common set of values and behaviours that are expected in the United Nations workplace.

55. Despite such efforts by the Organization to put the necessary systems in place, the Office frequently deals with workplace conflict involving allegations of prohibited conduct, and inappropriate and sometimes abrasive behaviours. Such conflicts have often festered for a long time without being addressed. One contributing factor appears to be a lack of awareness and inconsistent implementation of organizational values and norms. For visitors, the situation becomes especially acute when, in their perception, appropriate behaviours are not exemplified at the managerial levels. While senior leaders bear a special responsibility for conduct, the Office notes that the obligation to act in accordance with the values and behaviours of the Organization applies to everyone.

56. As mentioned in previous reports, the socialization and implementation of policies and initiatives in such a large, complex, dynamic and geographically dispersed Organization requires sustained and intentional efforts. Given that staff, including leaders, tend to bring their own values, beliefs and cultural norms into the workplace, there is a strong need to continuously model, reinforce and operationalize United Nations values and the code of conduct at all levels of the Organization.

Organizational support for senior leaders in their role as heads of entities

57. Supporting senior leaders in their roles as heads of entities within the Secretariat is crucial for ensuring effective decision-making and accountability at all levels. The current framework for delegation of authority emphasizes the placement of accountability and decision-making responsibilities at the point of delivery, which means that senior leaders bear significant responsibility for their entities' performance.

58. Transitioning into a leadership role at the senior levels of the United Nations can be challenging, especially for leaders who lack extensive United Nations experience or whose management styles differ from United Nations leadership frameworks. The Office has observed that it is essential for senior leaders to be well

prepared and adequately supported in carrying out their responsibilities – a need also expressed by senior leaders themselves.

59. The current Senior Leadership Induction Programme serves as a foundational step in introducing new leaders to their roles within the United Nations context. In addition, there are various tools available for senior leaders to gauge their effectiveness as managers. One such tool is the 360-degree feedback mechanism, which provides leaders with insights from peers, stakeholders and supervisees on their strengths and areas for improvement as leaders. Although participation in the 360-degree feedback process is currently voluntary, its expanded use holds great promise, especially when used to measure progress and tailor coaching and other support needs.

60. Overall, it is important for the Organization, as well as for leaders themselves, to recognize that leaders will have unique development and support needs upon joining the Organization and throughout their careers. The United Nations Ombudsman has personally offered conflict coaching to senior leaders and serves as a trusted, confidential and safe resource for many. As the Secretariat advances gender parity at all levels, the United Nations Ombudsman has also paid particular attention to engaging with senior female leaders – and will continue to do so.

Supporting managerial excellence grounded in United Nations values

61. In addition to providing targeted support to senior leaders, ensuring managerial excellence at all levels is crucial for fostering a positive and productive workplace. Although this observation has been raised in previous reports, it remains relevant. In cases brought to the Office, a recurring issue has been the question of managerial competence, especially with regard to people management.

62. In cases related to evaluative relationships, visitors raised several issues, including insufficient regular communication, top-down and rigid approaches to management, a lack of recognition of contributions, and inconsistent exemplification of United Nations values and behaviours at the managerial levels. The Office observed in these cases that managers joining the United Nations from external sectors often struggled to adapt their management style to fit the context of the United Nations and the needs of staff. In addition, staff transitioning from technical or substantive roles to managerial positions faced difficulties in meeting the demands and responsibilities associated with their new roles. Taking on supervisory responsibilities requires different skill sets and a deliberate shift to the new role.

63. At the individual level, the ombudsman teams have been available to coach managers and staff, helping them to navigate such challenges while amplifying United Nations values and expected behaviours. On a systemic level, the Office collaborated with the Office of Human Resources to support the adoption of the United Nations values of inclusion, integrity, humility and humanity. The Office helped to prepare for and facilitate an event entitled “Humanity takes the lead: the importance of dignity in two-way feedback”, which was geared towards training managers in applying the notion of dignity in their conversations with staff.

64. Several organizational development programmes are available for managers to enhance their managerial competence and make use of coaching as a developmental tool. New feedback channels, such as the performance management index, allowing supervisees to provide feedback to managers, have been introduced. It is important that these tools be used systematically.

Effective use of the performance management and development system

65. An essential part of managerial excellence that enables staff to perform at their best is the effective use of the performance management system. Much progress has

been made in raising awareness of the system, including through the network of performance management focal points and comprehensive online resources and toolkits.

66. In several cases brought to the attention of the Office, supervisors and supervisees alike expressed frustration with insufficient or ineffective communication, as well as misunderstandings. While the performance management policy encourages ongoing performance conversations and milestone discussions, several workplace conflicts arose in cases where such conversations had not been held and where there was a lack of clarity with regard to agreed working methods.

67. The Office observed that in conflicts between staff and first reporting officers, the role of second reporting officer could have been instrumental but was not always carried out effectively. In other cases, where there was no second reporting officer owing to the structure of the entity, it became more difficult to address the conflict between the parties. Numerous visitors noted the role of second reporting officer, especially in cases where there were pre-existing interpersonal issues or where comments in performance evaluations appeared not to match the overall rating of the first reporting officer.

68. Cases brought to the Office highlighted the importance of fully implementing the performance management policy through an approach that supports staff in accomplishing set goals. The Office will continue to be available for staff, including managers, to facilitate difficult conversations about performance. In addition, the planned integration of the United Nations Values and Behaviours Framework and the performance management system may offer opportunities to address behavioural issues.

Early intervention and reintegration

69. As stated in paragraph 8 above, the “informal first” approach opens additional avenues for early interventions through the Office when allegations of prohibited conduct are made under [ST/SGB/2019/8](#). In cases addressed to the Office, visitors often reflected on missed opportunities to engage with the Office early on, to mitigate conflict through earlier managerial action or to make use of interim measures. Early referral to the Office could help to address cases informally, quickly and in a less costly manner. Since the adoption of the “informal first” approach, entities have been reaching out to the Office proactively to discuss options prior to launching a formal process.

70. Sometimes, complainants approached the Office for support during a formal process to cope with the workplace dynamics while awaiting the outcome. For those affected by prohibited conduct, the Organization has been emphasizing a victim-centred approach that entails regular information-sharing, interim measures and regular monitoring, where necessary. The Office has noted gaps in the implementation of the victim-centred approach, which is particularly important in cases of alleged sexual harassment.

71. As noted in paragraph 92 of the previous report ([A/78/170](#)), the Office is more frequently being requested to assist with workplace restoration and reintegration following formal or disciplinary processes. Managers, team members and affected individuals have repeatedly sought the Office’s support in mending and restoring relationships, which is often a delicate and complex process requiring coordination with and among the different actors.

Addressing racial bias and discrimination

72. As the Organization is doing more to address racism and racial discrimination in the workplace, employees have increasingly come forward to raise and address such concerns. Under the zero-tolerance approach, staff members in most cases

related to allegations of racial discrimination are encouraged to proceed to the formal complaints channel; nevertheless, some staff turned to the Office when they experienced racist behaviour motivated by conscious or unconscious beliefs and biases. In such cases, the Office was able to facilitate conversations to enhance understanding and awareness, leading to reflection and behavioural change by the alleged offenders. There is opportunity for the Office to play a greater role in cases of prohibited conduct that may not rise to misconduct.

73. The Office has learned from cases brought to it that creating a safe environment for discussing discrimination allows issues to be more easily recognized and addressed. Visitors often believe that proactive bystanders (upstanders) can play a significant role by identifying biases and pointing them out. However, bystander effectiveness relies on an environment in which staff feel free to ask questions, raise issues and provide feedback. Encouraging open dialogue without fear of repercussion may help to address bias and foster awareness. The Office will continue to work collaboratively with the Anti-Racism Office to share its observations and contribute to the Organization's efforts to address racism and promote dignity for all.

V. Looking ahead

74. Since its inception in 2002, the ombudsman and mediation function in the Secretariat has grown to be a core function of good governance and accountability, helping to prevent, address and resolve workplace conflict. Today, the Office's services enhance organizational effectiveness, mitigate risks, reduce conflict-related costs and boost productivity. To consolidate progress and strengthen the use of informal conflict resolution, the Office has identified three key areas, which are described below.

Continued encouragement and expansion of the use of the "informal first" approach

75. Significant progress has been made since the introduction of the "informal first" approach in the Secretariat. To further its implementation, the Office will continue to collaborate with stakeholders to expand the use of the approach. As part of the network of United Nations system ombudsmen and mediators, the Office will also promote and raise awareness of the "informal first" approach across the system. In support of these efforts, the General Assembly is requested to welcome progress made and encourage the Secretary-General to foster the "informal first" approach in the Secretariat, as well as in his capacity as the Chair of United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination across the United Nations system.

Access to informal conflict resolution services in each geographical region

76. Ensuring access to the administration of justice, regardless of duty station, is important, as stressed by the General Assembly in paragraph 4 of its resolution [77/260](#). Currently, the Secretariat's staff population is distributed across 114 entities in 474 duty stations ([A/78/569](#)). Through its decentralized structure in New York, Bangkok, Entebbe, Geneva, Goma, Nairobi, Santiago and Vienna, the Office has an established presence in or near most regional commissions and United Nations Offices except those in the Middle East. Entities in that region include the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon and the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization.

77. Unfortunately, personnel serving in these entities cannot easily access informal resolution services through the existing infrastructure of the Office. Barriers to access include time zones, language requirements (Arabic), intermittent Internet access and a lack of physical proximity that would facilitate addressing complex conflict situations quickly and, as required, in person. When personnel serving in the region reach out with their workplace concerns, the Office assigns the cases to its other branches but is often unable to support individuals, teams or the entities systematically. The Office seeks to improve access for these staff and non-staff members who often work under already challenging circumstances.

Consideration of submission of future reports as reports of the Ombudsman to the General Assembly

78. In paragraph I.25 of its report [A/78/7](#), the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions “emphasizes the importance of the independence and impartiality of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services, as well as the integrity of the reports of the Office. Noting that reports of the Office are currently submitted as reports of the Secretary-General, the Committee considers that the Secretary-General and the Ombudsman should explore the submission of future reports of the Office as reports of the Ombudsman to the General Assembly, with any comments from the Secretary-General submitted as a separate report”.

79. In its resolution [78/252](#), the General Assembly endorsed the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Advisory Committee. Accordingly, the Secretary-General and the Ombudsman are exploring the matter.

VI. Action to be taken by the General Assembly

80. The Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to take note of the present report.

Annex

Core principles of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services

As the informal pillar of the system of administration of justice at the United Nations, the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services uses informal and collaborative approaches to resolve workplace conflict. It is guided by the core principles of independence, neutrality, confidentiality and informality, which are summarized below.

Independence

The Office maintains independence from other organizational entities, organs and officials and has direct access to the Secretary-General, the executive heads of the funds and programmes, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and senior management throughout the Organization, as needed. It has access to information relevant to cases, except medical records, and access to individuals in the Organization who request advice, information or an opinion on any matter.

Neutrality

The Office serves as an advocate for fair and equitably administered processes, not on behalf of any individual within the Organization, taking into account the rights and obligations of the Organization and the staff member and the equity of the situation.

Confidentiality

The Office maintains strict confidentiality and does not disclose any information about individual cases or visits from staff members. Its staff members cannot be compelled by any United Nations organ or official to testify or disclose information about cases.

Informality

In respect of its informality, the Office does not keep records for the United Nations or any other party. It does not conduct formal investigations or accept legal notice on behalf of the United Nations. It does not have decision-making powers, nor does it make determinative findings or judgments.

Types of services

Discussion of options

Following an exploration of the concerns raised, the various perspectives and the underlying needs and interests, the conflict resolution practitioner helps the visitor to brainstorm a variety of options that could potentially address the issue. Options are assessed together with the visitor, considering the advantages and disadvantages of each, thereby enabling the visitor to make an informed choice. Options generated could include continued engagement using other conflict resolution processes described below or connecting the visitor to another office with a more appropriate mandate to handle the relevant issues.

Conflict coaching

Visitors may opt to avail themselves of one-on-one conflict coaching with a conflict resolution practitioner. The aim of such coaching is to improve current or future professional relationships and empower individual staff to handle and take control of issues involving workplace relationships. Through the conflict coaching process, staff can prepare for difficult conversations and explore new ways of communicating with colleagues. It helps staff to create better strategies to resolve workplace issues before they escalate or become entrenched.

Mediation

Mediation is a structured, collaborative process to manage and help to resolve workplace disputes, concerns and differences with the assistance of an impartial third party. It is most useful when parties are looking to resolve a specific identified issue or issues. The parties can request mediation themselves or any part of the formal system can refer a matter for mediation with the parties' agreement. When successful, mediations are concluded with the drafting of legally enforceable settlement agreements. Mediation may take the form of a facilitated conversation when communications between colleagues become difficult or strained. In such processes, the neutral third party assists the colleagues in examining different paths to resolution by modelling active listening that, in turn, promotes mutual understanding. The eventual resolution of a facilitated conversation may be a verbal or written commitment or a shared understanding; unlike in a structured mediation process, the discussions do not always lead to the drafting of an official agreement.

Shuttle diplomacy

When parties are unable or unwilling to interact directly with one another, for whatever reason, an ombudsman acts as the intermediary, conveying each party's position and interests to the other with a view to helping to find a solution acceptable to all.

Team process

When a situation affects a group or team, the Office may offer to work with the entire team to help to restore a productive work environment. Situations that are ripe for such interventions include those in which groups or teams are grappling with workplace challenges such as difficult relationships among colleagues resulting from an ongoing or completed change process, a series of crises, problems arising from perceptions of staff or management as toxic, or following an investigation into the conduct of a team member that has polarized the team.
