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Secretary-General says staff United Nations' greatest asset, 'we must treat them, as such,' as he presents 'investing in people' report to budget committee

Following are UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's remarks to the Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary) of the General Assembly on "Investing in People" in New York, 30 October:

The issue of human resources at the United Nations is close to my heart. Over the course of my UN career, I have been deeply involved with this function.

Our people, as we often say, are our principal asset. Yet we don't invest in them or support them properly. These are people from many lands, and from diverse cultures and traditions, who represent 80 per cent of the Organization's resources; who give the world their remarkable skills; who are infused with the ideals of public service; and who are proud to live and breathe the global mission of this Organization. People who are also, let us also not forget, your nationals, working hand in hand with, and for, your citizens.

At present, far too many of these splendid men and women are prevented from doing their best, tied up in policies and processes that have not kept pace with the evolving needs of a changing world. Since the moment I took office as Secretary-General, I have sought to address this problem. I knew, from those years of involvement in personnel matters, the thicket of rules and regulations that needlessly slow us down. I knew, from managing diverse tasks and missions, the morass of systems and structures that so frequently hobble our responses. Those experiences -- as well as a deep belief in the commitment of UN staff -- underpin the measures that are now before you.

This latest package builds on a decade of work and lessons learnt. During my tenure, we have launched a new human resources framework, and given our managers

new authority to select and develop staff. We have streamlined rules and procedures, and strengthened our ability to staff peace operations. We have overhauled our staff security set-up, and begun to break down the institutional walls that hinder staff mobility and development. As a result, the Organization is more efficient and effective than it was 10 years ago. We deliver more than ever. And our cost-effectiveness rivals or surpasses other organizations engaged in similar activities. This progress would not have been possible without the backing of Member States, and I thank you for the support you have given me through successive rounds of reform.

You may ask why, at this late stage in my term, I have now put before you another set of proposals, further to the blueprint for reform I set out earlier this year in my report, “Investing in the United Nations”. The truth is that while we are on the right track, we still face important obstacles. Our recruitment practices are reactive and slow. We have still not reached our targets for gender balance and geographical diversity. And all the while, our mandates grow in number and complexity. Even in the time I have been in office, our work has changed. Current practices and arrangements can benefit only so much from further tinkering.

You yourselves have recognized as much. At last year’s World Summit, your leaders asked me to tell them what a Secretary-General needs to carry out his or her managerial responsibilities, and how to ensure that the United Nations has the right policies, regulations and rules, especially in the area of human resources. “Investing in the United Nations” was my initial response, in which I articulated a vision of a United Nations civil service known for its excellence and agility, and for its high standards of ethics and accountability. Now, with “Investing in People”, the report I am presenting today, I am providing the details for achieving that goal.

The United Nations at its founding, and even as recently as 15 years ago, was a stable, mostly static Secretariat, whose main function was to set norms and to service conferences and meetings, and whose staff worked mainly at Headquarters. That vital service continues, and will always be a primary part of our core identity. But the United Nations of today is much more multidimensional. More than half of our 30,000 staff now serve in field locations. The majority of these are in peacekeeping. But our people are also carrying out tsunami relief and criminal justice investigations. They are providing electoral assistance and post-conflict assessments of environmental damage. Our human rights presence extends to many more countries than just a few years ago.

This dramatic expansion is reflected in our budget, a large proportion of which is for the field. But it is not sufficiently reflected in the rules and regulations that govern our staff, which have been adapted only partially to these new realities. Our systems are fragmented and excessively complex, and therefore difficult to administer and understand. This leads, in turn, to an absence of trust among staff, and diffuse accountability. And our antiquated technology is ill-adapted for managing a global workforce.

The result is an unacceptably high level of managerial risk. Our missions are handicapped by high vacancy rates -- typically from 22 to 26 per cent -- and from destabilizing levels of staff turnover. Moreover, more than 50 per cent of field staff have been with the Organization for two years or less. And across the Organization, it is difficult to apply policies and standards consistently.

It is time to make a deeper, more fundamental change in our very culture. Such a change will not be possible without the buy-in of staff and managers alike. That is why my colleagues and I have consulted extensively with them, including with elected staff representatives from all duty stations except New York at the Staff-Management Coordination Committee. Teams of staff members have also visited duty stations outside Headquarters. Meetings with more than 5,000 staff found great support for what we have in mind. No previous proposals in this area have been so closely looked at and discussed throughout the Organization. I regret that the New York Staff Union has remained outside this consensus, and has chosen not to participate in the formal processes. I hope they will reconsider this stance, and re-engage in dialogue with senior management.

The starting point of my proposals is the recognition that the Secretariat has one global workforce, which has to be managed transparently and fairly if we are to provide the services the world asks of us, and if we are to become an employer of choice for the world's best professionals.

Change needs to begin with the way we recruit people to serve the Organization, the conditions of service we offer them, and how we develop their skills. My proposals cover this entire continuum. We aim to speed up recruitment, with targeted steps to find the people we need rather than waiting for them to find us. We need to have one kind of contract rather than the complex arrangements that prevail at present. Even this seemingly modest change will do much to restore equity and to improve transparency, mobility and flexibility.

Harmonized conditions of service for field staff will help us to attract and retain high-quality people who have gained valuable experience. The designation of 2,500 career positions in peace operations will ensure that this core function of the Secretariat gains the continuity and expertise that it needs. Managers and leaders in particular will be more rigorously selected and better trained.

It should go without saying that these proposals will only work if sufficient financial resources are put behind them. To date, training, and other efforts to strengthen both the staff themselves and the structures and systems underpinning their work, have suffered from a chronic shortage of funding. This new package is called "Investing in People" for a reason. If we make investments now, we will reap greater dividends tomorrow -- and also realize cost savings. I trust you will keep this in mind as you consider the financial implications.

Some of you may hesitate to give these proposals full consideration, because they come on the eve of a new administration. But let me stress that this package is based on a

Careful diagnosis of our current human resources situation. It reflects the views of staff and managers. And it is based on my own experience – more than 40 years of immensely gratifying, yet at times frustrating, service. Anyone else who does a similarly thorough analysis of UN human resources today will find the same problems, and is bound to seek the same or very similar remedies. You have devoted a significant amount of attention and political energy to the question of human resources over the years, with results that are bearing fruit. I hope you will maintain that level of engagement as we make this new and latest push for change. We all stand to gain.

This may be the last time I address you in the Fifth Committee. So let me stress one final time that the staff are this Organization's greatest asset. We must treat them as such. I appeal to you to give strong support to these proposals. I am convinced they are necessary if we are to have a strong international civil service with the highest standards of performance, ethics and accountability, able to meet evolving challenges. The return on this investment will be a more productive and accountable Organization, at the service of Member States. Thank you very much.