

SUPPORT SERVICES

Action in many underlying areas is required to maximize the potential and productivity of UN staff resources. Much effort has been made and new approaches are underway in national governments and private sector organizations to best use the people who increasingly make up the "service sector" worldwide. The UN, as usual, has lagged behind.

The ACABQ noted in 2000 that the Secretariat was [finally] undertaking a worldwide survey of "work/life issues" that influence staff. The survey considered such issues as facilitation of spousal employment [an important concern as part of UN efforts to increase staff mobility]; provision of adequate childcare; and staff health, safety and welfare concerns in the workplace. The ACABQ concluded that:

" ... a competitive package of conditions of service is an essential element in the successful achievement of the goals set out in the report of the Secretary-General [on human resources management reform.]"

"Human resources management reform ...: Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions", UN document A/55/499 of **19 October 2000**, paras. 18-19.

The only area of real activity on support issues during the 1990s was a gradual recognition of staff mental health issues and problems. Spurred by several staff suicides, the UN began efforts in 1991 to address the mental health challenges of a large, international, multi-cultural organization. Guidance was finally issued seven years later, in 1998, but it lacked any status reporting or apparent subsequent action to identify units with abnormal work-related stress and disability cases, or to help individual staff transfer from units where they are caught in "poisoned" interpersonal relationships.

UN staff are particularly at risk in this area because of the many abusive and unaccountable UN managers, who are the "power people" (and also too often the "poisonous managers") most able and likely to be responsible for workplace stress and long-term absence.

"Working group on mental health," UN Staff Report (New York), **December 1996**, p. 13, and

"Mental health - Medical and employee assistance facilities," UN document ST/IC/Geneva/4423 of **18 June 1998**.

The Secretary-General's report on human resource management reforms in 2002 cited the goal of providing staff with a better work and life environment, as a crucial element in order to attract and retain staff of high quality. It stated that the UN system organizations were making a comprehensive review of the pay and benefits system to help attract and reward top staff. OHRM was also pondering the results of the work-life survey mentioned above.

For the future, the report cited the Secretariat's determination to work toward a competitive and streamlined pay system; simplify entitlements; review policies relating to spousal employment with host governments; and develop pilot schemes in "flexi-time" and "flexi-place" work, to be expanded "in the light of experience." [In fact, a more enlightened UN Secretariat had actually experimented with flexi-time work and part time employment in the late 1970s and 1980s, but this experience, and any lessons learned from it, have probably disappeared into the sands of time.]

"Human resources management reform: Report of the Secretary-General," UN document A/57/293 of **8 August 2002**, paras. 62-69.

IO Watch will update the Secretariat observations, promises, and intentions for staff support made in the biennial human resources management of 2004 at a later date. In this area, as in all others, there is much Secretariat work to be done.

There is not much time left to dally and ponder, given the extremely competitive nature of modern work forces worldwide and rapidly changing work situations, technologies, and challenges. OHRM may no longer be its old "personnel administration" self, but it does not yet seem ready to provide maximal support to UN staff and maximize their contributions, let alone address the many drastic workplace and challenges of a UN which has "freed the managers" and thereby greatly enhanced their impunity.