

Remarks for the 88th Standing Committee meeting
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner
Agenda item 2(c) – Oral Update on Integrity
13-14 September 2023

Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,

You have heard us describe on previous occasions the three vectors of UNHCR's transformation. The first was structural - the regionalization and decentralization. Of moving UNHCR decision-making physically, administratively and operationally closer to refugees. The second dimension of our change focused on outdated systems and processes – packaged under the banner of the Business Transformation Programme. Not only were our systems on the verge of technological obsolescence, they could not meet the needs of UNHCR's new, decentralized model. And as we have kept you updated, our new, state-of-the-art systems are rolling out now with Cloud ERP to launch in less than a week.

Transforming UNHCR's culture is the final dimension of our transformation. And it has perhaps been the most challenging, because it is about us - the people of UNHCR – in all our diversity, in all our complexity. UNHCR's culture connects to our values. It implies emotions, teamwork, and sometimes conflict. Transforming our culture requires the courage to have the uncomfortable conversations, and the conviction to make the difficult decisions. It requires integrity and accountability. And I want to touch very quickly on both.

I won't go over the information that you have received in the document provided as background to this session, which provides highlights from the last year of activities by UNHCR's integrity providers – namely our Enterprise Risk Management, Ethics Office, the Ombudsman, and the Office of the Senior Coordinator for Sexual Misconduct.

They are an incredible team of leaders, with deep expertise in their respective fields, all dedicated to making UNHCR a healthy and safe workplace, free of discrimination, abuse and harm.

By first working to prevent conflict, missteps, or actions that verge on misconduct. Through strengthening our collective ability to identify risks and taking mitigating action pre-emptively. Before harm occurs. By learning to recognize the early signs of friction within and among teams, and having the skills and confidence to de-escalate conflict before it arises. And I hope you will be able to join us tomorrow for the side event on Ombuds and Mediation, which will be facilitated by UNHCR's Ombudsperson Youssoupha Niang and his team. Prevention also through understanding and applying our values, with the work led by Ann Encontre, Chief Ethics Officer, in helping UNHCR personnel know how to live up to UNHCR's code of conduct, but also more importantly, where to seek answers when they don't. Because sooner or later, UNHCR personnel will be faced with the inevitable ethical quandary. And some will make the wrong decision, whether intentionally or by mistake.

That is where integrity meets accountability. In the knowledge that when they witness lapses of integrity, colleagues know not only where to report misconduct, but also that they can do so without fear of retaliation. And there the work of the UNHCR's formal administration of justice entities – the Inspector General's Office, the Division of Human Resources and the Legal Affairs Section – becomes critical.

Under the overall coordination of the Inspector General's Office, UNHCR's integrity response system is, by some margin, handling the greatest number of complaints within the United Nations system, and the greatest number of complaints of sexual misconduct. This is due to several factors, not least because UNHCR personnel – and our partners – operate in complex and challenging environments, close to the people we serve, where power differentials inherent to our protection mandate pose a heightened risk of misconduct. In that context, the volume of complaints reflects confidence in the improved capability and coherence of the integrity and accountability system. Colleagues report misconduct because they trust that their concerns will be heard. That their complaints will be reviewed, and if warranted, investigated and sanctioned.

This 'whole of system' approach to integrity matters in UNHCR can only work because UNHCR's management team and UNHCR's independent oversight entities are pulling in the same direction. The integrity entities also work together closely, whilst ensuring appropriate confidentiality, and respecting each other's mandates. This ensures a collective effort to find the right and most effective approach to each integrity challenge.

Distinguished delegates,

In a moment, the colleagues joining me on the podium, and others who are in attendance, will be happy to answer your questions.

But one last word before closing, to acknowledge our soon-to-be former Director of Ethics, Ann Encontre. Please join me in thanking her the service to throughout a career with UNHCR of over 30 years, most of which has been spent in operations, close to the people we serve. Anyone who knows Ann knows of her tireless dedication both to refugees and to her colleagues. We will miss her, but she leaves a strong legacy for the future.

I am extremely proud of this team and the progress we have made to strengthen integrity as our organization has grown and the complexity of the environment in which we operate has increased. It is testament to the dedication and resolve of the entire UNHCR workforce.

Thank you.