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Agenda item 3(c)

Oral update on integrity in UNHCR

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is committed to fostering an open and respectful workplace free from abuse, discrimination, exploitation and harassment. This is crucial to ensuring cohesive and effective operations, and to upholding the trust of those UNHCR serves and its partners. Efforts in this direction have been strengthened under the comprehensive transformation process, which began seven years ago.

The integrity entities in UNHCR play a pivotal role in the transformation of the organizational culture within UNHCR. This update provides an overview of the work carried out by the Ethics Office, the Enterprise Risk Management Service, the Office of the Principal Adviser on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment, and the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator.

Enhancing capacity and confidence to uphold integrity

To uphold ethical standards, it is essential to build the capacity and confidence of the UNHCR workforce. Through annual code of conduct dialogue trainings, steered by the Ethics Office, personnel are empowered to make ethical decisions with discernment. The sessions serve as a crucial platform to reinforce UNHCR's commitment to a value-based culture and to integrity. During the past year, over 10,800 colleagues across 124 operations and offices benefited from the code of conduct dialogue training, marking a substantial increase in engagement from the previous year. The Ethics Office remained a trusted resource for the highly diverse workforce of UNHCR, addressing some 550 individual requests for ethical guidance, a 26 per cent increase in 2023 compared to 2022. This trend reflects a heightened awareness of the standards of conduct expected and underscores the pivotal role of the Ethics Office in fostering a culture of integrity within the organization.

Recognizing the importance of strengthening the risk management capabilities of colleagues and partners, UNHCR Risk Advisers continue to lead capacity-building efforts in this area. In 2023, more than 8,600 colleagues were reached globally, including on integrity-related risks. Additionally, to mark International Fraud Awareness Week in 2023, UNHCR hosted a virtual discussion on strategies to prevent fraud within the organization. In 2024, the Enterprise Risk Management Service introduced a Facilitator's Guide for personnel and partners to enhance risk management focused at preventing fraud and corruption.

The office of the Ombudsman and Mediator supports colleagues in preventing and resolving conflicts in the workplace. By adopting a proactive approach and ensuring rapid intervention, it aims to reduce the number of conflicts escalating to formal complaints. Organizational realignment initiated last year led to a significant increase in requests for support from the Ombudsman and Mediator's office. The number of requests reached over 850, an increase of 11 per cent compared to 2022; a similar trend is being observed in 2024. Last year, the office facilitated mediation in nearly 150 cases and engaged 5,700 UNHCR personnel through outreach and skill-building interventions. In December 2023, it established a presence in Panama to better serve colleagues in the Americas region.

Following the launch of UNHCR's 2023-2025 Strategy and Action Plan for Tackling Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment, UNHCR's first policy to address sexual misconduct was adopted in 2024. It codifies common standards of conduct for all UNHCR personnel and outlines clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities to ensure appropriate measures are taken to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment across the organization. All operations are now required to appoint a focal point for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and to reinforce the organization's existing victim-centered approach to addressing sexual misconduct. In 2023, the office of the Principal Adviser on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment rolled out an interactive training package, reaching nearly 3,000 UNHCR personnel (a 50 per cent increase compared to the previous reporting period), and introduced a new requirement for personnel to renew

the mandatory United Nations online training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse every three years in order to be eligible for contract extensions and positions at a higher grade.

Together with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, UNHCR continued to support the Community Outreach and Communications Fund in its fifth year. The Fund promotes localized community engagement in the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. So far, it has supported more than 50 projects in 39 countries, reaching over 2 million people through awareness-raising activities.

Advancing the “speak-up culture”

UNHCR remains steadfast in fostering a culture where personnel feel empowered to speak up and report misconduct without fear of retaliation and confident that their grievances will be heard and addressed by management. In this regard, the Ethics Office acts as Secretariat for the Support Desk for Workplace Concerns, a referral mechanism that was launched in 2022. Last year, 130 reports were addressed, marking a 27 per cent increase from the previous year. This is a clear indication of the central role the Support Desk plays in guiding personnel on where to seek help for grievances.

The Ethics Office also administers the UNHCR Policy on Protection against Retaliation, which supports a speak-up culture and aims to protect personnel who report misconduct from any form of actual or threatened retaliation. In 2023, the Ethics Office received nearly 60 requests for support with protection from retaliation, a 28 per cent increase compared to the previous year. Out of these requests, 16 progressed to formal cases of protection against retaliation. All initial determinations made by the UNHCR Ethics Office were upheld by the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, the secondary review body responsible for assessing the findings when contested by the aggrieved complainant. This endorsement underscores the Ethics Office’s pivotal role in mitigating escalations.

With support from the Ombudsman and Mediator’s office, UNHCR launched a mediation campaign entitled, “Resolution is more than a solution” in May 2024. It complements UNHCR’s speak-up culture by encouraging colleagues to “speak within teams and operations”. This campaign aims to raise awareness about mediation and the informal-first approach, encouraging this within UNHCR teams and communities.

UNHCR also saw encouraging use of the “NotOnlyMe” tool in its first year. While it is too early to assess impact, UNHCR personnel have used the tool to register accounts of sexual harassment, to document their experiences and to seek help from the Victim Care Officer anonymously. Victims have also used it as a tool to aid their decision-making. In 2023, more than 80 victims of sexual harassment were supported by the Victim Care Officer, with some 74 per cent choosing to engage in a resolution process. The Victim Care Officer was increasingly called upon to support managers on how to handle situations of sexual harassment in their offices in a victim-centred manner. Considering the increasing needs, a second Victim Care Officer was recruited towards the end of 2023.

Identifying and mitigating integrity risks

UNHCR’s five-year Risk Management 2025 Strategy continues to serve as a foundation for the organization’s risk management culture and efforts in this area. The United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services, the United Nations Board of Auditors and the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network have all recognized the significant advancements in the UNHCR risk management approach, based on independent audits and assessments conducted in 2022 and 2023. Despite the progress, work remains to be done to ensure that the effectiveness and consistency of the approach of UNHCR to risk management are further enhanced, particularly within country operations. For the sixth year in a row, 100 per cent compliance was achieved, as highlighted through the 2024 annual risk review process. The quality of the risk registers continues to improve, reflecting increasing risk maturity across the organization and signalling that risks are well identified, understood and addressed through a range of mitigating measures. Risks linked to potential violations of ethics and integrity, whether by UNHCR or partner personnel, consistently emerge as a key risk theme. A network of risk focal points and Senior Risk Advisers continue to operate at the country operation and regional bureau levels, supporting efforts to address risks.

Over the past year, UNHCR has made significant progress in defining its risk appetite in various operational areas, with strong messaging on the need to manage proactively integrity risks and maintain ethical standards. A draft corporate risk appetite statement has been shared internally, and the country operations in Ethiopia, Kenya, the Sudan and Ukraine are piloting this approach. Concurrently, guidance on applying risk appetite in country operations is being developed.

Inter-agency engagement and collaboration

UNHCR continues to invest heavily in supporting inter-agency efforts to combat sexual misconduct. This includes engagement in the United Nations Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment, where UNHCR co-leads the workstream on victim and survivor support; engagement in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, where UNHCR co-leads the workstream on inter-agency referral pathways; and collaboration with the offices of the United Nations Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse and the United Nations Victims' Rights Advocate. Until January 2024, the Deputy High Commissioner also chaired the Chief Executives Board Task Force on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Harassment.

Other UNHCR entities have been equally active in integrity-related inter-agency forums. The Ethics Office continues to engage with the Ethics Panel of the United Nations and the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations, which helped enhance the systems and processes of UNHCR. In early 2024, the Ethics Office launched its external facing [website](#) to make its mandate and services accessible to all and to increase transparency with partners, Member States and the public. Under the umbrella of the United Nations Chief Executives Board's High-Level Committee on Management (for which the Deputy High Commissioner continues to serve as Vice-Chair), UNHCR co-chairs a risk management forum, which covers integrity risks.

In February 2024, the Ombudsman and Mediator office's engagement within the Chief Executives Board's network of Ombudsman and Mediators led to the adoption of [Standards of Practice](#) for the United Nations system, which harmonizes the approach across the United Nations system.

Despite numerous and significant accomplishments, UNHCR continues to face challenges that require ongoing improvement and adaptation. Central to this transformation is fostering a cultural shift and embracing new ways of working among both personnel and partners, which are essential to the initiatives outlined in this note. Through these collective efforts, UNHCR will uphold the highest standards of integrity and effectiveness despite the increasingly complex operational environment in which we operate.

Geneva, 22 August 2024