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EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
CABINET DU SECRETAIRE GENERAL

REFERENCE:

13 February 2020

Dear Ms. El Hosseiny,

I wish to thank you for your joint letter dated 23 January 2020 addressed to the Secretary-General regarding concerns with respect to the impact of the financial crisis faced by the Organization on Human Rights Council sessions.

I would like to reiterate that the Secretary-General is very supportive of the crucial work performed by the Human Rights Council and has instructed the United Nations Secretariat to continue making every effort to support the Council in the implementation of its mandate. Unfortunately, the entire United Nations Secretariat is operating under considerable financial constraints at the moment, which are affecting the ability to deliver on our programme of work globally.

I would like to bring to your attention the broader context in which we are operating in Geneva and in other duty stations.

It is important to recall that the General Assembly determines the framework within which the Secretariat is allowed to provide conference services to intergovernmental meetings. In this instance, the General Assembly, in its resolution 56/242, determined that meetings should be held during regular meeting hours, namely from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. on working days. This provision applies to all intergovernmental bodies and duty stations and is not limited to Human Rights Council nor to the United Nations Office in Geneva. Additionally, the General Assembly only approves resources in the regular budget for conference services that fall within the above-mentioned provisions. The Secretariat therefore does not receive any regular budget resources to service lunchtime meetings. However, over the years, the United Nations Secretariat has made every effort to service lunchtime meetings within the overall resource level approved for meetings being held during regular working hours. This largely depends on cancellations or under-utilization of other budgeted meetings, which cannot be planned for in advance.

Ms. Salma El Hosseiny
Human Rights Council Advocate
International Service for
Human Rights
Geneva

In recent years, the overall resource level for conference servicing has been reduced by the General Assembly, which limits the ability of the Secretariat to support meetings outside of regular meeting hours. In addition, since 2018, the United Nations has been confronted by one of the worst liquidity crises in more than a decade. In 2019, the Organization had to contain expenditures globally to align it with our liquidity. Without these measures, the Organization would not have been able to meet payrolls and fulfil our obligations to vendors, and we would have risked a severe disruption of our global operations. Notwithstanding these measures, by late October 2019, we risked depleting all our liquidity reserves and risked starting November with not enough cash to even cover payrolls. The Organization had to put additional emergency stopgap measures in place to contain global non-post expenditure wherever possible, including in the area of global conference services.

The Organization avoided major disruptions to our global operations last year but initial forecasts indicate that it is likely to continue in 2020. Arrears reached a new record by year-end, further eroding the already depleted liquidity reserves and weakening our cash position for 2020. We were able to ease some of the stopgap measures but will have to manage resources carefully in order to ration cash throughout the year. Unless all Member States pay their assessed contributions in full, we still risk having insufficient cash to implement the entire programme of work approved for 2020.

In addition to the liquidity crisis, the General Assembly in December 2019 reduced the resources allocated to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management for 2020 compared with the level proposed by the Secretary-General, as well as with previous budget levels, without a concomitant reduction in the number of meetings to be serviced based on the calendar of conferences approved by the General Assembly. The United Nations Secretariat is therefore compelled to continue meeting all service requirements for all intergovernmental bodies at all duty stations within reduced resource levels. In light of the payment patterns seen in 2019, we do not expect to receive the full amount of resources approved by the Assembly for 2020, which makes providing services for the approved meeting schedule even more difficult.

Nevertheless, the Secretary-General has requested the Secretariat to mobilize all possible means and to endeavour to provide services to lunchtime meetings. The Secretariat is in regular contact with the President of the Human Rights Council to consider ways to support the workload of the Council.

I wish to assure you that the Secretary-General continues to engage Member States and impress upon them the importance of meeting their financial obligations in full and on time, as well as to finding a sustainable solution for the structural impediments contributing to the crisis.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the importance that the Secretary-General gives to effective civil society participation in the work of the Human Rights Council. He fully recognizes the vital role that civil society plays in solving global challenges, especially at a time when civic space is shrinking worldwide.

I would be grateful if you could kindly share this response with your fellow co-signatories.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Luiza Ribeiro Viotti', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti
Chef de Cabinet