

Selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General

Open letter from members of the United Nations' staff

July 2016

Over the coming months, Member States of the United Nations (UN) will select a new UN Secretary-General, to take office in January 2017. They are guided by the UN Charter and recent ground-breaking initiatives of the General Assembly and the Security Council to strengthen transparency in the selection. In a world that has changed profoundly since the UN was founded over seventy years ago, the decisions of the next Secretary-General will be fundamental in the life or death of millions of people, and in global peace and security, sustainable development and human rights. We members of UN Staff urge Member States to make their decision accordingly, and to draw on the experience and views of staff in determining the kind of person needed.

Every day, thousands of UN personnel travel into armed conflicts, work in displaced persons' camps, investigate killings, torture and sexual violence, deliver food, shelter and medication, and strengthen rule of law and development. We fight for human rights for all, respect for parliaments and the judiciary, the protection of sovereignty of vulnerable States, the credibility of elections, the health of mothers and children, for education, food, and water, for human habitats and the environment, for non-discrimination, for a global economy that benefits all, and much more besides. Member States give the UN mandates that appear both vital and nearly impossible, including to build peace in communities torn by decades of violence, to sow development in villages being lost to desertification, to secure collaboration between Member States with deeply opposing views, and to ensure early and coordinated action by an often fragmented system of many UN entities with diverse roles and expertise. The ability of UN staff to overcome the odds and successfully fulfil these mandates depends fundamentally on UN *leadership*, including the political weight derived from the UN's positive standing in the world. More than any other single factor, it is the person of the Secretary-General who is determinant.

We need the very best of candidates: a Secretary-General who shows leadership in intellect, empathy, and courage; who respects, and is respected by all States, from all regions, including the least powerful; who can ensure that UN system entities follow Member States' instructions but who can also provide ideas and lead Member States to unity, and who can stand for principle when States are not themselves united; who can demonstrate that impartiality is being true to universal standards, rather than remaining equidistant between polarized positions; who can engage not only world leaders but also Peoples; who can situate the UN ahead of the curve, on the cusp of world problems, traversing analytical concepts and geographic borders, and giving early warning; and who can push UN entities and staff to give their best, and hold them accountable when they fall short of UN standards.

Member States regularly express concern when they believe the UN Charter is not fully respected. As staff whose daily work depends ultimately on the Charter, we fully agree. We also note that the Charter defines the Secretariat as a separate and principal "organ" of the UN, and assigns the Secretary-General commensurate responsibilities. We believe that the essential balance in the Charter can only be preserved when a Secretary-General is able to fully implement those responsibilities. Critical elements, derived from the Charter's Articles 97 to 101, are the Secretary-General's prerogative to propose the agenda when needed, the

independence of the Secretary-General and staff from national influence, and the Secretary-General's freedom to appoint senior leaders on merit rather than through the allocation of posts for selection by specific Member States. Preserving the purpose and spirit of an international civil service oriented to UN values and goals is vital to the UN's credibility and effectiveness. In extreme instances, the actual safety of UN personnel – many of whom lose their lives every year – is affected by perceptions of the UN's independence and the esteem in which the Organization and its leader are held.

In the past, it has been suggested that Member States should select a UN leader to be 'more Secretary' and 'less General'. And there has appeared to be an inclination among some Member States to assess the suitability of candidates from the perspective first and foremost of national interests. We believe this is self-defeating. A UN that serves only immediate national interests or which is perceived as entirely beholden to certain States will be unable to adequately address the global problems for which it is most needed. Those problems in turn will evolve into grave international crises with terrible consequences for national interests. The current crises of violent extremism and massive population movements are just two examples with root causes in failed development, unresolved armed conflict and enduring human rights violations which the UN can address when empowered to do so.

The UN should have had a woman leader long ago. The lack of any gender diversity among the UN's past leadership undercuts the Organization's credibility and is a disservice to the many qualified women of the past and present. We therefore applaud the new groundswell of commitment to nominate and fully consider women candidates for Secretary-General, and to gender parity in other senior appointments. Ultimately, the very best person should always be selected as Secretary-General - regardless of gender or regional origin - but finding the best means giving equal consideration to both men and women.

In a globalized world facing grave problems that urgently need the UN to deliver multilateral preventive solutions, and for a UN Organization that relies fundamentally on its reputation for impact, Member States and Peoples will be best served by an independent Secretary-General of the highest calibre. As staff of the UN, we are ourselves committed to serving the UN, Member States, and Peoples to the best of our abilities. With so many lives and livelihoods in the balance, we will be inspired and enabled to reach higher by a leader who personifies the best of the UN.