



JUDGE SOPHIA ADINYIRA, Presiding

1. The United Nations Appeals Tribunal (Appeals Tribunal) is seized of an appeal filed by Mr. Walter Gehr on 12 September 2011 against Judgment No. UNDT/2011/150, issued by the United Nations Dispute Tribunal (UNDT or Dispute Tribunal) in Geneva on 25 August 2011. The Secretary-General filed an answer on 31 October 2011.

Synopsis

2. Mr. Gehr, a former staff member of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Vienna, appeals the decision of the Dispute Tribunal that the renewal of his fixed-term appointment until 31 December 2011, in line with the alignment policy issued in 2008 by the Director of the Division for Management of UNODC and the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), was lawful. He submits that the UNDT exceeded its jurisdiction and made errors of law and procedure.

3. The Appeals Tribunal has granted Mr. Gehr's request for an oral hearing finding that oral submissions would assist in the expeditious and fair disposal of this case.

4. From the written and oral submissions before this Tribunal, it appears to us that the Dispute Tribunal did not attach much weight to Mr. Gehr's submissions. This alone, however, does not necessarily mean that the UNDT has exceeded its jurisdiction or erred in law, as the UNDT has broad discretion as a court of first instance to determine the admissibility of any evidence and the weight to attach to it.¹

5. Mr. Gehr bears the burden to persuade this Court that there was a substantial error or flaw in the contested administrative decision, in the proceedings that led to it or in the UNDT Judgment.²

6. We affirm the decision of the UNDT that the alignment policy was properly issued by the Director of the UNOV/UNODC Division for Management and that Mr. Gehr had failed to show that the application of the alignment policy to his case was improperly motivated and unfair compared to other staff members who also received a contract extension until 31 December 2011.

¹ *Messinger v. Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Judgment No. 2011-UNAT-123.

² *Ilic v. Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Judgment No. 2010-UNAT-051.

Mr. Gehr has failed to establish that the UNDT made any error of law or procedure warranting a reversal of its decision. The appeal is dismissed and the UNDT Judgment is affirmed.

Facts and Procedure

7. The facts as set out in paragraphs 3 to 13 of the UNDT Judgment are not contested. They read as follows:

3. The Applicant joined the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (“UNODC”) in 2002. With effect from 1 November 2007, he was appointed under a fixed-term appointment, under the 100 series of the Staff Rules, to the post of Senior Terrorism Prevention Officer, at level P-5, in the Terrorism Prevention Branch (“TPB”), within the Division of Treaty Affairs (“DTA”).

THE UNITED NATIONS APPEALS TRIBUNAL

Judgment No. 2012-UNAT-234

THE UNITED NATIONS APPEALS TRIBUNAL

submits that the UNDT failed to provide any reason why the Administration was correct in departing from the core principle of equality.

18. The Appellant further submits that the UNDT committed several errors in procedure which affected the contested Judgment. In particular, he submits that the UNDT erred by failing to apply the standard of preponderance of evidence when examining his allegations of discrimination.

19. The Appellant submits that the UNDT exceeded its authority in considering the rationale put forward by the Secretary-General to motivate the rejection of the Appellant's application. The Appellant submits that the budgetary, fiscal or financial constraints were not stated as reasons by the Administration when it informed the Appellant that his appointment would be renewed for only 11 months. The only reason given was the alignment policy. In paragraph 39 of the UNDT Judgment, the UNDT however used the subsequent financial and budgetary consideration of the Administration to motivate the dismissal of the Appellant's application. The Appellant submits that the UNDT erred by endorsing the "shifting rationales of the Administration", which revealed that the contested decision was a measure of retaliation.

20. The Appellant submits that the UNDT failed to exercise its jurisdiction by not addressing his allegations of retaliation.

21. The Appellant also submits that the UNDT erred in denying his request to guarantee access, via video-conference, to the hearing at another duty station, namely Vienna. The Appellant submits that the UNDT erred in holding that only access to the Tribunal's courtrooms was to be guaranteed, considering that the parties, their representatives and other interested parties were in Vienna; and in failing to consider a change of venue.

22. The Appellant submits that the UNDT erred by declining to hear three of the four witnesses proposed by the Appellant.

23. The Appellant requests that the Appeals Tribunal reverse the UNDT Judgment; or in the alternative, remand the case to the UNDT for a public hearing which, if conducted by videoconference, should allow interested persons to attend the hearing from a videoconference room at the United Nations headquarters in Vienna. He also requests an oral hearing of his appeal.

Secretary-General's Answer

24. The Secretary-General submits that the UNDT correctly concluded that there was no minimum duration for the renewal of fixed-term appointments. The UNDT specifically noted that there was no ambiguity in Staff Rule 4.13, which provided that fixed-term appointments could be renewed “for any period up to five years at a time”. A renewal of an appointment for 11 months fell within the parameters of Staff Rule 4.13, as it was a period not exceeding five years. The Secretary-General submits that the UNDT’s reliance on the plain meaning of Staff Rule 4.13 and its interpretation of the term “up to five years” was reasonable.

25. The Secretary-General also submits that the UNDT correctly concluded that the words “renewal” and “extension” were used in an undifferentiated manner in the Staff Rules. The Appellant reiterates identical assertions to those already reviewed and rejected by the UNDT and has failed to identify any defects in the UNDT’s reasoning.

26. The Secretary-General contends that the UNDT correctly concluded that the alignment policy was properly issued and a proper exercise of the delegated authority. The Director of the UNOV/UNODC Division for Management derived his authority to develop, oversee, and manage the implementation of human resources from the provisions of ST/SGB/2004/6, promulgated by the Secretary-General. Since the alignment policy was an exercise in the management of human resources in UNOV, the Director of the UNOV/UNODC Division for Management had the authority to decide and adopt the alignment policy.

27. The Secretary-General submits that the alignment policy was properly issued by way of Messages of the Day”. The rules, policies t

29. The Secretary-General submits that the Appellant has not established that the UNDT made any errors in procedure warranting a reversal of its Judgment. The Secretary-General submits that the UNDT correctly limited its determination of the matters to three issues, namely, (a) whether fixed-term appointments should be renewed for at least one year; (b) whether the alignment policy was properly issued; and (c) whether the alignment policy was fairly implemented with respect to the Appellant. The Secretary-General submits that, contrary to the Appellant's contention, the UNDT properly considered the rationale put forward by the Administration for the alignment policy and did not exceed its jurisdiction in doing so. The Secretary-General further submits that, contrary to the Appellant's contention, the UNDT did consider and address his allegations of retaliation.

30. The Secretary-General submits that the Appellant failed to establish that the UNDT erred in not guaranteeing access to the public to the United Nations premises in Vienna; and that the UNDT erred in not hearing witnesses.

Considerations

31. Mr. Gehr appeals the UNDT Judgment on the grounds that the UNDT exceeded its jurisdiction and made errors of law and procedure.

32. The Appeals Tribunal has granted Mr. Gehr's request for an oral hearing finding that oral submissions would assist in the expeditious and fair disposal of this case.

33. From the written and oral submissions before this Tribunal, it appears to us that the Dispute Tribunal did not attach much weight to Mr. Gehr's submissions. This alone, however, does not necessarily mean that the UNDT has exceeded its jurisdiction or erred in law, as the UNDT has broad discretion as a court of first instance to determine the admissibility of any evidence and the weight to attach to it.⁴

34. Mr. Gehr bears the burden to persuade this Court that there was a substantial error or flaw in the contested administrative decision, in the proceedings that led to it or in the UNDT Judgment.⁵

⁴ *Messinger v. Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Judgment No. 2011-UNAT-123.

⁵ *Ilic v. Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Judgment No. 2010-UNAT-051.

Issuance of the Alignment Policy

35. Mr. Gehr submits that the UNDT erred in holding that the issuance of the alignment policy was a proper exercise of the authority of the Director of the UNOV/UNODC Division for Management. Mr. Gehr asserts that the provisions of ST/SGB/1997/5 and ST/SGB/2004/6 on which the UNDT relied relate to the organizational structure of UNODC, but they do not provide for the delegation of authority.

36. We think otherwise. ST/SGB/1997/5 and ST/SGB/2004/6 deal with not only the organizational structure of the Organization and UNODC, but also other matters such as the core functions of the Division for Management (see Section 8.2 of ST/SGB/2004/6).

37. Section 8.2(d) of ST/SGB/2004/6 provides that the core functions of the Division for Management inter alia include “[d]eveloping and overseeing the implementation of human resources policies and managing the human resources of the United Nations Secretariat entities in Vienna, including policy direction, guidance, supervision and implementation of personnel policies”. The UNDT rightly held that the alignment policy constituted an organizational measure aimed at simplifying administrative procedures in relation to staff appointments at UNODC.

38. Mr. Gehr further challenges the authority of the UNOV/UNODC Director of the Division for Management to issue the alignment policy by a “Message of the Day” instead of by an administrative issuance. We note that Section 1.2 of ST/SGB/1997/1⁶ (Procedure for the promulgation of administrative issuances) provides that “policies... intended for general application may only be established by duly promulgated Secretary-General’s bulletins and administrative instructions”.

39. Since this alignment policy was intended for only the staff at UNODC we reject the submissions by Mr. Gehr on this point. We accordingly hold that the UNOV/UNODC Director of the Division for Management had authority to issue the policy by a “Message of the Day” which was the means used by UNODC to convey information intended for all or large groups of UNODC staff. We agree with the UNDT that as a result of the Secretary-General’s broad discretion in relation to decisions on internal management, this measure is subject to limited review by the Tribunal.

⁶ Abolished and replaced by ST/SGB/2009/4 of 18 December 2009.

Implementation of the alignment policy

40. The Secretary-General submits that the alignment policy did not amend or affect the Staff Regulations and Rules concerning initial appointments or the renewal of appointments and contracts and their duration.

41. Our concern here is whether the alignment policy was applied to Mr. Gehr in an inconsistent, arbitrary and discriminatory manner or for improper motives. In this respect, we

45. The Secretary-General submits that, in response to Order No. 75 (GVA/2011), issued by the UNDT that requested further submissions from the parties, the parties filed submissions which included additional information on financial constraints faced by UNODC, and which

Error of Procedure

50. Mr. Gehr also appeals the decision of the UNDT rejecting his request to grant access to the Organization's premises in Vienna to the public to attend via video-link the hearing in Geneva.

51. Though we appreciate Mr. Gehr's point that public hearings are important as a sign of transparency, we find his complaint unreasonable in the light of the provisions of the Rules of Procedure of the UNDT. Article 16(6) of the said Rules of Procedure provides not only that ordinarily proceedings shall be held in public, but also that they may be held by video link, telephone or other electronic means. In *Mezoui*,⁹ this Tribunal held that the assignment of the venue is a matter of the court's discretion; we therefore dismiss this ground of appeal, as Mr. Gehr has not shown that the choice of venue in any way affected the outcome of the case. Mr. Gehr attended the hearing of his case before the UNDT, upon his request, by video-link from

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Dated this 29th day of June 2012 in Geneva, Switzerland.

(Signed)

Judge Adinyira, Presiding

(Signed)

Judge Weinberg de Roca

(Signed)

Judge Faherty

Entered in the Register on this 12th day of September 2012 in New York, United States.

(Signed)

Weicheng Lin, Registrar