



United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa
Nations Unies
Commission économique pour l'Afrique

STAFF UNION



SYNDICAT DU PERSONNEL

Date: 11 October 2020

To: Ms. Vera Songwe
Executive Secretary
ECA

Dear ES,

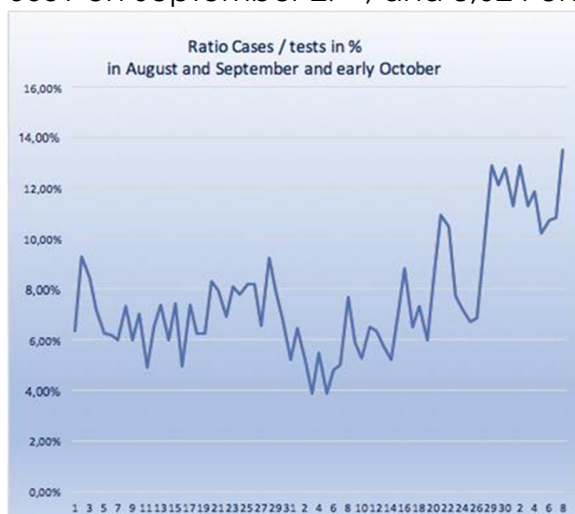
We are hereby writing to you on the subject of "Return to the duty station and /or workplace in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic".

As you know, the Office of Human Resources has put a guideline out during the last week of September (herewith attached for your information).

Because the guidelines are specific to the current status of COVID 19, we would like to highlight some points related to the pandemic.

1) Covid 19

Reflections on the country's latest trend: In the last 2 months, the statistics have not been encouraging even though the data shows a false decline in cases which is mainly due to the government's decision to cut the testing rate by almost 75%. The country went from the highest test numbers of 25158 on September 6th to 6631 on September 27th, and 8,024 on October 9, 2020.



As seen in the past several weeks, the positivity rate has hovered between 5-10% for Ethiopia. The positive rate has not dropped below 5% for more than 3 days since July, regardless of the number of "recorded cases," as given in our daily briefings, which are a function of how many tests the country chooses to do – which have been falling in Ethiopia.

When you decided to close the Campus last April (you did it jointly with the RC) and then the Covid positive test ratio (number of test vs cases) was at 7 to 8% , nowadays that ration has gone up to 12%.

In addition, even though the Government has lifted the state of emergency this has been motivated by political reasons more than anything else.

2) Return to Office

OHR announced on 23 September 2020 a comprehensive guideline on "Return to the duty station and /or workplace in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. We want to refer to some of the content of that guideline and to stress that any call for return to office should be aligned to that guideline.

Article 1.2: states: "The physical return of the UN personnel to the duty station and /or to the workplace should be based on cautious, phased, flexible and people centered approach."

Article 1.3. talks about consideration to ensure that all necessary measures are in place to support the safety and health of all UN personnel. It also states that "transparency and active communication with the staff regarding planning and the evolving situation is paramount".

The guideline goes on to talk about the local UN occupational Safety and health Committee (article 1.5. to be put in place and mentioned the vital role of the WHO office in that committee. It also states that the committee should be chaired by someone who is not part of the expert panel, for instance the Chief of Staff or similar.

It is also very specific on the production of clear guidance on key issues to be made widely available.

As far as the Return of UN personnel to their official duty station, the guidelines provide much clarity:

Article 2.1 is very specific on the duration of the Alternate Working Arrangement (AWA), as well as the need of coordination with UN agencies, funds and programme at the duty station with a view to harmonize the arrangements applicable to personnel across the organizations of the UN common system.

Article 2.2 states that "UN Personnel working outside of the duty station under AWA should be communicated in writing the expected return date and be provided a reasonable advance notice (at least 21 days) before they are expected to return in order to be able to make necessary arrangements to

physically report to the workplace taking in consideration travel restrictions and quarantine requirements as applicable.

Article 2.3 stipulates that “ When a decision is made to discontinue AWA outside the duty station as of a specific date, staff members who would like to exceptionally delay their return due to compelling personal circumstances may request their manager to telecommute from outside the duty station for an appropriate duration not exceeding six months on Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA)in accordance with the provisions of ST/SGB/2019/3 and ST/IC/2019/15. In exceptional circumstances, an extension of authorization to telecommute from outside the duty station may be considered for an additional period not exceeding three months.

Article 4.1 is specific how the return to office should be by phase, not based on seniority or importance of mandate function but rather on the requirement to be physically present in the building to conduct activities that support an essential function. The 4 phases are clearly explained. The following articles guides the managers on criteria to decide who will return to the premises based on on-site presence vs risks associated with it. It particularly states risk factors such as age (>60 years) chronic illness, immune suppression, heart /lung diseases, etc.

Article 4.3 and sub articles clearly state what to do for initial phases (4.3.5 gives specifics to medical reasons.

Finally, the guideline provides two very interesting annexes. Annex 2 “traffic light” Matrix allows to determine if and when personnel should return to the workplace in the initial phases.

In light of all the above, we have decided to write to you on this subject as we have heard about the SLT of Friday September 25, 2020 during which you decided on the following: -

- **Phase 1 (Starting date 26 October)** – In this connection, by mid-October, all directors and P-5s should return to Addis Ababa and resume work in the office following their 7-day quarantine period.
- **Phase 2 (Starting mid or late November)** – By mid-November, all P-4s and P-3s should return to Addis Ababa and resume work in the office following their 7-day quarantine period.
- **Phase 3 (Starting mid-December)** – 50 per cent capacity - all categories.

Although this was verbally communicated to the Directors, it brought a big concern to us, as some of them have already made arrangement to come back in the next 2 days without any “official announcement of the end of the Alternate Working Arrangement (AWA) as per **article 2.3**.

Let me take the opportunity to say that SLT meeting decisions should normally be communicated to staff, even if it is in a dry summary fashion.

We would like you to completely align ECA to the guidelines of OHR.

This brings us to reiterate on the staff request for the Staff Union representative to be part of the SLT for all matters related to staff so that together we work on decisions related to staff welfare, wellbeing and safety.

As Staff union, we strongly feel that staff safety should be the common denominator of all efforts pertaining to return to office and most importantly transparency and communication to the staff should be paramount.

Other Challenges

What is the level of preparedness for the compound? for instance, the 2 pedestrian entrances of the campus are a hazard and can constitute contamination points as the revolving doors don't work smoothly and there is no choice but to touch them. The said revolving doors create congestion of people seeking entry and exist out of the compound. These doors will need to be removed or re-constructed to be more appropriate for the Covid 19 circumstances/context. We note that the DOA has started to put signs, but this is far from being neither completed not enough and the Staff Union would like to be part of the efforts to make sure staff interests are kept alive at all stages.

Air circulation issues are a big problem in Niger building. As you know the building is very old and FMS will confirm to you that we have really tried and failed to improve aeration for the cubicles when we were implementing the flexible office arrangement. The building is not properly aerated.

This brings me to the issues of office space in the building. Up to now no definite thought has gone to wide-open work places such Finance, DOA, SSS, SS ID room, Control Room, UNDSS, Travel, UNCC, ITSS.

A serious discussion needs to take places as the building can easily become a breeding ground for Covid if caution is not taken. One death due to Covid on campus will be too many. The campus should be running on "minimum risk" at all times.

In our humble opinion, the security ID room for instance, is completely hazardous with a concentration of people in a confined place, which will not be acceptable. People have to walk through the ID room to get to the compound. That is a risk which should be avoided. These are just a few examples.

Finally, do we know for sure the government's official position on the pandemic? The World Health Organization (WHO) in May 2020, recommended an “under 5% positive test rate for two sustained weeks for a country to properly reopen”.

According to WHO, 5-10% positive test rates also indicates a mild prevalence of community spread of COVID-19 – which is considered dangerous. Ethiopia is at over 12% today.

ES, we want to reiterate our willingness to work with you and be part of the decisions on all fronts under these difficult circumstances to ensure that staff safety, security and well-being are preserved.

While return to office is a must, we would like it to be completely aligned with OHR guidelines and moreover, Staff Union should be part and parcel of the planning and the implementation of staff going back to the office.

ECA cannot do it unilaterally, this should be a UN family joint effort.

We thank you for your continued support.

Mahamadou Nassirou Ba, President
ECA Staff Union