



2 September 2020

Dear Mr. Orellana,

I refer to the letter addressed to the Secretary-General dated 13 July 2020, sent by your predecessor, Mr. Baskut Tuncak, in his capacity of Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes, in which he raised concerns related to the situation of workers at the United Nations facilities in the City of Knowledge in Panama City. These concerns are taken very seriously and we have been briefed by the United Nations Occupational Safety and Health staff on the issues raised in Mr. Tuncak's letter.

The Special Rapporteur recounted a situation in which workers at the United Nations facilities in the City of Knowledge reported suffering from health problems as a result of exposure to toxic and otherwise hazardous elements at the workplace. He further noted the request by staff for an independent medical evaluation. The Occupational Safety and Health team in the Department of Operational Support have engaged quite extensively with staff and management at the United Nations offices in Panama City. They have conducted a desk review of air quality data and health records, held comprehensive telephone interviews with management from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as well as with a UNDP staff representative, and consultations with the UNDP Panama office and regional hub manager. It was agreed that having identified the concerns, the best way to resolve the issue was to conduct an on-site assistance mission. Terms of reference for the mission were drawn up and a site visit by a Medical Officer and two Occupational Safety Officers was agreed to take place from 10 to 14 February 2020.

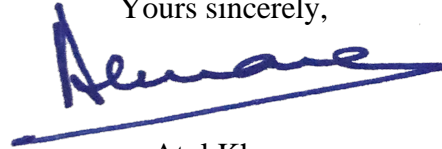
Unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused this on-site assessment to be put on hold. As soon as international travel resumes and the safety of the staff conducting the assessment can be assured, the mission will be rescheduled for a later date.

Mr. Marcos A. Orellana
Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights
of the environmentally sound management
and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes
Geneva

In the meantime, it is worth noting that UNEP addressed the issue in 2019 and took the decision to relocate to a new office outside the City of Knowledge. Since March 2020, due to COVID-19, UNEP personnel started working from home and have been informed that their return to the office will be to the new location in Panama City. While UNDP has invested in improving the conditions of its offices in the City of Knowledge, it has later taken the decision to relocate its premises and is in the process of identifying a suitable new location.

Staff members' rights to safe and healthy working conditions, and effective measures to address health and safety issues at the workplace, are of paramount importance. The Occupational Safety and Health team of my Department will continue to work closely with and assist staff and management at the United Nations facilities in the City of Knowledge to address health and safety issues at the workplace.

Yours sincerely,



Atul Khare
Under-Secretary-General
for Operational Support