



**UNITED NATIONS APPEALS TRIBUNAL  
TRIBUNAL D'APPEL DES NATIONS UNIES**

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Judgment No. 2016-UNAT-630

**Bhatia *et al.*  
(Appellants)**

**v.**

**Secretary-General of the United Nations  
(Respondent)**

**JUDGMENT**

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Before:	Judge Luis María Simón, Presiding Judge Deborah Thomas-Felix Judge Mary Faherty
Case No.:	2015-770
Date:	24 March 2016
Registrar:	Weicheng Lin

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Counsel for Appellants:	Self-represented
Counsel for Secretary-General:	Nathalie Defrasne

**JUDGE LUIS MARÍA SIMÓN, PRESIDING.**

1. The United Nations Appeals Tribunal (Appeals Tribunal) has before it 13 individual appeals of Summary Judgment No. UNDT/2015/024 rendered by the United Nations Dispute Tribunal (UNDT or Dispute Tribunal) in Geneva on 24 March 2015 in the cases of *Applicants UNHCR v. Secretary-General of the United Nations*.<sup>1</sup> The Secretary-General filed a consolidated answer on 8 September 2015.

2. On 19 January 2016, the Appeals Tribunal issued Order No. 250 (2016) consolidating the appeals “for all purposes”.<sup>2</sup>

**Facts and Procedure**

3. The Appellants are general service staff members of UNHCR, India. They joined the Organization on a date prior to 1 November 2014.

4. In June 2013, a Comprehensive Local Salary Survey was conducted in New Delhi, India. The results were promulgated by the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) on its website, as reflected in its cable dated 1 October 2014, in the following terms:<sup>3</sup>

Subject: New Delhi (India) local salaries

(AAA) [F]ollowing the comprehensive salary survey conducted in New Delhi in June 2013, this is to advi[s]e you that the results of the survey indicate that salaries for locally recruited staff are above the labour market when compared with the remuneration package of the retained comparators by 13.4 per cent for general service (GGSS) category and 19.4 per cent for national officer (NNOO) category. [A]ccordingly, the following salary scales are issued:

- (1) GS 62 and no 22, both effective 1 June 2013, payable only to staff recruited on or after one November 2014. [R]evised net salaries reflect

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<sup>1</sup> The UNDT Judgment disposed of 19 individual applications filed by staff members of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Of the 19 applicants before the UNDT, the following 13 individuals filed separate, almost identical, appeals: Amandeep Singh Bhatia, Veerapathiran Chelliahpillai, Priya Rozario, Ankush Kakkar, Minou Verghese, Anup Bhardwaj, Satish Sehgal, Bhuvana Balasubramanian, Ajit Dogra, Kalpana Tawakley, Shuchita Mehta, Satchithananda Valan Michael and Arvind Kumar (Bhatia *et al.*).

<sup>2</sup> The Appeals Tribunal ordered that any further filings and submissions by any of the parties should be filed under Case No. 2015-770, the first of the 13 appeals filed, and that any orders and judgment in this consolidated matter be issued under Case No. 2015-770.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in the impugned Judgment, para. 4.

downward adjustment of (-) 13.4 per cent for GGSS and (-) 19.4 per cent for NNOO.

- (2) [A]mend [] one to GS 61 and no 21, effective 1 July 2012, payable to eligible staff already on board prior to one November 2014, the amendments are issued to reflect revised allowances.

(BBB) [R]evised allowances in rupees net per annum are as follows:

- (1) [C]hild, per child, subject to maximum of six children
- a. 23,511 applicable to staff members for whom the allowance becomes payable on or after one November 2014;
  - b. 27,156 applicable to staff members for whom the allowance becomes payable prior to one November 2014;
- (2) first language
- a. 29,532 applicable to staff members for whom the allowance becomes payable on or after one November 2014;
  - b. 34,104 applicable to staff members for whom the allowance becomes payable prior to one November 2014;
- (3) second language
- a. 14,766 applicable to staff members for whom the allowance becomes payable on or after one November 2014;
  - b. 17,052 applicable to staff members for whom the allowance becomes payable prior to one November 2014.

5. The Appellants requested an extension of time to file their applications against “the decision of [OHRM/International Civil Service Commission] that the comprehensive salary survey conducted in New Delhi, India, in June 2013 found that the current salaries for locally-recruited staff are above the labour market”.<sup>4</sup>

6. On 24 March 2015, the UNDT rendered its Judgment. The UNDT recalled the Appeals Tribunal Judgment in the *Tintukasiri et al.* case and reiterated that “the decision to freeze the existing salary scales ... did not constitute an administrative decision for the purpose of art. 2(1)(a) of its Statute”.<sup>5</sup> Noting that, as a matter of law, the issue of receivability may be adjudicated without serving the application on the Respondent for a

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<sup>4</sup> Impugned Judgment, para. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 13, referring to *Tintukasiri et al. v. Secretary-General of the United Nations*, Judgment No. 2015-UNAT-526.

reply and notwithstanding that the issue was not raised by the parties, the UNDT decided by way of summary judgment that the applications were not receivable *ratione materiae*.

### **Submissions**

#### **Bhatia *et al.*'s Appeals**

7. The UNDT failed to find that despite its general application, the contested decision is an administrative decision with direct legal consequences on their terms of appointment and contracts of employment. The UNDT's interpretation of "administrative decision" is narrow and excluding, and leaves the Appellants without recourse to contest the issuance which is in violation of their rights. The freezing of salary scales based on the recommendation of the Headquarters Steering Committee is a decision taken by the Secretary-General to accept the recommendations of the Steering Committee and therefore, it is an "administrative decision". The UNDT failed to exercise jurisdiction vested in it and committed an error of law.

8. The UNDT erred in procedure by treating the Appellants' motions for an extension of time as incomplete applications and rendering a judgment without giving the Appellants the opportunity to file detailed applications "enunciating [their] grievance[s] and the manner in which it affected [their] legal rights".

9. The UNDT erred in fact by failing to appreciate that the facts in *Tintukasiri et al.* were fundamentally and materially different from their cases. Moreover, the process of the comprehensive salary survey was "not transparent, was erroneous and faulty leading to a grossly negative result". The Appellants elaborate extensively on alleged irregularities tainting the survey, including the "[d]eviation from methodology, lack of transparency and faulty data collection".

10. The Appellants request that the Appeals Tribunal set aside the impugned Judgment, direct the Secretary-General to conduct a new comprehensive salary survey following the proper method and procedure, order an interim adjustment based on the previously held comprehensive salary survey pending the convening of the next comprehensive salary survey, and award compensation for the financial losses they suffered due to the implementation of the decision. The Appellants also ask that the Appeals Tribunal award all legal and administrative costs incurred by them.

### **The Secretary-General's Answer**

11. The Secretary-General contends that the UNDT correctly treated the motions for an extension of time as applications and correctly issued a summary judgment. The motions provided the information required under Article 8 of the UNDT Rules of Procedure (UNDT Rules), including the applicants' full names, dates of birth, nationalities, addresses, and employment status. They also identified the date and place of the contested decision and the remedies sought. Furthermore, Article 9 of the UNDT Rules provides that the UNDT may determine *proprio motu* that a summary judgment is appropriate and the Appeals Tribunal has consistently allowed summary judgments in matters of law.

12. The UNDT correctly concluded that the decision to freeze salary scales did not constitute an administrative decision and that the Appellants' challenges were irreceivable *ratione materiae*. In reaching its conclusion, the UNDT noted that the facts in *Tintukasiri et al.* were identical to those in the present case and took into account the Appeals Tribunal's confirmation that the decision to freeze an existing salary scale was not an administrative decision for the purpose of Article 2(1) of the UNDT Statute. Based on its obligation to abide by the Appeals Tribunal jurisprudence, the UNDT correctly applied the jurisprudence in *Tintukasiri et al.* and found the applications not receivable *ratione materiae*.

13. The relief sought by the Appellants is without merit. First, the contested decision to freeze the existing salary scale is of general order and does not constitute an administrative decision susceptible to challenge. Consequently, the Appeals Tribunal should reject the requests to order the Administration to conduct a new salary survey. The Appeals Tribunal should also reject the requests for interim adjustment based on the previously held salary survey. The Appellants' cases do not meet the requirements for an order for interim measures, including a real likelihood of irreparable harm and consistency with the UNDT Judgment. Further, as the impugned decision is not an administrative decision subject to judicial review, there is no legal basis for the award of compensation for financial losses. Finally, in the present case nothing suggests a manifest abuse of process on behalf of the Secretary-General. The Appellants' requests for costs are without legal basis and should not be granted.

### Considerations

14. Article 2(1) of the UNDT Statute provides, in part:

The Dispute Tribunal shall be competent to hear and pass judgement on an application filed by an individual, as provided for in article 3, paragraph 1, of the present statute, against the Secretary-General as the Chief Administrative Officer of the United Nations:

(a) To appeal an administrative decision that is alleged to be in non-compliance with the terms of appointment or the contract of employment. The terms “contract” and “terms of appointment” include all pertinent regulations and rules and all relevant administrative issuances in force at the time of alleged non-compliance;

15. The UNDT Statute was approved by the General Assembly, which in 2007 decided “to establish a new, independent, transparent, professionalized, adequately resourced and decentralized system of administration of justice consistent with the relevant rules of international law and the principles of the rule of law and due process to ensure respect for the rights and obligations of staff members and the accountability of managers and staff members alike”.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, the General Assembly reiterated that “a transparent, impartial, independent and effective system of administration of justice is a necessary condition for ensuring fair and just treatment of United Nations staff and is important for the success of [a] human resources reform in the Organization”.<sup>7</sup>

16. Article 8(3) of the UNDT Statute provides: “The Dispute Tribunal may decide in writing, upon written request by the applicant, to suspend or waive the deadlines for a limited period of time and only in exceptional cases. The Dispute Tribunal shall not suspend or waive the deadlines for management evaluation.” This article is to be read in conjunction with Article 7(5) of the UNDT’s Rules, which establishes that “[i]n exceptional cases, an applicant may submit a written request to the Dispute Tribunal seeking suspension, waiver or extension of the time limits”.

17. What occurred before the Dispute Tribunal is not contested: the staff members submitted written requests for an extension of time to file an application; the Dispute Tribunal did not address the staff members’ requests for an extension of time; the Dispute Tribunal converted *sua sponte* the requests for an extension of time

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<sup>6</sup> A/RES/61/261, para. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, preamble.

into “incomplete” applications; and the Dispute Tribunal summarily adjudged their applications not receivable.

18. As the language of the statutory scheme shows, a request for an extension of time to file an application is not the same document as an application. The requests for an extension of time were made so that the staff members could obtain information needed to prepare an application. In other words, the staff members were not ready to submit an application without obtaining additional information to support it. Of course, this does not mean that the Dispute Tribunal must grant the staff members’ requests for an extension of time; but it does mean that the Dispute Tribunal cannot convert *sua sponte* the staff members’ requests for more time into applications.

19. Under the Dispute Tribunal’s statutory scheme, an application is the document which is required to commence judicial review. The application is the means by which the staff member provides pertinent information, describes the claim or claims he or she is contesting and presents documentary evidence to support his or her claims (if he or she so chooses). The Dispute Tribunal did not afford the staff members the opportunity to file an application.

20. One of the main purposes behind the establishment of the new two-tier system of administration of justice is “to ensure respect for the rights and obligations of staff members”.<sup>8</sup> When it established the Dispute Tribunal as the first tier of the new two-tier system of the administration of justice, the General Assembly recognized the right of staff members to have access to the Dispute Tribunal. The right of access to the Dispute Tribunal commences with the filing of an application.

21. The Dispute Tribunal has the competence and jurisdiction under Article 8 of the Statute to determine whether an application is receivable. To determine whether an application is receivable, an application is an *a fortiori* requirement. As there was no application before it, the Dispute Tribunal exceeded its competence and jurisdiction and committed errors in procedure when it determined that the requests for an extension of time were the “equivalent” of applications; inferred that statements in the requests for an extension of time were the equivalent of claims in an application; and summarily adjudged that the converted “applications” were not receivable. By exceeding its competence and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 4.

jurisdiction and committing several procedural errors, the Dispute Tribunal violated the staff members' statutory rights to file an application and to have access to justice and, more importantly, violated the staff members' right to due process of law.

22. For these reasons, the Appeals Tribunal concludes that this matter must be remanded to the Dispute Tribunal, with directions to permit the staff members to file their applications.

### **Judgment**

23. Judgment No. UNDT/2015/024 is reversed and the matter is remanded to the Dispute Tribunal with directions to permit the staff members to file their applications.



Original and Authoritative Version: English

Dated this 24<sup>th</sup> day of March 2016 in New York, United States.

*(Signed)*

Judge Simón, Presiding

*(Signed)*

Judge Thomas-Felix

*(Signed)*

Judge Faherty

Entered in the Register on this 13<sup>th</sup> day of May 2016 in New York, United States.

*(Signed)*

Weicheng Lin, Registrar