



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

3 February 2021

Dear New York-based Colleagues,

I am writing to provide an update on our phased return to the premises. Your health and safety continue to be my top priority.

I thank you all for your commitment, solidarity and humanity throughout these challenging times. It has been a difficult and heartbreaking year, which has tested us all, personally and professionally. I offer my sincere condolences to the families and loved ones of all those we have lost.

As you know, we transitioned into Phase 2 of our return to the premises on 24 August 2020, which allows for a gradual increase in personnel and delegates on site, from the 10 per cent maximum set in Phase 1 to 40 per cent maximum in Phase 2. A recent review of the COVID-19 safety mitigation measures found that the Phase 2 measures have been largely effective.

The situation in New York remains concerning. While key indicators of the epidemic in New York in recent days have begun to show signs of improvement when compared to December, we need to remain vigilant and to continue the safety measures put in place. The potential risks posed by the new variants of COVID-19 are not fully known, and this justifies continued caution and extra vigilance.

Based on the recommendation of the Senior Emergency Policy Team, and in line with medical advice, I have decided that we will continue the Phase 2 safety measures. Phase 2 allows for a maximum of 40 per cent of normal building capacity. In practice, staff numbers in the New York buildings have averaged from 10 to 20 per cent occupancy, and this cautious approach needs to be maintained. This is largely due to managerial preference and operational necessity – if staff can perform their functions effectively by telecommuting, they will continue to be encouraged to do so. While staff should feel confident to be present in the buildings when required, there is no need at this stage to take any active measures to increase numbers.

All United Nations Staff Members in New York

I wish to assure you that the physical risk mitigation efforts in the buildings have been extensive. Signage, enhanced cleaning services, additional air filtration, and the installation of barriers are all complete. Before an in-person meeting occurs, the risks are assessed according to a standard process and the meeting is compartmentalized for maximum safety. Contact tracing, coupled with in-house and in-residence testing programmes, are well established. There have been no cases of transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace.


I know that the pandemic is having a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of staff. A multi-agency interdisciplinary mental health leadership team has been established to ensure that we have a targeted approach and action plan to support our personnel. I am sharing a list of the resources and tools available for managers and staff members throughout the Secretariat and would encourage you to avail of this support.

The Tri-State area, including the City of New York, recently launched its vaccination programme. We have received confirmation that United Nations personnel and their dependents would have access to vaccines through the host country's vaccination programme and in accordance with its criteria for the prioritization of the vaccine delivery. I encourage you to consult the respective websites of your state of residence for more information on the different phases of the vaccine distribution plan and the locations of vaccination centres.

While it is still not clear when conditions will allow for us to enter into Phase 3, I would like to note that work on the planning and design for our post COVID-19 Next Normal phase at United Nations Headquarters has commenced. The cross-functional project team is aiming to send me a proposed set of principles and an implementation plan for Phase 3 by late March.

I wish to thank you all for continuing to advance the work of the United Nations in the face of the pandemic. Our work life has had to adjust and respond for nearly one year. You have collectively carried forward the mission of the United Nations while maintaining safety and protecting your health and that of your colleagues. Let us all remain vigilant and support each other as we continue the important work of the Organization.

Yours sincerely,

*with my warmest personal regards*  


António Guterres