

Whistleblower asks Kerry to recommend withholding U.N. funds

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - A U.N. whistleblower who was awarded a fraction of the damage award he sought from the United Nations urged the United States on Monday to withhold 15 percent of its contribution to the world body as required by U.S. law.

American James Wasserstrom, now an anti-corruption officer at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, won his case but was awarded only 2 percent of the \$3.2 million (2 million pounds) he asked for. A tribunal last month found U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the U.N. Ethics Office failed to properly review claims that he was retaliated against for reporting U.N. corruption in Kosovo.

The United States is required by law to withhold 15 percent of its contribution to any U.N. agency if the secretary of state determines it is not implementing "best practices for the protection of whistleblowers from retaliation."

Wasserstrom, backed by the Government Accountability Project, a non-profit whistleblower watchdog, asked U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to recommend that Congress withhold the 15 percent because the United Nations failed to implement those best practices for protecting whistleblowers.

"When I succeeded in the U.N. justice system, I came away with compensation that left me far worse off than if I had not come forward at all," Wasserstrom said in his letter to Kerry, which he distributed at a news conference.

"At the same time, the judgment conveys that anyone engaging in retaliation has nothing to fear as there are no real consequences," he wrote. "This is not justice. It is a travesty."

A U.S. State Department official, however, told Reuters on condition of anonymity that the department does not believe any withholdings are required at this time.

U.N. spokesman Eduardo del Buey declined to comment on Monday, citing ongoing litigation.

NOT SERIOUS ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY?

Wasserstrom complained in 2007 that he suffered retaliation for reporting suspected misconduct while head of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Oversight of Publicly Owned Enterprises in Kosovo.

He told the United Nations' ethics office he was concerned about corporate governance in Kosovo and reported a possible kickback scheme tied to a proposed power plant and mine that involved top politicians and senior U.N. officials.

Instead of being protected as a whistleblower, Wasserstrom said his U.N. public utility watchdog office in Kosovo was shut down and his U.N. contract was not renewed.

Although Wasserstrom eventually won his case before the U.N. Dispute Tribunal, he was only awarded \$65,000. He says his legal fees, lost wages and other financial damage amounted to more than \$2 million.

"The U.N. and Ban Ki-moon are not serious about transparency and accountability," Wasserstrom told reporters.

"In my case, the United Nations did not adhere to best practices for legal burdens of proof, nor did the organization hold the retaliators accountable, release its finding regarding my substantive disclosures, or eliminate the effects of the retaliation," he wrote to Kerry.

Shelley Walden, an expert from the Government Accountability Project, said her group believed the United Nations was not following best practices for protecting whistleblowers as required by U.S. law.

A U.N. spokesman declined to comment because the matter is under appeal.