The Executive Director of UNAIDS, Michel Sidibé, announced on Dec 13, that he will step down from his post, 6 months before the end of his term, after an independent expert panel report faulted his “defective leadership” and called for change at the top.

After a 4 month long probe, which included interviews, written testimonies, and a staff survey, the independent expert panel on prevention of, and response to, harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying, and abuse of power at UNAIDS Secretariat, chaired by Gillian Triggs, former president of the Australian Human Rights Commission, concluded that “The UNAIDS Secretariat is in crisis, a crisis which threatens its vital work...The leaders, policies and processes at UNAIDS have failed to prevent or properly respond to allegations of harassment including sexual harassment, bullying, and abuse of power in UNAIDS.”

The leadership of UNAIDS, it said, “has enabled a culture of preferment, non-transparency, and circumvention of process that has allowed others to operate with impunity and retaliation against those who speak up. This culture has permitted a work environment across dispersed locations that allows abuse of office, bullying, and harassment, including in some cases sexual harassment.”

The panel said it has “no confidence that the current leadership can deliver cultural change when that leadership has been largely responsible for the current malaise”. For UNAIDS to regain a culture of dignity and respect, it noted, “a change in leadership has become necessary.”

In 2016, Martina Brostrom, a UNAIDS official, filed a complaint of harassment and sexual harassment against Luiz Loures, a top UNAIDS official who has since retired and who denied the charges.

An internal investigation concluded there was “insufficient evidence” to support the allegations of sexual harassment. The mismanagement of the case by Sidibé during the investigation, and his stance afterwards, triggered a global outcry and led the UNAIDS chief to call for the independent expert panel probe under mounting international pressure.

The responses to the release of this report were very strong within the global HIV/AIDS health community. A spokesperson for the UK Department for International Development told The Lancet on Dec 12 that the panel report “sets out serious concerns regarding the way in which harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying, and abuse of power have been dealt with at the UNAIDS Secretariat, including allegations of impunity and retaliation against those who speak up.”

“The sector has been very clear that we cannot tolerate practices which don’t reach the standards we require. We expect immediate and far-reaching action from UNAIDS over this to address the findings of the report.”

The report was presented by the independent expert panel members to the agency’s ruling Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) in a closed door meeting held on Dec 11. During the meeting, Sweden’s minister for international development cooperation and climate, and Deputy Prime Minister, Isabella Lövin told the Swedish daily newspaper Svenska Dagbladet: “we’re freezing our support until he’s gone, we have no confidence in him, he has to go now”. Rumours that more Nordic countries could follow suit added to the divisive atmosphere.

The UNAIDS member states’ response to this presentation was highly polarised.

High-income nations, such as Sweden, Australia, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands, and influential HIV/AIDS activist care groups wanted Sidibé to step down immediately in light of the findings of the report.

UNAIDS diplomats said that Lina Nykanen, chair of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association, told the PCB that “UNAIDS staff have been most affected by the problems that brought us to where we are today...We must acknowledge the truth: the hurt and suffering of our colleagues documented by the panel...There are things described in the report that should never be part of any workplace, let alone a UN entity that has zero discrimination at the core of its identity and mission...The panel’s report is tough...It is not the type of report we are used to seeing in the UN system.”
The AIDS Healthcare Foundation told the PCB that “Sidibé should be immediately dismissed. The current executive director oversaw the creation of the problem and he is not the person to fix it...There is no way for the healing and reform to happen with him in charge, the AIDS community and the UNAIDS response requires better than this.”

However, many developing countries, especially African nations, called for him to stay until the end of his term—in Jan 2020—saying that they considered that the report was “not fair and credible” and that its methodology was “flawed” and “biased” against Sidibé

Some African officials and experts attending the PCB session told The Lancet that they felt strongly that Sidibé had been made a scapegoat for what is an institutional problem at UNAIDS and throughout the UN, and that the shortfalls of the PCB in dealing with the UNAIDS problems had not been sufficiently addressed.

“Mr Sidibé—a real visionary on HIV/AIDS—has given [patients and victims of HIV/AIDS] a voice, and fought hard for their rights and for them to have access to care”, Francois-Xavier Mbopi-Keou, a professor of microbiology and infectious diseases at the University of Yaoundé, told The Lancet.

One delegate from a high-income country agreed. His serious shortfalls, aside, Sidibé “has done fantastic work for HIV/AIDS”, this delegate said.

The broad political support for Sidibé among PCB members, sources said, ruled out the possibility of his immediate dismissal. After marathon negotiations, PCB member countries agreed on a compromise “consensus decision” that effectively postponed any concrete action on the panel findings.

The Nordic group, led by Sweden, wanted action now, including forwarding the panel’s report and specific recommendations to the UN Secretary-General. However, developing countries, spearheaded by a United Africa group and including China (which, in 2019, assumes the rotating PCB Chair from the UK), objected to a fast-track approach. As a result, they agreed to hold a special session of the PCB “no later than March, 2019”, at which time the PCB, “after complete consideration of the [independent expert panel] report, may elect to choose to bring specific recommendations to the attention of the UN Secretary-General”. They also agreed to establish a PCB working group, to further review the conclusions and recommendations of the report.

In the end, it was Sidibé who “informed the UNAIDS Board that the 44th Board meeting in June, 2019, would be his last board meeting and he would complete his duties at the end of June, 2019”, Sophie Barton-Knott, a UNAIDS spokesperson, told The Lancet. With his decision, Sidibé, “created a [diplomatic] opening between the divided UNAIDS member states, a top international health official, told The Lancet.

Asked about the criticisms of the report, Triggs told a small group of reporters, “The methodology was impeccable, it was specifically approved by a specialist in social sciences.”

“We believe the stories need to be told as well as the statistics. In other words, you need to move hearts as well as minds, and that’s what we did”, Triggs declared.

But more importantly, Triggs emphasised, “just about everybody agreed with the core legal principle and policies of zero tolerance; it’s an overused cliché but, nonetheless, that is a policy: that abuse of office, harassment, [and] sexual harassment are illegal.”

When asked about the Executive Director’s decision, Paula Donovan, co-director of AIDS-Free World and its Code Blue Campaign, said in a statement “Mr Sidibé doesn’t deserve to leave on his terms and on his timeline. A leader of any other major institution who was accused of the wrongdoing described in the [independent expert panel] report would have been summarily fired.”

“Mr Sidibé has taken advantage of a failure of leadership by the [UN] secretary-general and the governing body of UNAIDS. This is the culmination of the abuse of power and authority that has marked Sidibé’s tenure. The culture of impunity remains intact. Zero tolerance is nothing more than an empty slogan”, she added.

One delegate, who declined to be identified, said “There was a fear that no outcome over the leadership risked tearing apart UNAIDS”, but that Sidibé has stepped down will contribute to a solution.

“We have an obligation to UNAIDS and to the millions of people with HIV”, he said.

For Brostrom, who reported allegations of harassment and who brought details of this controversy to public light, “it is clear that he has been fired for his wrongdoings and for that I am pleased”. 

Sadly it is a political and moral catastrophe to leave Michel Sidibé in his job for 6 months. In his position, he will continue to represent the UN with impunity,” she told The Lancet.

John Zarocostas