

*Registry's translation,
the French
text alone
being authoritative.*

105th Session

Judgment No. 2741

The Administrative Tribunal,

Considering the complaint filed by Mr L.M. L. C. against the International Olive Oil Council (IOOC) on 16 September 2006 and corrected on 21 December 2006, the Council's reply of 4 April 2007, the complainant's rejoinder of 9 July and the IOOC's surrejoinder of 25 October 2007;

Considering Article II, paragraph 5, of the Statute of the Tribunal;

Having examined the written submissions and decided not to order hearings, for which neither party has applied;

Considering that the facts of the case and the pleadings may be summed up as follows:

A. The complainant, a Spanish national born in 1967, joined the IOOC on 1 February 1995. He held the post of computer technician from January 1996 and his appointment was confirmed on 1 July 1996. In November 2001 he was appointed to the post of information technology officer.

In April 2005, having decided to modernise its structure and organisation, the IOOC signed a contract with a company, T., with a view to setting up a new financial management system. With the same end in view, a new organisation chart of the Executive Secretariat was approved on 1 July 2005. As it was to be applied with effect from 1 January 2006, competitions were organised to fill the posts that it created. In September 2005 the complainant applied for the new post of Head of the Information Technology and Communications Department, but his application was turned down. The post was declared vacant on 20 October 2005 and the complainant continued to perform the duties of an information technology officer.

At the end of December 2005 the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division reported that he was unable to access his personal e-mail account because his password was refused. On 8 February 2006 he found an e-mail sent from his personal account, to which he was still denied access, among the e-mail messages in his professional account. As this incident seemed to point to the existence of a security flaw in the IOOC's entire information technology system, and as the complainant, the only technician with supervisory responsibilities in that area, was absent on sick leave, an external information technology company – the SIA company – was contacted as a matter of urgency. The company proposed the following day that an expert report should be drawn up in the presence of a notary, and the IOOC agreed. On the same day, the hard disks of the computers used by the complainant were removed and handed over to the notary.

On 10 February SIA prepared a preliminary report indicating that one of the servers – which was used by the complainant – contained espionage software register files in which the access details for the personal e-mail account of the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division were stored. The complainant, who was still on sick leave, was informed by a fax bearing the same date that he was suspended from duty without pay for the duration of the investigation. By a letter of 13 February he asked to be informed of the grounds for this decision. In reply a Deputy Director informed him, on behalf of the Executive Director, of the decision to initiate disciplinary proceedings against him by appointing an investigating officer, the basis for such action being that there were "strong indications" that he had engaged in serious or gross misconduct in the performance of his duties.

On 13 March SIA submitted its expert report, in which it concluded, inter alia, that espionage software had been installed on the computer of the Head of the above-mentioned Division and that the latter's personal e-mail account had been accessed from one of the complainant's computers. On 31 March the investigating officer sent the complainant a "statement of the grounds of the case" containing the list of charges against him, including unlawful appropriation of IOOC data, appropriation of passwords and installation of espionage software with a

view to obtaining such passwords. Having concluded that the complainant had acted deliberately and engaged in gross misconduct that jeopardised the IOOC's interests, the investigating officer proposed summary dismissal.

On 18 April the complainant filed an appeal with the Joint Committee, requesting in particular that the proceedings be declared void on the grounds that his right to a fair trial had been violated. In its report of 8 May 2006, the Committee found that the rules of procedure had been complied with but proposed, "given the complexity of the facts from a legal/criminal point of view", that the case should be examined by the "competent judicial authorities". The Committee considered that if it were proved that the complainant had indeed committed the acts in question, they would constitute gross misconduct warranting dismissal with three months' notice. On 21 June 2006 the Executive Director adopted decision No. 9/06, which constitutes the impugned decision, in which he stated that, in his view, it had been proved that the complainant had committed acts constituting gross misconduct and that he should be summarily dismissed in accordance with the terms of Article 51 of the Staff Regulations.

B. The complainant asserts that the principle of the presumption of innocence was disregarded, since the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division had designated him from the outset as the guilty party. He also points out that it was the Head himself who took the decision to engage SIA. He maintains that the evidence used against him was unlawfully gathered between 8 and 10 February 2006, i.e. before the investigating officer had been appointed. The complainant objects to the fact that the investigation immediately focused on an analysis of his computers' hard disks; it should have begun, in his view, with an analysis of the hard disk contained in the computer used by the Head of the aforementioned Division. Moreover, there can be no certainty that his hard disks were not tampered with, since he was on sick leave when they were removed and the presence of other staff members was not required. He emphasises that he was not summoned prior to the adoption of the decision to suspend him from his duties. He claims that that decision was taken before the results of the analysis of the hard disks were known and that he was not informed of the facts complained of or the penalties that might be imposed, in violation of the terms of Article 3 of the Disciplinary Procedure of the Executive Secretariat. The complainant adds that neither the principle of the protection of legitimate expectations nor the adversarial principle was observed, that the investigation was conducted in secret and that the investigating officer did not seek to gather the necessary evidence.

The complainant accuses the Executive Director of having disregarded the Joint Committee's opinion without stating the grounds for such action. Reviewing the content of the report prepared by SIA, he submits that the impugned decision is based on the erroneous assumption that he was the only person who knew the passwords providing access to the IOOC's information technology system. In fact, he points out, T. had known the passwords since April 2005 and had also used his computers, a fact that was not disclosed to SIA. He further claims that he was not on the premises of the IOOC when some of the acts attributed to him were perpetrated. Lastly, he indicates that not a single negative incident had clouded his entire 11-year career and that he had demonstrated his professional integrity.

The complainant requests the setting aside of the decision of 21 June 2006 and his reinstatement in the post he formerly held or, failing that, payment of a termination indemnity. He further requests payment of the salary that he did not receive from the date of his dismissal until that of the present judgment or that of his reinstatement. Lastly, he claims 40,000 euros in moral damages and 9,000 euros in costs.

C. In its reply the IOOC explains that it was decided to begin with an analysis of the hard disks of the computers used by the complainant because he was the administrator of the Council's information technology system. It asserts that no investigation into the complainant's activities was conducted on 8 and 9 February 2006; those days were devoted solely to an attempt to verify the facts and deal with the consequences of the incident. Every step taken before the formal institution of the disciplinary procedure was controlled by the notary, who certified that the hard disks in question had not been tampered with. Moreover, the Financial Delegate supervised the entire process.

The defendant submits that it complied strictly with the disciplinary procedure and that on some occasions the complainant was even given the opportunity to be assisted by counsel although there was no express provision to that effect. The disciplinary procedure was not instituted until sufficient evidence had been gathered to support the presumption that the complainant had committed an offence. An investigating officer was then appointed and the suspension measure was adopted in accordance with the provisions of Article 56 of the Staff Regulations and Article 16 of the Disciplinary Procedure. It was a provisional measure that was taken with the sole aim of shedding light on the facts and establishing whether responsibility lay with the complainant. As it did not constitute a

penalty, the safeguards foreseen under Article 3 of the Disciplinary Procedure were not applicable. The IOOC adds that there is no provision in either the Staff Regulations or the Disciplinary Procedure requiring that the complainant should be heard before the adoption of such a provisional measure. It endeavours to show that the complainant was aware at all times of the charges against him and that he had many opportunities to produce evidence and propose any actions required to defend his interests. The investigating officer, for his part, fulfilled his role in conformity with the rules.

Furthermore, the defendant points out that the Joint Committee is a purely advisory body. It submits that there can be no doubt as to the proportionality of the penalty imposed, given the seriousness of the violation of both the security and interests of the Council and its staff.

According to the IOOC, the complainant never disputed the factual basis of the charges against him. It affirms that, contrary to his submissions, T. was not entrusted with the maintenance of its information technology system until 13 February 2006 – i.e. after he was suspended from his duties. Thus it was only from that time onwards that T. had access to the system; it had previously operated from its own installations and had not used the complainant's computers. At the end of 2006 T. discovered that a programme allowing remote access to the IOOC network had been installed on the complainant's computer. Moreover, internal filters were found on the accounts of four staff members – the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division, the investigating officer, the Head of the Financial and Budgetary Unit and a member of the Staff Committee – which could be used to copy certain e-mails sent by these users or to delete them before they reached their addressee. According to the IOOC, the complainant is seeking to substantiate the theory that a plot was hatched against him by the staff and by T. with the aim of obtaining his summary dismissal so as to economise on the termination indemnity. It finds this argument to be “totally illogical” in view of the overwhelming evidence of the complainant's guilt.

D. In his rejoinder the complainant enlarges on his pleas. He submits that the IOOC accused him of having committed acts of espionage solely in order to be able to dismiss him summarily. He maintains that not all of the work on the computers was carried out in the absence of the notary. He claims that his “worker's dignity” has not been respected and, citing Article 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, that his right to respect for his private life and his correspondence has been violated.

Furthermore, the complainant argues that the report submitted by SIA is flawed in several respects. Referring to a report prepared at his request by a computer expert in July 2007, he claims that T. necessarily worked on the IOOC information technology system in order to comply with the terms of the contract it signed in April 2005. He adds that the Head of the Financial and Budgetary Unit also had access to the system. He notes that the expert's report further indicates that the computer security problems at the IOOC persisted after his departure, that he cannot be held responsible for them, and that the evidence adduced against him is insufficient to prove that he is the perpetrator of the acts attributed to him.

E. In its surrejoinder the IOOC reiterates its position. It indicates that the presence of the notary was unnecessary during the period prior to the investigation, when antivirus software was used to identify the problem. It contends that the reference to the above-mentioned Convention is irrelevant; the complainant's right to privacy was not violated, since his computers were not analysed for the purpose of obtaining information about his person but in order to detect the presence of software installed for malicious purposes. The Council emphasises that an employee's dignity and privacy are in no way violated by an inspection of the computer tools placed at his disposal by the employer just because the inspection was conducted in his absence or in the absence of another employee.

The defendant challenges the contention that SIA's report is flawed and questions the findings of the computer expert appointed by the complainant: T. did not have remote access to the IOOC's information technology system. Moreover, in its view, the complainant could not possibly have been unaware of the unlawful activities that occurred, because he had sole responsibility for the system. Even if it were true that T. was perpetrating such irregularities, the complainant could not claim to have failed to detect them since the espionage software was detected by means of a simple antivirus tool. The IOOC infers from the foregoing that the complainant refrained from reporting these irregularities because he was the person responsible for them.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. At the material time the complainant was an information technology officer at the IOOC. On 8 February

2006 the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division reported that a third party had accessed his personal e-mail account. As the complainant had been suddenly taken ill and admitted to hospital, the Head of the above-mentioned Division contacted the SIA company with a request for an assessment of the situation and a plan of action to preserve the security of the IOOC's information technology system. On the following day, the company's technicians undertook a general examination of the system without performing any hands-on work on the installations. The subsequent research, which did entail such work, was carried out in the presence of a notary. The expert assessment began with an inspection of the computers placed at the complainant's disposal. The three hard disks they contained were removed in the presence of the notary and entrusted to his safe keeping.

On 10 February 2006 the technicians noted that a server used exclusively by the complainant contained espionage software register files. This software had been used to record, on 28 December 2005, the keyboard characters typed on the computer of the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division. On being informed of this discovery, a Deputy Director decided at once to initiate disciplinary proceedings against the complainant, to appoint an investigating officer and to suspend the complainant provisionally.

On 13 February 2006 the IOOC instructed T. – with which it had signed a contract on 12 April 2005 for the installation of a new financial management system – to carry out the maintenance tasks previously assigned to the complainant.

2. SIA submitted its expert report on 13 March 2006, in which it concluded, inter alia, that the personal e-mail account of the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division had been accessed from one of the complainant's computers. The investigating officer then drew up a statement of the grounds of the case in which he proposed that the complainant should be summarily dismissed.

The Joint Committee conducted written and oral adversarial proceedings, in which the complainant participated with the assistance of counsel of his own choosing. The Committee issued its opinion after establishing that the rules of procedure had been complied with. It proposed, given the legal complexity and criminal nature of the facts, that the case should be submitted to the competent judicial authorities and held that, if it were proved that the complainant had committed the acts in question, he would be guilty of gross misconduct warranting his dismissal with three months' notice.

After hearing the complainant, the Executive Director decided on 21 June 2006 to dismiss him summarily, since the acts he was alleged to have committed constituted, in his view, gross misconduct within the meaning of Article 7, paragraph 1, of the Disciplinary Procedure, which refers to "[a]ction against the interests of the International Olive Oil Council". He added that his decision was enforceable with immediate effect and rendered final the provisional measures adopted on 10 February 2006. That is the decision which the complainant asks to have set aside with, as a result, either his reinstatement or the payment of a termination indemnity.

3. The complainant submits that the investigation was directed against him from the outset with the sole aim of gathering evidence of his guilt. He points out in this regard that SIA immediately examined his computers instead of examining the computer of the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division. The complainant asserts that he was deliberately excluded from the decisive initial phase of the investigation, which made it impossible for him to prevent any tampering with the equipment seized in his office. He argues that because the search of his computer equipment was carried out in secrecy, his "worker's dignity" and his right to privacy were unjustifiably violated which, in his view, renders the evidence thus gathered inadmissible.

(a) Any worker has the right to be protected against arbitrary or unlawful interference by an employer in his or her private life or correspondence. Any interference in a worker's private life ordered exceptionally by an employer to safeguard the normal and secure functioning of a company's information technology system must be undertaken in the presence of the worker or his or her representatives. If that is not possible owing to the urgency of the situation, all reasonable precautions should be taken to ensure that the accessing of the worker's personal files remains within the bounds of what is required for company security, that any unjustified disclosure or dissemination of personal information is avoided and that any tampering with the computer equipment is prevented. In addition, the person concerned must be informed without delay of the investigations conducted and given all reasonable means to assert his or her rights. These basic principles are applicable to employment relations within international organisations.

(b) On discovering that a third party had accessed the e-mail account of the Head of the Administrative and

Financial Division, the IOOC clearly had to adopt urgent provisional measures within the meaning of Article 16 of the Disciplinary Procedure in order to avert a serious threat to the security of its information technology system.

Obviously, the initial steps could not be taken in the complainant's presence, since he had been suddenly admitted to hospital. The IOOC therefore immediately had recourse to the services of SIA, which it describes as one of the most prestigious in Europe in the area of computer security. The complainant fails to prove that this choice was determined by other motives or made with the aim of causing him harm. Moreover, he does not question the qualifications of SIA's technicians and produces no substantive evidence casting doubt on their neutrality during the preliminary investigation.

When the technicians arrived, they confined themselves to a visual examination of the IOOC's entire computer system. As soon as it proved necessary to conduct more extensive investigations, they sought the assistance of a notary with the IOOC's consent. The hard disks of the computers located in the complainant's office were removed under the supervision of this public servant. This step was rightfully taken as a matter of priority because the complainant was responsible for the proper functioning and maintenance of the information technology system requiring urgent protection, and above all because he was, in that capacity, the only one who had access to the entire system.

Hence it cannot but be concluded that the IOOC complied during the preliminary phase of its investigation with the principles set out under section (a) above.

(c) It may be noted that there is nothing in the file to suggest that specific personal data were provided to the IOOC or to any third party during the preliminary investigation, or that third parties or persons involved in the investigation tampered with the equipment or data.

(d) The Tribunal notes that the provisional suspension decision was taken without informing the complainant of the charges against him. However, the complainant does not claim that this decision, as such, should be set aside.

(e) His first plea therefore fails.

4. (a) A disciplinary penalty can be imposed only at the close of an adversarial procedure that fully guarantees the presumption of innocence and the staff member's right to be heard. The facts complained of must be clearly stated and notified in good time so that the staff member can participate actively and fully in the taking of evidence both before the body responsible for conducting the investigation and before the advisory disciplinary body and the decision-making authority. These bodies must scrupulously avoid taking evidence from one party without the other's knowledge, whether or not the evidence is prejudicial to the staff member (see Judgments 1133, 1212, 2254, under 6, and 2475, under 20).

(b) Pursuant to Article 51, paragraph 2, of the Staff Regulations of the IOOC and Article 12 of the Disciplinary Procedure, the two most severe disciplinary sanctions are dismissal and summary dismissal.

Article 54 of the Staff Regulations stipulates that, where an allegation of serious misconduct is made against a member of the Executive Secretariat, the Executive Director shall inform the Joint Committee thereof in a report, which shall clearly set out the facts of the complaint. Article 12 of the Disciplinary Procedure emphasises that summary dismissal, dismissal with notice and downgrading may be imposed only in the event of gross misconduct, which should be taken to denote, in particular, any action against the interests of the IOOC.

Pursuant to Articles 18 to 20 of the Disciplinary Procedure, the officer appointed to conduct the investigation must deliver to the Executive Director, as soon as possible, a statement of the grounds of the case setting out the circumstances in which the misconduct took place and any clarifications that the investigating officer considers necessary. If there are grounds for action, the statement must then be forwarded to the Joint Committee and the staff member concerned. The latter is entitled to receive his or her full personal file and to frame in writing such arguments as he or she considers appropriate for his or her defence. At the close of this cross-investigation, the Joint Committee meets in private session, but the investigating officer and the staff member concerned, or the person representing the staff member, may be summoned to give evidence and may put forward witnesses before the Committee. The latter may furthermore order a new cross-investigation conducted by an investigating officer of its own choosing, if it considers that it does not possess sufficient information about the facts attributed to the staff member concerned or the circumstances in which they occurred. These rules of procedure are also set out in section

6 of the Procedure of the Joint Committee.

Pursuant to section 6, paragraphs (d) and (e), of the Procedure of the Joint Committee and Articles 21 and 22 of the Disciplinary Procedure, the Committee's opinion shall be submitted to the Executive Director, who shall take a decision on whether or not a disciplinary penalty should be imposed after hearing the staff member concerned.

(c) The complainant asserts that the IOOC conducted the investigation in disregard of the rights that these rules of procedure are designed to guarantee, in particular the presumption of innocence, equality of arms and the protection of legitimate expectations. He contends that the alleged flaws in the investigation undermined the validity of the entire disciplinary proceedings.

This second plea is manifestly unfounded. On completion of the preliminary phase required for the adoption of provisional measures, which was conducted, as noted under 3 above, in a manner in keeping with the circumstances, the investigation was carried out in accordance with due process. The complainant was immediately informed of the provisional measure of suspension adopted against him and secured representation at once by counsel of his own choosing, who assisted him throughout the proceedings. There is nothing in the file to indicate that the complainant's defence, thus assured, was impeded in any way whatsoever before the investigating officer, the Joint Committee or the Executive Director. In particular, the complainant's allegations regarding the unlawful disclosure of certain documents are not supported by any credible evidence.

5. The complainant criticises the Executive Director for having summarily dismissed him despite the fact that the Joint Committee had proposed referring the case to the "competent judicial authorities" and ordering dismissal with three months' notice if, at the close of the investigation conducted by those authorities, he was indeed found to have perpetrated the acts attributed to him. He also contends that the Executive Director failed to explain the reasons why he did not endorse the Joint Committee's recommendation.

(a) The decision-making authority cannot disregard the opinions or recommendations it receives from advisory bodies without good reason (see Judgment 2092, under 10). Otherwise, advisory procedures would be meaningless and serve no purpose.

However, such opinions or recommendations do not bind the decision-making authority to the extent of barring it from undertaking an impartial assessment of the merits of the proposals made and curtailing its obligation to examine carefully, in particular, whether the findings of fact that they contain are correct. Nevertheless, where a decision-making authority intends to disregard the recommendations of advisory bodies, it must state clearly in its decision the objective grounds that led it to opt for a divergent conclusion. In the case of a disciplinary procedure, this clearly applies not only to the appraisal of the evidence gathered but also, on the one hand, to the decision whether or not to order a penalty and, on the other, to the severity of the penalty, which should respect the principle of proportionality.

These are the rules underlying Article 22 of the Disciplinary Procedure, which stipulates that the Executive Director shall issue a decision "after studying the opinion of the Joint Committee and hearing the official concerned".

(b) The reasons given in the Joint Committee's report of 8 May 2006 are perfunctory to say the least. They consist basically of a review of the procedure, at the close of which the Committee asserts that the rules of procedure have been observed. The Committee then states that, "given the complexity of the facts from a legal/criminal point of view", the case must be referred to the "competent judicial authorities" before a disciplinary penalty is imposed.

This reasoning seems all the more anomalous in light of the fact that the statement of the grounds of the case dated 31 March 2006 was fairly detailed, which ought to have prompted the advisory body to state whether or not it harboured any doubts as to the imputability of the facts to the complainant and, if it did, to account for those doubts. If such doubts existed, it would then have been required by the rules described under 4(b) above to initiate a new cross-investigation entrusted to a new investigating officer of its own choosing. It was in any case unacceptable for the advisory body to confine itself to proposing that the Executive Director should await the ruling of a criminal court before closing the disciplinary procedure.

Under these circumstances the decision-making authority had a duty to undertake a detailed analysis of the entire

file before it. It did so by stating, in a decision that was carefully reasoned in fact and in law, why it supported the findings of the investigating officer rather than those of the Joint Committee.

(c) This plea is therefore also manifestly unfounded.

6. The complainant denies that he is the perpetrator of the acts attributed to him.

When the Tribunal is seised of a complaint against a disciplinary penalty, it must quash the penalty if it is based on an error of fact or of law, overlooked some essential fact, was tainted with abuse of authority, or if a clearly mistaken conclusion was drawn from the evidence (see Judgments 2262, under 2, and 2365, under 4(a) *in fine*).

(a) The Executive Director based the impugned decision essentially on SIA's expert report, without in any way overlooking the points made by the complainant in the course of the adversarial proceedings.

SIA noted that the espionage software used to gain access to the e-mail account of the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division was installed on 29 September 2005. According to the IOOC, the complainant was the only member of its staff who, on the one hand, was fully conversant with its information technology system and all possible modes of access and, on the other, possessed the skills required to perform the computer manipulations attributed to him. The installation of the espionage software occurred during the most active phase of the process of restructuring the Executive Secretariat. The complainant could have had serious reasons to fear that this process would adversely affect his professional status; in this context the Executive Director attached some importance to the finding that the espionage software had been installed immediately after the expiry of the deadline for submission of candidacies for a post created in the new organisation chart that was coveted by the complainant, in other words at a time when he had the utmost interest in obtaining access to confidential information. The impugned decision also gives weight to the fact that several e-mails exchanged between the Head of the Administrative and Financial Division and another staff member regarding the staff restructuring process were found on the hard disk of one of the complainant's computers.

(b) The Tribunal finds that these facts constitute strong circumstantial evidence of the imputability of the facts to the complainant, who clearly had the means and motives to act notwithstanding the considerable risks involved. The findings of SIA are based, moreover, on an in-depth examination of the computer equipment seized in the complainant's office under the supervision of a public servant. SIA's expert report appears to be the work of highly competent technicians and to have been prepared with considerable attention to impartiality.

Another fact that cannot be overlooked is that T. – the company responsible for maintenance of the IOOC's information technology system following the complainant's dismissal – subsequently discovered that a secret programme had been installed on the computer used by the complainant allowing remote access to the IOOC's information technology network. This discovery strips the argument based on the complainant's absence on 28 December 2005 of all credibility.

(c) The divergent evidence adduced in the expert report prepared at the complainant's request is insufficiently strong to invalidate the findings made by SIA. In this regard the most cogent argument put forward by the complainant concerns possible interference by T. This company might have possessed the means to install the software in question, but one fails to see what the company would stand to gain from installing it, with all the risks that this entailed, while carrying out the general restructuring assignment entrusted to it by the IOOC.

Nor is there any reasonable explanation for how the clandestine installation of espionage software by third parties and its subsequent functioning – a theory put forward by the complainant – could have escaped his notice for more than four months although he had full responsibility for the IOOC's information technology system during that period.

As for the plea based on the fact that further occurrences of system malfunctioning were discovered after his departure, this obviously cannot clear the complainant of the charges relating to those which occurred before his departure, inasmuch as the Tribunal has found on the basis of the convincing evidence in the file that these charges have been proven.

7. The complaint is therefore ill-founded and must be dismissed.

DECISION

For the above reasons,

The complaint is dismissed.

In witness of this judgment, adopted on 8 May 2008, Mr Seydou Ba, President of the Tribunal, Mr Claude Rouiller, Judge, and Mr Patrick Frydman, Judge, sign below, as do I, Catherine Comtet, Registrar.

Delivered in public in Geneva on 9 July 2008.

Seydou Ba

Claude Rouiller

Patrick Frydman

Catherine Comtet