**Departing U.N. official calls Ban's leadership 'deplorable' in 50-page memo**

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UNITED NATIONS -- The outgoing chief of a U.N. office charged with combating corruption at the United Nations has issued a stinging rebuke of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, accusing him of undermining her efforts and leading the global institution into an era of decline, according to a confidential end-of-assignment report.

The memo by Inga-Britt Ahlenius, a Swedish auditor who stepped down Friday as undersecretary general of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, represents an extraordinary personal attack on Ban from a senior U.N. official. The memo also marks a challenge to Ban's studiously cultivated image as a champion of accountability.

Shortly after taking office in 2007, Ban committed himself to restoring the United Nations' reputation, which had been sullied by revelations of corruption in the agency's oil-for-food program in Iraq.

But Ahlenius says that, rather than being an advocate for accountability, Ban, along with his top advisers, has systematically sought to undercut the independence of her office, initially by trying to set up a competing investigations unit under his control and then by thwarting her efforts to hire her own staff.

"Your actions are not only deplorable, but seriously reprehensible. . . . Your action is without precedent and in my opinion seriously embarrassing for yourself," Ahlenius wrote in the 50-page memo to Ban, a copy of which was obtained by The Washington Post. "I regret to say that the secretariat now is in a process of decay."

Ban's top advisers said that Ahlenius's memo constituted a deeply unbalanced account of their differences and that her criticism of Ban's stewardship of the United Nations was patently unfair.

"A look at his record shows that Secretary General Ban has provided genuine visionary leadership on important issues from climate change to development to women's empowerment. He has promoted the cause of gender balance in general as well as within the organization. He has led from the front on important political issues from Gaza to Haiti to Sudan," Ban's chief of staff, Vijay Nambiar, wrote in a response.

"It is regrettable to note," Nambiar added, "that many pertinent facts were overlooked or misrepresented" in Ahlenius's memo.

The departure of Ahlenius, 72, coincides with a period of crisis in the United Nations' internal investigations division. During the past two years, the world body has shed some of its top investigators. It has also failed to fill dozens of vacancies, including that of the chief of the investigations division in the Office of Internal Oversight Services. That post has been vacant since 2006, leaving a void in the United Nations' ability to police itself, diplomats say.

"We are disappointed with the recent performance of [the U.N.'s] investigations division," said Mark Kornblau, spokesman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations. "The coming change in . . . leadership is an opportunity to bring about a significant improvement in its performance to increase oversight and transparency throughout the organization."

The U.N. General Assembly established the Office of Internal Oversight Services in 1994 to conduct management audits of the United Nations' principal departments and to conduct investigations into corruption and misconduct. The founding resolution granted the office "operational independence" but placed it under the authority of the secretary general and made it dependent on the U.N. departments it policed for much of its funding and administrative support.

The dispute between Ahlenius and Ban has underscored some of the resulting tensions and exposed a protracted and acrimonious struggle for power over the course of U.N. investigations.

While Ahlenius cited Ban's move to set up a new investigations unit as a sign that he was seeking to undermine her independence, Nambiar said that it was intended to strengthen the United Nations' ability to fight corruption.

Ahlenius also clashed with Ban over her efforts to hire a former federal prosecutor, Robert Appleton, who headed the U.N. Procurement Task Force, a temporary white-collar crime unit that carried out aggressive investigations into corruption in U.N. peacekeeping missions from 2006 to last year. The unit's investigations led to an unprecedented number of misconduct findings by U.N. officials and prompted federal probes into corruption.

Ban's advisers said they blocked Appleton's appointment on the grounds that female candidates had not been properly considered and said that the final selection should have been made by Ban, not Ahlenius.

"The secretary general fully recognizes the operational independence of OIOS," Nambiar said. But that, he said, "does not excuse her from applying the standard rules of recruitment."