

This is the United Nations

A short overview

The UN is an international organization, not a world government

The United Nations is an organization of sovereign States. These States voluntarily join the UN to work for world peace, promote friendship among all nations and support economic and social progress. It formally came into being on 24 October 1945. At that time, it had 51 countries as Members. As of March 2007, 192 countries were UN members.

The UN is a forum, a meeting-place, for virtually all nations of the world. It provides them with the mechanism to help find solutions to disputes or problems, and to act on virtually any matter of concern to humanity.

Though sometimes described as a “parliament of nations”, the UN is neither a supra-State nor a government of governments. It does not have an army and it imposes no taxes. It depends on the political will of its Members to have its decisions implemented and relies on the contributions of its Members to carry out its activities.

The United Nations plays a central role in reducing international tensions, preventing conflicts and putting an end to fighting already under way. It deals with our environment, outer space and the sea-bed. It has helped wipe out many diseases and expand food production. It cares for and protects refugees, expands literacy and responds quickly to natural disasters. It also protects and promotes rights of individuals by setting a global standard for human rights.

The six main UN organs

The General Assembly

The General Assembly is the main deliberative organ of the United Nations and includes all its Members. It may discuss any matter arising under the UN Charter and make recommendations to UN Members (except on disputes or situations which are being considered by the Security Council). In the Assembly, each nation, large or small, has one vote and important decisions are taken by a two-thirds majority vote.

The Assembly meets every year from September to December. Special sessions may be summoned by the Assembly, at the request of the Security Council, or at the request of a majority of UN Members.

The work of the General Assembly is also carried out by its six main committees, the Human Rights Council, other subsidiary bodies and the UN Secretariat.

The Security Council

The Security Council has primary responsibility under the Charter for maintaining peace and security. It can be convened at any time, whenever peace is threatened. Member States are obligated to carry out its decisions. When a threat to peace is brought before the Council, it usually first asks the parties to reach agreement by peaceful means. If fighting breaks out, the Council tries to secure a ceasefire. It may then send peacekeeping missions to troubled areas or call for economic sanctions and embargoes to restore peace.

The Council has 15 members, including five permanent members: China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The other 10 are elected by the General Assembly on the basis of geographical representation for two-year terms. Decisions require nine votes; except on procedural questions, a decision cannot be taken if there is a negative vote by a permanent member (known as the “veto”). The Council also makes recommendations to the General Assembly on the appointment of a new Secretary-General and on the admission of new members to the UN. Many countries want to expand the membership of the Council to include new permanent and non-permanent members.

The Economic and Social Council

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the central body for coordinating the economic and social work of the United Nations and the UN family of organizations. It has 54 member nations elected from all regions. As much as 70 per cent of the work of the UN system is devoted to promoting higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development. The Council recommends and directs activities aimed at promoting economic growth of developing countries, supporting human rights and fostering world cooperation to fight poverty and under-development.

To meet specific needs, the General Assembly has set up a number of specialized agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and programmes such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The work of these agencies and programmes is coordinated by ECOSOC.

The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council was assigned under the UN Charter to supervise the administration of Trust Territories — former colonies or dependent territories — which were placed under the International Trusteeship System. The system was created at the end of the Second World War to promote the advancement of the inhabitants of those dependent Territories and their progressive development towards self-government or independence.

Since the creation of the Trusteeship Council, more than 70 colonial Territories, including all of the original 11 Trust Territories, have attained independence with the help of the United Nations. As a result, in 1994, the Council decided formally to suspend its operation and to meet as and when occasion might require.

The International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the UN’s main judicial organ. Presiding over the ICJ, or “World Court”, are 15 judges, each from a different nation, elected by the General Assembly and Security Council. The Court settles legal disputes between nations only and not between individuals, in accordance with international law. If a country does not wish to take part in a proceeding it does not have to do so, unless required by special treaty provisions. Once a country accepts the Court’s jurisdiction, it must comply with its decision.

The seat of the International Court of Justice is at The Hague in the Netherlands. The offices of the Court occupy the “Peace Palace”, which was constructed by the Carnegie Foundation, a private non-profit organization, to serve as the headquarters of the Permanent Court of International Justice, the predecessor of the present Court. The UN makes an annual contribution to the Foundation for the use of the building.

The Secretariat

The Secretariat is made up of an international staff working at UN Headquarters in New York, as well as UN offices in Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi and other locations. It consists of departments and offices with a total staff of around 16,000, drawn from some 175 countries. Including civil staff in peacekeeping missions the total number comprises approximately 30,000 staff. Staff members carry out the substantive and administrative work of the United Nations as directed by the General Assembly, the Security Council and the other organs.

The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General. He is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a five-year term. As the chief administrative officer of the

Organization, the Secretary-General directs its work. He is also responsible for implementing decisions taken by the various organs of the United Nations.

The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which, in his opinion, may threaten international peace and security. He may use his "good offices" to prevent conflicts or promote peaceful settlement of disputes between countries. The Secretary-General may also act on his own initiative to deal with humanitarian or other problems of special importance.

There have been only eight Secretaries-General since the founding of the UN:

Trygve Lie (Norway), 1946-1952
 Dag Hammarskjöld (Sweden), 1953-1961
 U Thant (Burma, now Myanmar), 1961-1971
 Kurt Waldheim (Austria), 1972-1981
 Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (Peru), 1982-1991
 Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Egypt), 1992-1996
 Kofi Annan (Ghana), 1997-2006
 Ban Ki-moon (Republic of Korea), since 2007

Peace is not just a dream

UN peacekeepers with their blue helmets are the most visible symbols of the UN's peace efforts. The peacekeepers, soldiers drawn voluntarily from various national armies, fulfil the role of an impartial third party. They help create and maintain a ceasefire and form a buffer zone between parties in conflict. Their presence helps make the search for peaceful settlement of conflict through diplomatic channels possible. As peacekeepers maintain peace on the ground, mediators from the United Nations meet with leaders from the disputing parties or countries and try to reach a peaceful solution.

Modern-day peacekeeping is more than maintaining peace and security. Peacekeepers are increasingly involved with assisting in political processes, reforming justice systems, training law-enforcement and police forces, disarming former combatants and clearing land mines.

In 2005, the International Atomic Energy Agency and its Director General Mohamed El Baradei were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This was the ninth time the UN was honoured by the Nobel Committee with the peace award. Previous winners were: UN and Kofi Annan (2001), UN Peacekeeping Forces (1988), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (1954 & 1981), International Labour Organization (1969), UN Children's Fund (1965), Dag Hammarskjöld (1961) and Ralph Bunche (1950).

Peacekeeping throughout the world

Since 1948 UN peacekeepers undertook 63 field missions and participated in the implementation of more than 170 peaceful settlements that ended regional conflicts, and enabled people in more than 45 countries to take part in free and fair elections. A total of 119 countries have contributed military and police personnel to UN peacekeeping.

UN peace operations are less expensive than other forms of international interventions. In June 2008, there were almost 110,000 personnel serving in 20 UN peacekeeping operations on four continents in ten time zones, directly impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of people. The approved peacekeeping budget from 1 July 2008 to 30 June 2009 is approximately \$6.8 billion, representing less than 0.5% of global military spending.

Human rights for everyone

When in 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it set a common standard of human rights for all nations. By this Declaration, Governments are expected to accept their obligation to ensure that all human beings, rich and poor, strong and weak, male and female, of all races and religions, are treated equally.

Since then, the UN has adopted numerous international treaties on human rights, covering such issues as women's rights, racial discrimination and children's rights. When Governments become parties to these treaties, they accept an obligation to honour them. When violations occur, specially created treaty bodies review them and make recommendations to rectify the situation. The UN can also censure a country for not honouring its obligations under an international human rights treaty.

The Human Rights Council established in June 2006 is the primary global forum for dialogue and cooperation on human rights. A subsidiary of the General Assembly, it is directly accountable to the full membership of the Organization and is administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Development is another name for peace

About 980 million people in the world now live in absolute poverty — earning less than \$1 a day. These people often don't have access to the fundamentals of a decent life — sufficient food, safe water, reliable health care, adequate shelter, and basic education, training and opportunities to sustain livelihoods. Lasting world peace cannot be achieved until social and economic development for all is achieved. The United Nations devotes more than 80 per cent of its resources to achieve this goal.

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, the largest gathering of world leaders in history adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are the world's targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many dimensions — income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, and exclusion — while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability. They are also goals for basic human rights — the rights of each person to health, education, shelter and security.

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