

# Fact Sheet: THIS IS THE UNITED NATIONS

## The Six Main Organs



*We the people of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, **and for these ends** to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods,*

*that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, **have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.** Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.*

*The Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations  
(signed on 26 June 1945 by 51 Countries)*

The United Nations is an organization of sovereign States, which voluntarily join the UN to work for world peace. It formally came into being on 24 October 1945. At that time, it had 51 countries as Members. Currently, 193 countries are UN members; the most recent to join was South Sudan in July 2011.

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 United Nations is neither a supra-State nor a government of governments. It does not have an army nor

does it impose taxes. It depends on the political will of its Members to have its decisions implemented and relies on 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.

Learn more about the United Nations: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)

Learn more about UN Member States: [www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml)

Learn more about the UN Charter [www.un.org/en/documents/charter/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/index.shtml)

Learn more about UN Women: [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)

## THE SIX MAIN UN ORGANS

There are six main organs of the United Nations—the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat. The Court has its seat at The Hague, Netherlands. All other organs are based at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

While Headquarters in New York serves as the principal nerve centre of the organization, several important activities are

directed from offices located in centres around the world. Meetings and various UN bodies are often held away from Headquarters. The Economic and Social Council, for example, rotates its regular annual session between New York and Geneva, and special committees of the General Assembly have frequently held meetings in many countries around the world. Conferences on topics such as population, food, the environment and human rights have been held in different parts of the world.

### The General Assembly

The General Assembly is the main deliberative organ of the United Nations comprised of all Member States, each of which has one vote, no matter its size or influence. It may discuss any matter arising under the UN Charter. Decisions on international peace and security, admitting new Member States and the UN budget are decided by a two-thirds majority. Other matters are decided by a simple majority. In recent years, a special effort has been made to reach decisions through consensus, rather than a formal vote. General Assembly resolutions are only recommendations to the Member States, but as they represent the majority of the world's view, they carry heavy moral weight and often lead countries to join international agreements called treaties, conventions, and protocols, etc., and, ultimately, have a positive influence in the world.

The Assembly's session lasts a year, starting in mid-September; the busy season, during which time most resolutions are adopted, is from September to December. Special sessions may be requested by the Assembly, at the request of the Security Council, or at the request of a majority of UN Members.

At the beginning of each regular session in September, the Assembly holds a two-week general debate at which time heads of State present their views on a wide range of issues of concern to the international community, from war and terrorism to disease and poverty. Each year, the General Assembly elects a president who presides over these meetings as a neutral party that represents the United Nations.

The work of the Assembly is also carried out by its six main committees, the Human Rights Council, other subsidiary bodies and the UN Secretariat. The six main committees of the General Assembly are: First Committee (Disarmament and International Security); Second Committee (Economic and Financial); Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural); Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization); Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary); and Sixth Committee (Legal).



Learn more about the UN General Assembly: [www.un.org/en/ga/](http://www.un.org/en/ga/)

## The Security Council

The Security Council has a primary responsibility under the UN Charter to maintain international peace and security. Unlike the General Assembly, the Security Council does not hold regular meetings. It can be convened at any time, whenever international peace is threatened. In fact, it meets almost every day.



Member States are obligated to carry out its decisions, which are legally binding. 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, however, the Council tries to secure a ceasefire through negotiation, the establishment of sanctions, or by authorizing the use of force, carried out by willing Member States. The Council may also decide

to establish peacekeeping operations to promote lasting peace.

The Council has 15 members, including 5 permanent members: China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States. At the end of World War II, these five countries played key roles in the establishment of the United Nations. The creators of the UN Charter conceived that they would continue to play important roles in the maintenance of international peace and security. The other 10 rotating members are elected by the General Assembly on the basis of geographical representation for two-year terms.

To pass a resolution in the Security Council, 9 out of the 15 members of the Council must vote "yes", but if any of the 5 permanent members votes "no" — often referred to as a veto — the resolution does not pass. 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. These proposals are currently being discussed by the Member States of the United Nations.

Learn more about the UN Security Council: [www.un.org/en/sc/](http://www.un.org/en/sc/)

## The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the central body for coordinating the economic and social work of the United Nations and the UN System. The Council has 54 members which are chosen for equal geographical representation and serve a three-year term. Voting in the Council is by simple majority; each member has one vote.

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 (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.

Learn more about the UN Economic and Social Council: [www.un.org/en/ecosoc/](http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/)

### **The Trusteeship Council**

The Trusteeship Council was assigned under the UN Charter to supervise the administration of 11 Trust Territories—former colonies or



dependent territories—which were placed under the International Trusteeship System. The system was created at the end of the World War II to promote the advancement of the inhabitants of those dependent

Territories and their progressive development towards self-governance or independence.

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

The Trusteeship Council is comprised of the permanent members of the Security Council—China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States. Each member has one vote, and decisions are made by a simple majority.

Learn more about the UN Trusteeship Council: [www.un.org/en/decolonization/](http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/)

### **The International Court of Justice**

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the UN's main judicial organ, located in The Hague, Netherlands. Established in 1945, the ICJ, or "World Court" assumed its functions in 1946.

The Court settles legal disputes only between nations 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.

Since 1946, the International Court of Justice has considered over 150 cases and issued numerous judgments on international disputes brought to it by states involving economic rights, environmental



protection, rights of passage, the non-use of force, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, diplomatic relations, hostage-taking, the right of asylum and nationality.

It has also issued advisory opinions in response to requests by a range of United Nations organizations. All judgments passed by the Court are final and without appeal.

It is presided over by 15 judges elected for 9-year terms, each from a different nation, both by the General Assembly and the Security Council. No two judges can be from the same country. Elections take place every three years for one-third of the seats, and retiring judges may be re-elected. The Members of the Court do not represent their governments but are independent magistrates. It takes a majority of nine judges to make a 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.

Learn more about the International Court of Justice: [www.icj-cij.org/](http://www.icj-cij.org/)

### 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 16,000 drawn from most Member States. They carry out the day-to-day work of the Organization. Their duties are as varied as the problems dealt with by the United Nations. These range from administering peacekeeping operations, mediating international disputes, surveying social and economic trends, laying the ground work for international

agreements to organizing international conferences.

The Secretariat is responsible for servicing the other organs of the

United Nations and administering the programmes and policies laid down by them.

The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General, who is

appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a 5-year term and is responsible for implementing decisions taken by various organs of the United Nations. As the chief administrative officer of the Organization, the Secretary-General directs the work of staff known as "international civil servants".

Unlike diplomats, who represent a

particular country and its interests, international civil servants work for all 193 Member States and take their orders not from governments, but



from the Secretary-General. They are independent from political and other forms of interference and place the interests of the Organization above their own.

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 can use his "good offices" to prevent conflicts or promote peaceful settlements 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 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; and Ban Ki-moon (Republic of Korea), 2007-present.

Learn more about the UN Secretariat: [www.un.org/en/mainbodies/secretariat/](http://www.un.org/en/mainbodies/secretariat/)

Learn more about the UN Secretary-General: [www.un.org/sg/](http://www.un.org/sg/)

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