



**Welcome  
to the  
United  
Nations**







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**THE UNITED NATIONS** is an organization of sovereign states, which voluntarily join together to create a forum. The UN was founded after World War II with the aspiration to avoid future wars through diplomacy and dialogue among nations. Member States join the United Nations because it provides them the mechanism to solve problems and disputes and to act on matters of concern to humanity.

On 24 October 1945, the UN Charter was put into effect and the United Nations was born, to...

“save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,...to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights,...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.”

In 1945, the UN opened with 51 Member States. Currently, 193 countries are UN Members; the latest state to join was South Sudan in July 2011.



Though sometimes described as a “parliament of nations,” the United Nations is not a world government. The UN is the forum where countries meet to discuss important issues such as human rights, social and economic development, and the fight against terrorism, among others. It plays a central role in reducing international tensions, preventing conflicts and putting an end to fighting already under way. The United Nations provides the means to help maintain international peace and security, to help those most in need to lead better lives, and to formulate policies on matters affecting all of humanity. All actions of the United Nations are made based on decisions of the Member States. The UN does not have an army nor imposes taxes. Any course of action, whether it concerns sending peacekeeping troops to conflict areas or helping a country rebuild after a war or a natural disaster, must be decided by the Member States.

The United Nations also addresses issues relating to our environment, outer space and the planet’s sea-bed. It has helped wipe out many diseases and expand literacy. It cares for and protects

refugees, responds to natural disasters, and has increased food security and production. It also protects and promotes rights of individuals by setting a global standard for human rights.

The main UN offices (Secretariat) are in New York, Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna. There are also 60+ “Information Centres” throughout the world that serve the international community with support from United Nations Headquarters in New York. Regional Commissions in Geneva, Santiago, Bangkok, Beirut, and Addis Ababa, as well as field offices around the world, direct numerous important activities of the UN. Conferences on topics such as population, food, biodiversity, climate change and human rights have been held in various parts of the world. Different areas of work are carried out by more than 30-affiliated organizations known as the UN System.

The latest addition to the UN family of organizations is UN Women, an entity for gender equality and empowerment of women, created in 2010. Empowering women propels progress in education, health, economic growth and productivity, and helps to improve a country’s level of development.



## The six official languages

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To help ensure clear communications among the Member States, the United Nations has six official languages:

Arabic

Chinese

English

French

Russian

Spanish

The working languages at the UN Secretariat are English and French. During meetings, delegates may speak in any of the official languages, and their statements are interpreted simultaneously into the other official languages. Most UN documents are also issued in all six official languages.

## The six main UN organs

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The work of the United Nations is carried out almost all over the world and is done by its six principal organs:

the General Assembly

the Security Council

the Economic and Social Council

the Trusteeship Council

the International Court of Justice\*

and the Secretariat

*\*The International Court of Justice is the only main organ not in New York. It is based in The Hague, Netherlands.*

## The General Assembly

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The General Assembly is the main deliberative organ of the United Nations: all Member States are represented equally. In the Assembly, each nation, large or small, has one vote.

The Assembly may discuss any matter arising under the UN Charter (except situations which are being considered by the Security Council). 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.

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. Each year, the General Assembly elects a president who presides over these meetings.





At the beginning of each regular session in September, the Assembly holds a general debate at which heads of state or government present their views on a wide-range of issues of concern to the international community. Agenda topics often include war and terrorism, disease, poverty and climate change.

The work of the Assembly is carried out by its six Main Committees and by the Human Rights Council, other subsidiary bodies, and the UN Secretariat. The Main Committees discuss their body of work, seeking to harmonize the various approaches of States and then to present draft resolutions for consideration at a plenary meeting of the General Assembly.

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)

Sixth Committee (Legal)



## The Security Council

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Under the Charter, the Security Council is responsible for maintaining peace and security. Unlike the General Assembly, the Security Council does not hold regular meetings. It can be convened at any time, even on very short notice, whenever peace is threatened. Member States are obligated to carry out Security Council decisions.

When a threat to peace is brought before the Council, it usually asks the parties to reach agreement by peaceful means. When fighting occurs, the Council tries to secure a ceasefire, recommend methods and terms of settlement, or recommend actions against aggression. The Security Council may call for economic sanctions and embargoes to restore peace or ultimately send political or peacekeeping missions to troubled regions. The Council determines when to create or to close peacekeeping missions.

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. The presidency of the Security Council rotates in alphabetical order on a monthly basis among its members.

To pass a resolution in the Security Council, 9 of the 15 members of the Council must vote “yes”. If any of the 5 permanent members votes “no”—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.

## The Economic and Social Council

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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. ECOSOC has 54 members who serve for three-year terms. Voting in the Council is by simple majority; each member state has one vote. Each year, the Council holds several short sessions highlighting its work. Often, these sessions include representatives of civil society.

As much as 70% 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. ECOSOC identifies solutions to international economic, social and health problems, fosters world cooperation to fight poverty, and helps countries reach an agreement on how to improve education, health conditions, and promote human rights.

ECOSOC coordinates the work of several agencies and programmes



established by the General Assembly: the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

## **The Trusteeship Council**

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Under the UN Charter, the Trusteeship Council was assigned to supervise the administration of 11 Trust Territories—former colonies or dependent territories. With the establishment of the United Nations, these territories were placed under the International Trusteeship System to promote their self-governance and independence.

From 1945-1994, more than 70 colonial territories, including all 11 Trust Territories, attained independence. In 1994, Palau was the last territory to gain independence.

After nearly 50 years, the Trusteeship Council completed its work and suspended operations.

## The International Court of Justice

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The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the UN's main judicial organ. The ICJ, or "World Court", assumed its functions in 1946. It is presided over by 15 judges, each from a different nation, elected by the General Assembly and the Security Council. The ICJ requires a majority of nine judges to make a decision.

The Court settles legal disputes between nations, not between individuals, in accordance with international law. All judgments passed by the Court are final and without appeal.

Since 1946, the ICJ has considered over 150 cases and issued numerous judgments on international disputes brought to it by states. These cases involve 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.



## The Secretariat

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The Secretariat carries out the day-to-day work of the Organization. It is made up of an international staff working at UN Headquarters in New York, as well as UN main offices in Geneva, Nairobi, and Vienna. The Secretariat works with UN System offices all over the world.

The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General (SG) who serves as the chief administrative officer of the Organization and directs the work of staff known as “international civil servants”. Unlike diplomats, who represent a particular country and its interests, UN staff work for all 193 Member States. The Secretary-General is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a 5-year term. The job of the SG is to implement decisions taken by various organs of the United Nations. The Secretary-General may also act on humanitarian or other problems of special importance.





There have been nine 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), 2007-2016

António Guterres (Portugal), 2017-present

An appointee to the position of Secretary-General cannot be a citizen of any of the Security Council's five permanent members, although it is the Security Council that recommends an appointee.

## The Three Pillars

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### PEACE

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.

Since 1948, UN peacekeepers have undertaken 71 field missions. The UN has helped end conflicts and foster reconciliation by conducting successful peacekeeping operations in dozens of countries.

UN Peacekeeping guiding principles:

- (1) Consent of the parties
- (2) Impartiality
- (3) Non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate

UN peacekeepers with their blue helmets are the most visible symbols of the UN's peace efforts. The Security Council determines the deployment of new UN peacekeeping operations. The United Nations does not have its own standing army; peacekeepers are contributed by Member States. 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.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It set a common standard of human rights for all nations.



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.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* works to protect all peoples.

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world... Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

*—Eleanor Roosevelt, first Chairperson of the  
UN Human Rights Commission*

One of the great achievements of the UN is the creation of a large body of human rights law—a universal and internationally-protected code to which all nations must subscribe and all people aspire. Since its inception, the UN has adopted numerous international

treaties on human rights, covering such issues as women's rights, racial discrimination, and children's rights.

The Human Rights Council is the main UN forum on human rights. It is administered by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), headquartered in Geneva.

OHCHR seeks to integrate human rights by:

- (1) ensuring justice and accountability in peace processes
- (2) preventing and redressing human rights violations
- (3) building capacities and strengthening national institutions
- (4) mainstreaming human rights in all UN programmes.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

To achieve lasting world peace, social and economic development must be achieved, and climate change must be addressed. The post-2015 development agenda rises to new world challenges while building on the strengths of the Millennium Development



Goals (2000-2015). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the development targets for 2016-2030. Seventeen goals forecast a world beyond 2015 that is inclusive, equal, and sustainable and which urgently addresses climate change and its impact.

## **The House Where the World Meets**

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Before settling in its permanent home in New York, the Organization led a roving existence. In January 1946, the first session of the General Assembly opened in London. Offers were received from several cities in Europe and North America. On 10 December 1945, the US Congress invited the United Nations to establish its permanent home in the United States. The General Assembly accepted an offer of \$8.5 million by American businessman and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. for the purchase of the present site. Concurrently with the Rockefeller gift, the City of New York offered land adjacent to the site. The United Nations headquarters occupies 18 acres.

A team of 11 architects headed by Wallace K. Harrison (USA) designed the UN Headquarters complex. The cornerstone of the building was laid on 24 October 1949. Nineteen months later, on 21 August 1951, the Secretariat staff began moving into their new offices.

The UN Headquarters has several interconnected buildings: the 39-story Secretariat Building, the Conference Building, the General Assembly Building, and the Library. The UN complex is both a historical and architectural landmark. It is seen all over the world as a symbol of the United Nations itself, and it is a rare example of the international style of architecture from the 1950s.



## **Visit the United Nations. It's Your World!**

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United Nations Headquarters is one of the most popular tourist attractions in New York City. Every year, over 1 million visitors from around the world come to the United Nations. Share in the experience.

When you visit the United Nations, explore your many options:

### **TAKE A TOUR**

An exciting opportunity to discover United Nations Headquarters, UN Guided Tours include a behind-the-scenes view of the Organization at work. Tours are offered in the United Nations' six official languages and in other languages upon request. Tours last about one hour and are conducted Monday through Friday from 9:45 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.

### **ASK A QUESTION**

Ask a question and collect free information materials at the Public Inquiries counter.

## INVITE A SPEAKER

For groups interested in learning more about the work of the United Nations, our Speakers Bureau offers customized lectures, video-conferences and outside speaking engagements.

## EXHIBITS

Free exhibits in the Visitors Lobby feature photographic and multi-media displays by world-renowned photographers and artists on diverse topics.

For more information, click on our website:

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## Photo Credits and Captions

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**Front cover:** The United Nations Under-Secretary-General (USG) for the Department of Field Support attends a Medal Parade where Mongolian peace-keepers will be decorated in appreciation of their work—UN Photo/Martine Perret; **p.1:** Timorese in traditional dress take part in a ceremony for the International Day of Peace, celebrated annually 21 September. **p. 2:** The Flag of the United Nations—UN Photo/John Isaac; **p. 5:** UN Provides Water to Community of Displaced in South Darfur—UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran; **p. 8:** UN Tour Guides in front of the Visitor Centre at UN Headquarters in New York—United Nations/John Gillespie; **pp. 12-13:** General Assembly High-level Summit of the Climate Change—UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe; **p. 15:** Security Council—UN Photo/JC McIlwaine; **p. 19:** Children play with garbage in Phnom Penh's Stung Meanchey slums, where some 2000 people live on the garbage dump and make their living selling recyclable refuse—UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran; **p. 22:** UN Headquarters with flags of the Member States—UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata; **pp. 24-25:** UN Tour Guides with cherry blossoms at UN Headquarters in New York—United Nations/John Gillespie; **p. 29:** Brazilian UN peacekeeper rescues a child from his flooded home in Cite Soleil, Haiti—UN Photo/Marco Dormino; **p. 32:** A H'mong woman and her baby in Sin Chai hill tribe village in Vietnam—UN Photo/Kibae Park; **p. 35:** UN Headquarters in New York from across the East River—United Nations/John Gillespie

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