



United Nations



Sixty-fourth
session of the
General Assembly

To convene on
15 September 2009

Backgrounder

United Nations General Assembly opens on 15 September 2009

The General Assembly of the United Nations opens its sixty-fourth session on 15 September at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The annual general debate, which traditionally features statements by Heads of State and Government as well as Ministers, will begin on Wednesday, 23 September 2009, and conclude on 30 September 2009.

Several major events will be featured during the sixty-fourth session, which runs until mid-September 2010. On 22 September 2009 there will be a World Summit on climate change, convened by the Secretary-General. This will be followed by a high-level event on 24 September to commemorate the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of its establishment.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference will be convened from 7 to 18 December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, and a Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons will be held in May 2010 in New York.

Among other key issues, the Assembly will also address the following:

- » Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including the preparation for the 2010 high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly, to take place at the beginning of the sixty-fifth session (see below);
- » World financial and economic crisis and its impact on development;
- » Climate change;
- » Disarmament;

- » United Nations reform, including Security Council reform and the revitalization of the General Assembly;
- » Review of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council.

The Assembly will also continue to consider issues relating to system-wide coherence, sustainable development and HIV/AIDS.

Functions and powers of the General Assembly: forum for multilateral negotiation

Established in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprising all 192 Members of the United Nations, it continues to play a leading role in advancing the purposes and principles of the Charter as a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues. It also plays a significant role in the process of standard-setting and the codification of international law. The Assembly meets in regular session intensively from September to December each year, and thereafter as required.

The General Assembly adopts mandates (resolutions and decisions) which are implemented by Member States, the Secretariat and the wider United Nations system. In performing its responsibilities, the Assembly works in close partnership with members of civil society, many of whom have affiliate status with the United Nations and frequently participate in important General Assembly meetings. The General Assembly also works closely with the media to raise awareness of, and mobilize international support for, important issues of global concern.

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly may:

- » Consider and make recommendations on the general principles of cooperation for maintaining international peace and security, including disarmament;
- » Discuss any question relating to international peace and security and, except where a dispute or situation is currently being discussed by the Security Council, make recommendations on it;
- » Discuss, with the same exception, and make recommendations on any questions within the scope of the Charter or affecting the powers and functions of any organ of the United Nations;
- » Initiate studies and make recommendations to promote international political cooperation, the development and codification of international law, the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and international collaboration in the economic, social, humanitarian, cultural, educational and health fields;
- » Make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of any situation that might impair friendly relations among nations;
- » Receive and consider reports from the Security Council and other United Nations organs;
- » Consider and approve the United Nations budget and establish the financial assessments of Member States;
- » Elect members of other principal organs of the United Nations, namely, the non-permanent members of the Security Council, members of the Economic and Social Council and judges of the International Court of Justice, and appoint the Secretary-General, on the recommendation of the Security Council. The Assembly also elects members to its subsidiary organs and to the executive boards and governing councils of the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes.

Pursuant to its “Uniting for peace” resolution of 3 November 1950 (resolution 377 (V)), the Assembly may also take action if the Security Council fails to act, owing to the negative vote of a permanent member, in a case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression. The Assembly can consider the matter immediately with a view to making recommendations to Members for collective measures to maintain or restore international peace and security (see “Special sessions and emergency special sessions” below).

While the Assembly is empowered to make only non-binding recommendations to States on international issues within its competence, it has, nonetheless, initiated actions—political, economic, humanitarian, social and legal—which have affected the lives of millions of people throughout the world. The landmark Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome document reflect the commitment of Member States to reach specific goals to attain peace, security and disarmament along with development and poverty eradication; safeguard human rights and promote the rule of law; protect our common environment; meet the special needs of Africa; and strengthen the United Nations. Recently, the General Assembly collectively decided on a course of action to deal with emerging global issues of urgent and critical dimensions, such as climate change and the world financial and economic crisis.

The search for consensus

Each Member State in the Assembly has one vote. Votes taken on designated important issues, such as recommendations on peace and security and the election of Security Council members, require a two-thirds majority of Member States, but other questions are decided by simple majority.

In recent years, a special effort has been made to achieve consensus on issues, rather than deciding by a formal vote, thus strengthening support for the Assembly’s decisions. The President, after having consulted and reached agreement with delegations, can propose that a resolution be adopted without a vote.

Follow-up to the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome

The Millennium Declaration (2000), *inter alia*, set 2015 as the deadline for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 2005 World Summit Outcome document reiterated Member States’ determination to try to achieve the timely and full realization of the MDGs. In September 2008, the Secretary-General recommended that Member States meet in 2010, at the summit level, to review progress in attaining the development goals. By its resolution 63/302 of 9 July 2009, the Assembly decided to convene in 2010, at the commencement of its sixty-fifth session, a high-level plenary meeting with the participation of Heads of State and Government. It also entrusted the sixty-fourth session to hold consultations on the scope, modalities, format and organization of the 2010 high-level meeting.

The Assembly continues to review the work of its subsidiary bodies, including the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council, created in accordance with the 2005 World Summit Outcome document. Implementation of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy, further efforts at system-wide coherence and other issues including human trafficking, human security, the “responsibility to protect”, global health, food and water security and an institutional framework for environmental activities, as well as United Nations management and secretariat reform, also remain under discussion by the Assembly.

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Over the past years, there has been a sustained effort to make the work of the General Assembly more focused and relevant. This became a major priority as of the fifty-eighth session, and efforts continued at subsequent sessions of the General Assembly to streamline the agenda, improve the practices and working methods of the Main Committees, enhance the role of the General Committee, strengthen the role and authority of the President and examine the Assembly’s role in the process to select the Secretary-General.

At its sixtieth session, the Assembly adopted a text, annexed to resolution 60/286 of 8 September 2006, which, among other things, encouraged the holding of informal interactive debates on current issues of critical importance to the international community. The text, which had been recommended by the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, also invited the President of the General Assembly to propose themes for these interactive debates. During the sixty-third session, seven informal thematic interactive debates were convened on: the global financial crisis; access to education in emergency, post-crisis and transition situations caused by man-made conflicts or natural disasters; the world financial and economic crisis and its impact on development; the global food crisis and the right to food; taking collective action to end human trafficking; energy efficiency, energy conservation and new and renewable sources of energy; and the responsibility to protect.

As of the sixty-first session, it has become an established practice for the Secretary-General to brief Member States periodically, in informal meetings of the General Assembly, on his recent activities and travels. These briefings have provided a well-received opportunity for exchange between the Secretary-General and Member States and are likely to be continued at the sixty-fourth session.

Elections for the President and Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly and Chairs of Main Committees

As a result of the ongoing revitalization of its work, and pursuant to rule 30 of its rules of procedure, the General Assembly now elects its President, Vice-Presidents and Chairs of the Main Committees at least three months in advance of the start of the new session in order to further strengthen coordination and preparation of work among the Main Committees and between the Committees and the plenary.

General Committee

The General Committee—composed of the President and 21 Vice-Presidents of the Assembly, as well as the Chairs of the six Main Committees—makes recommendations to the Assembly about adoption of the agenda, allocation of agenda items and organization of its work (see <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/gasess.htm#gaagen> for more on the agenda).

The role of the General Committee has been further strengthened over the past few sessions with the holding of informal meetings and briefings, open to all Member States, on specific issues under consideration by or pertaining to the work of the Assembly.

Credentials Committee

The Credentials Committee, appointed by the General Assembly at each session, reports to the Assembly on the credentials of representatives.

General debate

The general debate at the sixty-fourth session will begin on Wednesday, 23 September, and will last until Wednesday, 30 September 2009, in accordance with General Assembly decision 63/553 of 20 February 2009. The debate will be held under an overarching theme, “Effective responses to global crises: strengthening multilateralism and dialogue among civilizations for international peace, security and development”, proposed by the President-elect of the sixty-fourth session in accordance with General Assembly resolution 58/126 of 19 December 2003. The Secretary-General will present his report on the work of the Organization immediately prior to the general debate, a practice that began with the fifty-second session.

Six Main Committees

With the close of the general debate, the Assembly begins consideration of the substantive items on its agenda. Because of the great number of questions it is called upon to consider (over 150 agenda items at the sixty-third session, for example), the Assembly allocates to its six Main Committees items relevant to their work. The Committees discuss the items, seeking where possible to harmonize the various approaches of States, and present their recommendations, usually in the form of draft resolutions and decisions, to a plenary meeting of the Assembly for its consideration.

The six Main Committees are: the Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee), concerned with disarmament and related international security questions; the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), dealing with a variety of political subjects not covered by any other Committee or the plenary, including the question of decolonization; the Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee), concerned with economic questions; the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (Third Committee), which deals with social and humanitarian issues; the Administrative and Budgetary Committee (Fifth Committee), which is concerned with the administration and budget of the United Nations; and the Legal Committee (Sixth Committee), which deals with international legal matters.

On a number of agenda items, however, such as the question of Palestine and the situation in the Middle East, the Assembly acts directly in its plenary meetings. In the light of the strong international consensus that has emerged on the urgency and the parameters for a just, lasting, comprehensive and peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole, on the basis of international law and United Nations resolutions, it is anticipated that consideration of these items by the Assembly will generate broad interest among the membership and a spirited and constructive debate aimed at intensifying international and regional efforts in this regard.

Working groups of the General Assembly

The General Assembly has, in the past, authorized the establishment of working groups, such as the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly and the Open-ended Working Group on the

Question of Equitable Representation on and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council and Other Matters Related to the Security Council, to focus on matters of importance in more detail and make recommendations to the Assembly. During the sixty-fourth session, a newly established ad hoc open-ended working group of the Assembly will continue to follow up on the issues contained in the Outcome of the June 2009 Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development and will submit a report on the progress of its work to the Assembly before the end of the session.

Regional groups

Over the years, various informal regional groupings have evolved in the General Assembly as vehicles for consultation and to facilitate procedural work. The groups are: the African States; the Asian States; the Eastern European States; the Latin American and Caribbean States; and the Western European and other States. The post of President of the General Assembly rotates among the regional groups. For the sixty-fourth session, the President has been elected from the Group of African States.

Special sessions and emergency special sessions

In addition to its regular sessions, the Assembly may meet in special and emergency special sessions.

To date, the Assembly has convened 28 special sessions on issues that demanded particular attention, including the question of Palestine, United Nations finances, Namibia, disarmament, international economic cooperation, apartheid, drugs, the environment, population, women, social development, human settlements, HIV/AIDS, and the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps.

Ten emergency special sessions have addressed situations in which the Security Council found itself deadlocked, namely, Hungary (1956), Suez (1956), the Middle East (1958 and 1967), the Congo (1960), Afghanistan (1980), Palestine (1980 and 1982), Namibia (1981), the occupied Arab territories (1982) and illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2009). The Assembly also decided on 16 January 2009 to adjourn the tenth emergency special session temporarily and to authorize the President of the Assembly to resume its meetings upon request from Member States.