

## THE UNITED NATIONS



The United Nations (UN) is an international organization that aims to ease cooperation in international law, international security, economic development, social progress, human rights, and achieving world peace. It was founded as a successor to the League of Nations, which many people thought had failed as an international governing body, since it had not prevented World War II.

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the UN Conference on International Organization began in San Francisco. It was attended by 50 governments and a number of non-governmental organizations. The UN officially came into existence on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1945, when the Charter was ratified by the five permanent members of the Security Council — France, the Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States — and by a majority of the other 46 signatories. There are currently 192 member states, including nearly every recognized independent state in the world.

The United Nations system is based on five principal administrative bodies: the General Assembly (the main deliberative assembly, composed of all member states); the Security Council (decides resolutions for peace and security, composed of the five permanent members and ten other member states); the Economic and Social Council (assists in promoting international economic and social cooperation and development); the Secretariat (provides studies, information, and facilities needed by the UN); and the International Court of Justice (the primary judicial organ).

Four of the five principal organs are located at the main United Nations headquarters, which is on international territory in New York City. They hold regular meetings throughout the year to discuss and decide on a variety of issues. The International Court of Justice is located in The Hague, where it hears cases related to war crimes, illegal state interference, and ethnic cleansing. Other major agencies are based in the UN offices in Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi. Other UN institutions are located throughout the world. The six official languages of the United Nations, used in intergovernmental meetings and documents, are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. The Secretariat uses two working languages: English and French.

The Security Council is dedicated to maintaining peace and security among countries. While other organs of the United Nations can only make recommendations to member governments, the Security Council can make binding decisions that member governments have agreed to carry out, under the terms of Charter Article 25. The decisions of the Council are known as United Nations Security Council resolutions.

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The original intentions when the UN was founded included encouraging disarmament, preventing war, and ensuring peace. The UN, after approval by the Security Council, can send peacekeepers to regions where armed conflict has recently ceased or paused to enforce the terms of peace agreements and to discourage combatants from resuming hostilities. Since the UN does not have its own military, peacekeeping forces are voluntarily provided by member states of the UN. The forces, also called the "Blue Helmets", enforce UN accords. The peacekeeping force as a whole received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988.

The pursuit of human rights was another central reason for creating the UN. World War II atrocities and genocide led to a consensus that the UN must work to prevent any similar tragedies in the future. An early objective was creating a legal framework to consider and act on complaints about human rights violations. The UN Charter obliges all member nations to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights" and to take "joint and separate action" to that end. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, though not legally binding, was adopted by the General Assembly in 1948 as a common standard of achievement for all. The Assembly regularly takes up human rights issues.

The UN is also involved in supporting development, e.g. by the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals, which are as follows: 1. eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2. achieve universal primary education; 3. promote gender equality and empower women; 4. reduce child mortality; 5. improve maternal health; 6. combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; 7. ensure environmental sustainability; and 8. develop a global partnership for development.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) is the largest multilateral source of grant technical assistance in the world. Organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria are leading institutions in the battle against diseases around the world, especially in poor countries.

Other bodies deal with the governance of all other UN System agencies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Other well-known UN organizations and agencies include the International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA, the Food and Agriculture Organization – FAO, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), and the World Bank.

The UN's most visible public figure is the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General is the UN's chief administrative officer, and can bring issues to the attention of the Security Council. This post is currently held by Ban Ki-moon of South Korea, who attained the post in 2007.

The UN is financed from assessed and voluntary contributions from its member states. The top five donors are the USA, which contributes 22% of the total UN budget (the maximum amount allowed by UN rules, to prevent member countries from having undue influence), followed by Japan: 16.624%; Germany: 8.66%; the United Kingdom: 6.13%; and France: 6.03%.

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***NOTE: The text on the preceding pages accompanies a unit available to abcteach members. The unit includes research, multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions.***

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