THE UNITED NATIONS (UN)

Origin and Aims. The United Nations is an association of states which have pledged themselves to maintain international peace and security and co-operate in solving international political, economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems towards achieving this end. The name ‘United Nations’ was devised by United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt and was first used in the Declaration by United Nations of 1 Jan. 1942, during the Second World War, when representatives of 26 nations pledged their Governments to continue fighting together against the Axis Powers.

The United Nations Charter, the constituting instrument of the UN, was drawn up by the representatives of 50 countries at the United Nations Conference on International Organization, which met in San Francisco from 25 April to 26 June 1945. Those delegates deliberated on the basis of proposals worked out by the representatives of China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States at Dumbarton Oaks (Washington, DC) from 21 Aug. to 28 Sept. 1944. The Charter was signed on 26 June 1945 by the representatives of the 50 countries. Poland, which was not represented at the Conference, signed it later and became one of the original 51 Member States. Nothing contained in the Charter authorizes the organization to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.

The United Nations officially came into existence on 24 Oct. 1945, with the deposit of the requisite number of ratifications of the Charter with the US Department of State. United Nations Day is celebrated on 24 Oct. each year.

Over the past five decades, international co-operation has brought advances in every area of the United Nations Charter but the post-cold war era brings new challenges to the UN. Peacekeeping operations, for which demand has increased sharply, now operate under greatly expanded mandates in response to the bitter conflicts which menace societies from within. Today, 80% of the UN’s work is devoted to helping developing countries build the capacity to help themselves. This includes promoting the creation of independent and democratic societies, which it is hoped will offer vital support for the Charter’s goals in the 21st century; the protection of human rights; saving children from starvation and disease; providing relief assistance to refugees and disaster victims; countering global crime, drugs and disease; and assisting countries devastated by war and the long-term threat of landmines.

Members. Membership is open to all peace-loving nations which accept the obligations of the Charter and, in the judgement of the Organization, are willing and able to carry them out. New Member States are admitted by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council. The Charter provides for the suspension or expulsion of a Member for violation of its principles, but no such action has ever been taken. At the start of 1998, there were 185 member states. (For a list of these, see below.)

Finance. Assessments on member states constitute the main source of funds. These are in accordance with a scale specified by the Assembly, and determined primarily by the country’s share of the world economy and ability to pay, in the range 25%-0.01%. The Organization is prohibited by law from borrowing from commercial institutions. A Working Group on the Financial Situation of the United Nations was established in 1994 to address the long-standing financial crisis which has come about because of the non-payment of assessed dues by many Member States, severely threatening the Organization’s ability to fulfil its mandates. As of mid-July 1997, Member States owed the UN a total of US$2,300m.

Official languages. Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

Structure. The UN has six principal organs established by the founding Charter. All have their headquarters in New York except the International Court of Justice, which has its seat in The Hague. These core bodies work through dozens of related agencies, operational programmes and funds, and through special agreements with separate, autonomous, intergovernmental agencies, known as Specialized Agencies, in order to provide an increasingly cohesive programme of action in the fields of peace
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and security, justice and human rights, humanitarian assistance, and social and economic development. The six principal UN organs are as follows:

1. The General Assembly, composed of all members, is the main deliberative body; each member has 1 vote. It meets once a year, commencing on the third Tuesday in Sept., and normally runs until mid-Dec. At the start of each session, the Assembly elects a new President, 21 vice-presidents and the chairmen of its seven main committees, listed below. To ensure equitable geographical representation, the presidency of the Assembly rotates each year among the five geographical groups of states: African, Asian, Eastern European, Latin American, and Western European and other States. Special sessions may be convoked by the Secretary-General if requested by the Security Council, by a majority of members, or by 1 member if the majority of the members concur. Emergency sessions may be called within 24 hours at the request of the Security Council on the vote of any 9 Council members, or a majority of United Nations members, or 1 member if the majority of members concur. Decisions on important questions, such as peace and security, new membership and budgetary matters, require a two-thirds majority; other questions require a simple majority of members present and voting.

The work of the General Assembly is divided between 6 Main Committees, on which every member state is represented. These are: Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee); Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee); Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (Third Committee); Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee); Administrative and Budgetary Committee (Fifth Committee); Legal Committee (Sixth Committee). There is also a General Committee charged with the task of co-ordinating the proceedings of the Assembly and its Committees; and a Credentials Committee. The General Committee consists of 29 members: the president and 21 vice-presidents of the General Assembly and the chairmen of the 6 main committees. The Credentials Committee consists of 9 members appointed by the Assembly on the proposal of the President at each session. In addition, the Assembly has 2 standing committees—an Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, and a Committee on Contributions; and may establish subsidiary and ad hoc bodies when necessary to deal with specific matters. These include: Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (34 members), Human Rights Committee (18 members), Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (61 members), Conciliation Commission for Palestine (3 members), Conference on Disarmament (38 members), International Law Commission (34 members), Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (21 members), Special Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (25 members), and Commission on International Trade Law (36 members).

The General Assembly has the right to discuss any matters within the scope of the Charter and, with the exception of any situation or dispute on the agenda of the Security Council, may make recommendations on any such questions or matters. While it has no power to compel action by any Government, its recommendations are seen to carry the weight of world opinion. Occupying a central position in the UN, the Assembly receives reports from other organs, admits new members, directs activities for development, sets policies and determines programmes for the Secretariat, appoints the Secretary-General, who reports annually to it on the work of the Organization, and approves the UN budget.

Under the “Uniting For Peace” resolution adopted by the General Assembly in Nov. 1950, the Assembly is also empowered to take action if the Security Council, because of a lack of unanimity of its permanent members, fails to exercise its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security in any case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression. In this event, the General Assembly may consider the matter immediately with a view to making appropriate recommendations to members for collective measures, including, in the case of a breach of the peace or act of aggression, the use of armed force when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security.

2. The Security Council has primary responsibility, under the Charter, for the main-