

The United Nations

The highs and lows of a global forum

The United Nations (UN) is an intergovernmental organization which was established on 24 October, 1945, ostensibly to promote international cooperation between nation states and to avert another catastrophe like the one that befell the world in 1939-1945. Its stated objectives include maintaining international peace and security, promoting human rights, fostering social and economic development, providing humanitarian aid in cases of famine, natural disaster and armed conflict and protecting the environment.

The UN replaced the ineffective League of Nations which preceded it, and had just 50 member states at its founding; now 193 today. The first meetings of the UN's Security Council and General Assembly, with 51 member states represented, took place in the United Kingdom, in January, 1946, in Methodist Central Hall Westminster, London. Its headquarters moved from London to New York City in 1952, located in the Turtle Bay neighbourhood of Manhattan. Prior to the site's development, where the UN now stands, the site used to serve as a slaughterhouse. What made this project possible was a U.S. \$8.5 million donation by John D. Rockefeller Jr. for the real estate acquisition, and an additional U.S. \$65 million interest-free loan granted by the U.S. government to the UN to cover the building works. This loan was repaid in full by 1982.

The UN has six principal organs:

- General Assembly
- Security Council
- Secretariat
- International Court of Justice
- Economic and Social Council
- United Nations Trusteeship Council (inactive since 1st November, 1994)

The General Assembly is the main deliberative assembly of the UN. Composed of all member states, that assembly meets in regular annual sessions. Emergency sessions, however, can also be called. The General Assembly is led by a president, elected from among the member states on a rotating regional basis, and 21 vice-presidents. When the General Assembly convenes to vote on important questions, a two-thirds majority of those present and voting is required. Examples of such important questions include recommendations on peace and security; elections of members to organs; admission, suspension and expulsion of members, and, budgetary matters. All other questions are decided by a majority vote. Each member country has one vote. Apart from approval of budgetary matters, resolutions are not binding on the members. The Assembly may make recommendations on any matters within the scope of the UN, except on matters of peace and security that are under consideration by the Security Council.

The Security Council is tasked with maintaining peace and security among countries. While other organs of the United Nations can make no more than "recommendations" to member states, the Security Council has powers to make binding decisions, which its member states have agreed to implement under the terms of UN Charter, article 25. Decisions passed are known as United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

The Security Council is made up of fifteen member states of which five are permanent UNSC members: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and, the United States. These five permanent members each hold veto power over UN resolutions, granting them the power to block the adoption of a resolution, though not debate. The ten non-permanent members are elected for two-year terms by the General Assembly. Every member has one vote. Decisions on what the council calls "substantive" issues need a majority of nine votes in order to be passed, including either votes in favour, or, if not unanimous, abstentions from any, or all, of the permanent five for a resolution to pass.

The UN Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General acts as the de facto spokesperson and leader of the United Nations. The Secretariat is assisted by a staff of international civil servants worldwide, and provides studies, information, and facilities needed by United Nations bodies for their meetings. The Secretariat also is responsible for carrying out tasks as directed by the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, and other UN bodies.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), located in the Peace Palace in The Hague, is the primary judicial organ of the UN. Initially set up in 1945 by UN Charter, it began work in 1946 as the successor to the Permanent Court of International Justice that was once part of the League of Nations. The ICJ consists of fifteen judges who serve nine year terms and are appointed by the General Assembly. Every sitting judge must be of a different country. The judges operate independently from the legislature and, when on the bench, rid themselves of their nationality for the purposes of hearing cases; that way owing allegiance to no individual UN member state to maintain full impartiality.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the principal body for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on economic, social cooperation and development, and, environmental issues. ECOSOC has 54 member states that are elected by the General Assembly for a three-year term. The president is elected for a one-year term only, and his candidacy is picked amongst the small or middle powers represented on ECOSOC. The council has one annual meeting in July, held in either New York City or Geneva. Owing to its broad mandate of coordinating a multitude of agencies, ECOSOC has at times been criticized as unfocused or irrelevant.

The United Nations Trusteeship Council was originally established to help ensure that trust territories—most of them former mandates of the League of Nations or territories taken from nations defeated by the close of World War II—were administered in the best interests of their inhabitants and of international peace and security. These trust territories have all by now attained self-governance or independence as either separate nations, or, by joining neighbouring independent countries. The last such territory was Palau, formerly part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which became a full UN member state on the 15th of December, 1994.

The United Nations was founded on an idea to harmonize the nations of the world and provide a platform for dialogue and cooperation that could help foster world peace. Its résumé is by no means perfect. The UN has been praised for its role in decolonization, particularly throughout the 1960s and 1970s which in turn saw its membership grow. The UN is also credited for carrying out important humanitarian work in the fields of peacekeeping missions, providing food aid to refugees, protecting the vulnerable and carrying out war crimes prosecutions, such as for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

But, in the decades following its founding, there seems to have been a departure from the UN's just and noble principles. The United Nations has been criticized for being undemocratic, biased, hypocritical, irrelevant, unfit for purpose, and, critics have also accused the UN of bureaucratic inefficiency, waste and corruption.

Russia and China, both permanent members of the Security Council with veto power, were engaged in a seven-month long military conflict in 1969, in what became known as the Sino-Soviet border conflict. The Security Council was totally ineffective during this skirmish. Other failures attributed to the Security Council in the dereliction of its duties are the genocides committed in Rwanda, Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia. The General Assembly came under the spotlight in 2001 for electing Syria, a country the U.S. State Department identifies as a sponsor of terrorism, to the Security Council. The democratic character of the UN also comes under close scrutiny, knowing that its five permanent members of the Security Council are also the top five arms exporting countries in the world, leading critics to argue that the council represents the interests of the governments in question, and not necessarily the ethical values purported to be incumbent upon its founding ideals and its *raison d'être*, as per chapter 5, article 26 of the UN Charter [see link:].

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter5.shtml>

The United Nations has, in recent times, been dogged by controversy and corruption. In 2004, the UN did face accusations that its Oil-For-Food Programme—wherein Iraq had been allowed to trade oil in exchange for food, medicines and other basic needs to relieve the pressure of sanctions—had suffered from widespread corruption, involving bribery and misappropriation of funds. A UN independent inquiry found that many of its officials had been involved, fraudulently taking billions of dollars in kickbacks. In the aftermath of this inquiry, countries followed suit in establishing their own criminal investigations, resulting in some high-profile convictions.

Perhaps one of the biggest travesties in the United Nations' portfolio is a body known as the Human Rights Council (UNHRC), formerly known as the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), which was disbanded by Secretary General Kofi Annan for being so ineffective and unfit for purpose. The Human Rights Council is based in the Palace of Nations in Geneva, and held its first meeting in 2006. It seems to be plagued by the same problems as its predecessor insofar that the council consists of countries whose own human rights records are asymmetrical to the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since its founding, in 2006, China, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Zimbabwe, Cuba, and other such 'beacons of democracy' and 'champions of human rights' have all been admitted.

Libya chaired the council when its regime was headed by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, as did Syria with Bashar al-Assad at the helm, and Cuba with Fidel Castro. In 2009, at the Durban II conference, Dr. Ashraf Ahmed El Hojouj testified on the human rights abuse that he and five Bulgarian nurses sustained when they were held in captivity by Libyan authorities. When Dr. El Hojouj tried to address that conference, he was faced with three interruptions from the Chair, presided by the Ambassador for Libya, Najat al-Hajjaji, who sounded her gavel repeatedly. After she duly dismissed Dr. El Hojouj, in a twist of irony, Ambassador Najat al-Hajjaji gave the floor to the representative of the Arab Commission for Human Rights who was next in line to speak. Nonetheless, Dr. El Hojouj's intervention did not go in vain, and, was reported in the press.

There have been many calls to reform the UNHRC. The position of the United States is not to participate but to continue to support the council financially, in a bid to assert some influence over it. Due to the make-up of the council, being comprised of hostile states that seek the annihilation of the state of Israel, in addition to UNHRC article 4 that deals with human rights violations all over the world, there exists a special article that targets Israel only; article 7. Ron Prozor, the former Israeli Ambassador to the UN and to the United Kingdom, had this to say about the Human Rights Council:

“We have the Council on Human Rights, by the way, headed formerly by Libya and Syria. It’s like having Jack the Ripper running Scotland Yard, or, Charles Manson running the Crime and Investigation squad of the NYPD. Sometimes I have a feeling that the inmates have taken over the asylum!”

~ Ron Prozor

The scenarios presented before you serve to highlight the inherent flaws of the United Nations, in treating democracies and dictatorships with equality and with equal voting rights. Paradoxically, it became so politicized, to the extent that some voting decisions by emerging and developing countries have been contrived through deals put forth in backroom channels, resulting in some to vote cynically on resolutions, not necessarily out of genuine conviction, but, out of benefits they may be furnished with if they vote the right way. Such examples may come in the form of cheap bank loans, discounted oil prices, arms shipments and various other incentives. Despite its imperfections, the United Nations still presents a unique platform; a forum on a global scale where 193 countries convene and where each can exercise the opportunity to voice its position to the rest of the world, and that is why it still matters today.