

## United Nations

The United Nations was established on 24 October 1945 by 51 countries seeking to establish a new basis of international relations and avoid the horrors of the two World Wars. Today, 191 countries are members of the United Nations, nearly every state in the world. When joining, member states agree to accept the obligations of the UN Charter, an international treaty that set out basic principles of international relations. According to the UN Charter, the UN has four purposes:

To maintain international peace and security

To develop friendly relations among nations

To cooperate in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights, and

To be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations

When created more than half a century ago in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations reflected the hope for a just and peaceful global community. It is the only global institution with the legitimacy that derives from universal membership, and a mandate that encompasses security, economic and social development, the protection of human rights, and the protection of the environment. Yet the UN was created by states for states and the relationship between state sovereignty and the protection of the needs and interests of people has not been fully resolved. Questions about the meaning of sovereignty and the limits of UN action have remained key issues.

None theless, since the founding of the UN, there has been an expansion of UN activities to address conditions within states, an improvement in UN capacity in its economic and social work, and an increased tendency to accord the UN a moral status. Threats to global security addressed by the UN now include inter-state conflict, threats by non-state actors, as well as political, economic, and social conditions within states. Despite the growth in UN activities however, there are some questions about the relevance and effectiveness of the UN. The failure to get clear UN Security Council authorisation for the war in Iraq in 2003 led to well-publicised criticism of the UN and a crisis in international relations. Yet the aftermath of the invasion and persistent questions about the legitimacy of a war that was not sanctioned by the UN show that the UN has acquired important moral status in international society.

## Selected Articles of the UN Charter

The UN Charter contains references to both the rights of states and the rights of people.

The Preamble of the UN Charter asserts that 'We the peoples of the United Nations [are] determined to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'.

Article 1(2) states that the purpose of the UN is to develop 'friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace'.

Article 2(7) states that 'Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state'.

Chapter VI deals with the 'Pacific Settlement of Disputes'

Article 33 states that 'The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice'.

Chapter VII deals with 'Action with Respect to Threats to Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression'.

Article 42 states that Security Council 'make take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security'. The Security Council has sometimes authorized member states to use 'all necessary means', and this has been accepted as a legitimate application of Chapter VII powers.

Article 99 authorises the Secretary-General to 'bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security'.

## Areas concerning the United Nations:

## Peacekeeping

## Human Rights

The pursuit of human rights was a central reason for creating the UN. World War II atrocities and genocide led to a ready consensus that the new organization must work to prevent any similar tragedies in the future. An early objective was creating a legal framework for considering and acting 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.

On 15 March 2006 the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to replace the United Nations Commission on Human Rights with the UN Human Rights Council. Its purpose is to address human rights violations. The UNCHR had repeatedly been criticized for the composition of its membership. In particular, several of its member countries themselves had dubious human rights records, including states whose representatives had been elected to chair the commission.

The United Nations and its various agencies are central in upholding and implementing the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A case in point is support by the UN for countries in transition to democracy. Technical assistance in providing free and fair elections, improving judicial structures, drafting constitutions, training human rights officials, and transforming armed movements into political parties have contributed significantly to democratization worldwide. The UN has helped run elections in countries with little democratic history, including recently in Afghanistan and East Timor.

The UN is also a forum to support the right of women to participate fully in the political, economic, and social life of their countries. The UN contributes to raising consciousness of the concept of human rights through its covenants and its attention to specific abuses through its General Assembly or Security Council resolutions or ICJ rulings.

## Arms Control and Disarmament

The 1945 UN Charter envisaged a system of regulation that would ensure "the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources". The advent of nuclear

As defined by the UN, it is "a way to help countries torn by conflict create conditions for sustainable peace."<sup>[1]</sup> Peacekeepers monitor and observe peace processes in post-conflict areas and assist ex-combatants in implementing the peace agreements they may have signed. Such assistance comes in many forms, including confidence-building measures, power-sharing arrangements, electoral support, strengthening the rule of law, and economic and social development. Accordingly UN peacekeepers (often referred to as Blue Helmets because of their light blue helmets) can include soldiers, civilian police officers, and other civilian personnel.

The Charter of the United Nations gives the UN Security Council the power and responsibility to take collective action to maintain international peace and security. For this reason, the international community usually looks to the Security Council to authorize peacekeeping operations, and all UN Peacekeeping missions must be authorized by the Security Council.

Most of these operations are established and implemented by the United Nations itself with troops serving under UN operational command. In these cases, peacekeepers remain members of their respective armed forces, and do not constitute an independent "UN army," as the UN does not have such a force. In cases where direct UN involvement is not considered appropriate or feasible, the Council authorizes regional organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Economic Community of West African States, or coalitions of willing countries to undertake peacekeeping or peace-enforcement tasks.

The United Nations is not the only organization to have authorized peacekeeping missions, although some would argue it is the only group legally allowed to do so. Non-UN peacekeeping forces include the NATO mission in Kosovo and the Multinational Force and Observers on the Sinai Peninsula.

weapons came only weeks after the signing of the Charter and provided immediate impetus to concepts of arms limitation and disarmament.

The UN has established several forums to address multilateral disarmament issues. The principal ones are the First Committee of the General Assembly and the UN Disarmament Commission. Items on the agenda include consideration of the possible merits of a nuclear test ban, outer-space arms control, efforts to ban chemical weapons, nuclear and conventional disarmament, nuclear-weapon-free zones, reduction of military budgets, and measures to strengthen international security.

The Conference on Disarmament is a forum established by the international community for the negotiation of multilateral arms control and disarmament agreements. It has 66 members representing all areas of the world, including the five major nuclear-weapon states (the People's Republic of China, France, Russia, UK and USA). While the conference is not formally a UN organization, it is linked to the UN through a personal representative of the Secretary-General; this representative serves as the secretary general of the conference. Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly often request the conference to consider specific disarmament matters. In turn, the conference annually reports its activities to the Assembly.