



Ten Frequently Asked Questions on the United Nations and Decolonization

For further information, please see
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Ten Frequently Asked Questions on the United Nations and Decolonization

General

1. What is decolonization?

More than a half-century ago, when the United Nations was established, 750 million people — almost a third of the world's population — lived in the Territories that were non-self-governing, dependent on colonial Powers. In 1945, the Charter of the United Nations referred to the "respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" in spelling out the purposes of the Organization. In the following decades, more than 80 colonial territories became independent; other territories chose free association, or integration with a State. The process by which the peoples of these territories exercised their right to self-determination to decide the future status of their homeland is known as decolonization.

2. What is the role of the United Nations in decolonization?

The role of the United Nations in decolonization is based on the principle of “equal rights and self-determination of peoples” as provided for in [Article 1 \(2\)](#) of the Charter of the United Nations, as well as from three specific chapters in the Charter which are devoted to the interests of dependent peoples. [Chapter XI](#) of the Charter established the principles that guide Member States in their relations with the Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs). The Charter also established the International Trusteeship System in [Chapter XII](#) and the Trusteeship Council in [Chapter XIII](#) for the administration and supervision of the Trust Territories.

There were originally 11 Trust Territories all of which have either become independent States or have voluntarily joined a neighboring State. The last remaining Trust Territory was Palau which was under the administration of the United States and became independent in 1994.

In 1960, the UN General Assembly adopted the [Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples](#) (known as the “Declaration on Decolonization”). By this Declaration, the General Assembly proclaimed the necessity of bringing colonialism to a speedy and unconditional end and of taking immediate steps

in Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories, and all other territories which had not yet attained independence, to transfer all powers to the people of those territories in order to enable them to enjoy complete independence and freedom and, in this context, declared that all peoples had the right to self-determination.

The United Nations currently monitors progress towards self-determination in the NSGTs. The General Assembly, the principal organ of the



UN Photo / Yutaka Nagata

PRAJA, SAO TIAGO ISLAND, FEBRUARY 1975: The C-24 visited Cape Verde at the invitation of the Government of Portugal and the Territory's liberation movement, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC).

United Nations which establishes overall guidance on decolonization matters within the Organization, established the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence of Colonial Countries and Peoples (also known as “C-24” or the “Special Committee on Decolonization”) in 1961 as its subsidiary organ devoted to the issue of decolonization. Furthermore, the decolonization agenda items are considered by the Special Political and Decolonization (Fourth) Committee of the General Assembly. The Fourth Committee considers recommendations of the C-24 and prepares draft resolutions and decisions for consideration of the General Assembly.



UN Photo / Eskinder Debebe

UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 2018:
Secretary-General António Guterres (centre left) addresses the opening session of the Special Committee on Decolonization.

Special Committee on Decolonization

3. What does the Special Committee do?

The Special Committee was established in 1961 in order to examine the application of the Declaration on Decolonization and to make suggestions and recommendations on the progress and extent of the implementation of the Declaration.

The current focus of the work of the Special Committee includes:

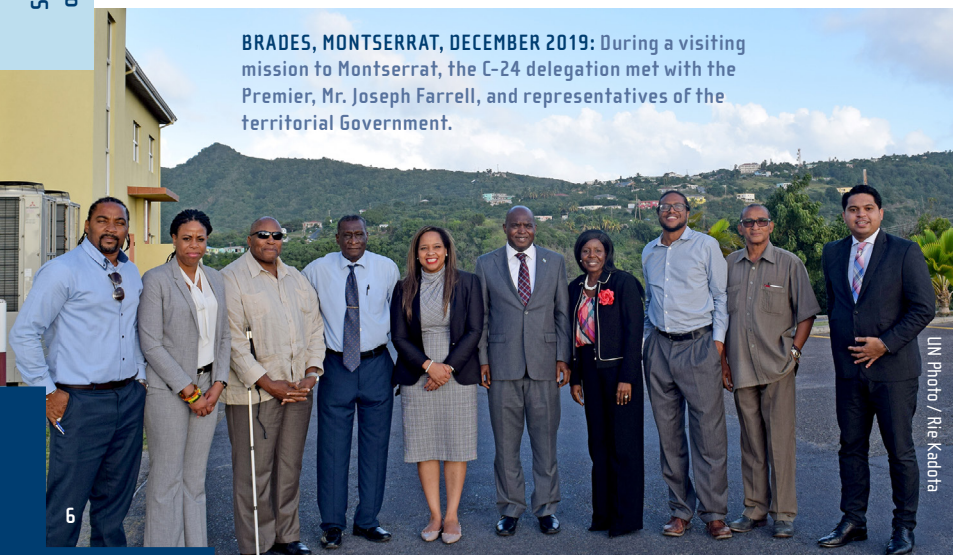
- » Examining the political, economic and social situation in the remaining NSGTs;
- » Conducting annual regional seminars on decolonization in the Caribbean or the Pacific;
- » Hearing representatives of the NSGTs and individuals at its annual sessions held in June;
- » Dispatching visiting missions to the NSGTs;
- » Making recommendations to the General Assembly, usually in the form of draft resolutions on the NSGTs and thematic issues;
- » Reviewing the list of the NSGTs and where and when appropriate, recommending to the General Assembly that the conditions have been met for the removal of a Territory from the list.

4. Who are the members of the Special Committee?

Originally comprising 17, the membership was enlarged in December 1962 to 24. This is why the Special Committee is called the “Committee of 24” or “C-24”. The membership increased on four subsequent occasions since then, and the Committee is now composed of the following 29 Member States:

Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Chile, China, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Fiji, Grenada, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Mali, Nicaragua, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sierra Leone, Syrian Arab Republic, Timor-Leste, Tunisia, United Republic of Tanzania and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

BRADES, MONTERRAT, DECEMBER 2019: During a visiting mission to Montserrat, the C-24 delegation met with the Premier, Mr. Joseph Farrell, and representatives of the territorial Government.



UN Photo / Rie Kadota

Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs)

5. What is a NSGT and where are these Territories?

In the Charter, a NSGT is defined as a Territory “whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government.” As at 2020 the following 17 Territories are on the list of the NSGTs: [American Samoa](#), [Anguilla](#), [Bermuda](#), [British Virgin Islands](#), [Cayman Islands](#), [Falkland Islands \(Malvinas\)](#),¹ [French Polynesia](#), [Gibraltar](#), [Guam](#), [Montserrat](#), [New Caledonia](#), [Pitcairn](#), [Saint Helena](#), [Tokelau](#), [Turks and Caicos Islands](#), [United States Virgin Islands](#) and [Western Sahara](#).

6. What is the process of including a territory in the list of the NSGTs? What are the recent examples?

The decision to add a territory to the list of NSGTs lies in the hands of the Member States administering such Territories or the General Assembly. In 1946, a first list was established when eight Member States submitted the names of 72 Territories under

¹ A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, OCTOBER 2016:
The Special Political and Decolonization Committee
hears statements by representatives of
Non-Self-Governing Territories and petitioners.



UN Photo / Amanda Voisard

their administration, which they considered to be non-self-governing. The list has changed over time, including when the General Assembly added the Portuguese territories in 1960 and Southern Rhodesia in 1962. In 1963, the General Assembly approved a revised list which included 60 NSGTs. In addition, in 1986 and 2013, respectively, the General Assembly affirmed that [New Caledonia](#) and [French Polynesia](#) remained NSGTs, thereby effectively “re-listing” them (both Territories had been on the list of NSGTs from 1946 to 1947).

7. How can a NSGT be removed from the list of NSGTs?

Similar to the “listing” process described above, the General Assembly has the authority to determine whether a Territory has exercised its right to self-determination, for example, through a referendum, and should hence be removed from the list of NSGTs (“de-listing”). When appropriate, this determination is made, based upon a recommendation by the Special Committee. The General Assembly follows a “case-by-case” approach taking into consideration the particular circumstances in the respective Territory. One example of such a process is East Timor (now Timor-Leste): On 1 May 2002, the General Assembly, on the basis of the Special Committee’s recommendation, decided to “remove East Timor from the list of NSGTs upon its accession to independence.” In

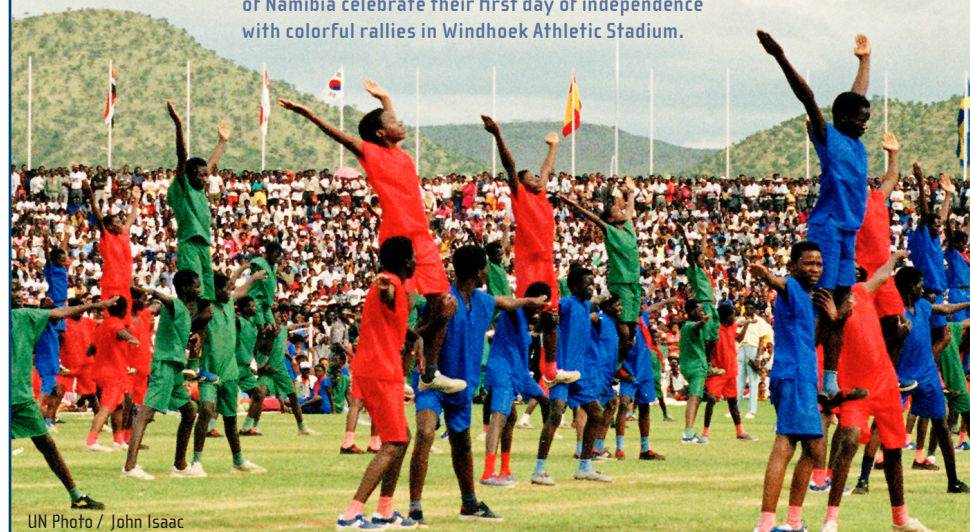
other cases, the General Assembly considered that the administering Power was no longer obliged to transmit information to the United Nations on conditions in the respective Territory, a requirement for administering Powers under [Article 73e](#) of the UN Charter. This decision to cease the transmission of information is generally understood as an indication that the Territory concerned is no longer considered as a NSGT and provides a basis to remove it from the list of NSGTs.

8. What is an administering Power?

Member States which have responsibilities for the administration of the NSGTs are called administering Powers. As part of the obligations arising from the sacred trust referred to in the Charter to “promote to the utmost...the well-being of the inhabitants” of the NSGTs, administering Powers accept to develop “self-government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples” and to transmit to the United Nations information on conditions in the NSGTs.

Currently, France is the administering Power for [French Polynesia](#) and [New Caledonia](#); New Zealand is the administering Power for [Tokelau](#); the United Kingdom is the administering Power for [Anguilla](#), [Bermuda](#), [British Virgin Islands](#), [Cayman Islands](#),

WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA, MARCH 1990: The people of Namibia celebrate their first day of independence with colorful rallies in Windhoek Athletic Stadium.



UN Photo / John Isaac

[Falkland Islands \(Malvinas\)](#),² [Gibraltar](#), [Montserrat](#), [Pitcairn](#), [Saint Helena](#) and [Turks and Caicos Islands](#); the United States is the administering Power for [American Samoa](#), [Guam](#) and the [United States Virgin Islands](#). With regard to [Western Sahara](#), in 1976 Spain informed the Secretary-General of the United Nations that, following the termination of its presence in the Territory, it considered itself exempt from any responsibility of an international nature in connection with the administration of the said Territory.

² A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

9. What options does a NSGT have when deciding on its future status?

According to [General Assembly resolution 1541 \(XV\)](#) of 1960, a NSGT can be said to have reached a “full measure of self-government” by:

- » Emergence as a sovereign independent State;
- » Free association with an independent State;
- » Integration with an independent State.

In 1970, by the [Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations](#), the General Assembly stated that the three options mentioned above and the “emergence into any other political status freely determined by a people” constituted “modes of implementing the right of self-determination by that people.”

In the past, independence has been resorted to as the most common form of attainment of self-determination, while some chose integration or free association with an independent State.

10. What are the recent examples of the decolonization process in the NSGTs?

East Timor

The most recent NSGT to change its status was East Timor, which in 2002 became an independent State, following 2.5 years of UN transitional administration. The General Assembly added East Timor to its list of NSGTs in 1960 through the adoption of a resolution, along with other Territories administered by Portugal. Over 40 years later, Agreements were signed on 5 May 1999 between Indonesia and Portugal and between them and the UN, providing the people of East Timor with an opportunity to exercise their right to self-determination by choosing between autonomy within Indonesia or independence. In 1999, the popular consultation was conducted in East Timor by the United Nations and a majority of the voters voted to reject the proposed special autonomy and expressed their wish to begin a process of transition towards independence. On 20 May 2002, following the hand-over of authority from the UN to the democratically-elected government, East Timor became independent, and was admitted as Member of the UN on 27 September 2002 as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

Tokelau

In February 2006 and October 2007, Tokelau, a NSGT under the administration of New Zealand, held two



UN / Ariane Rumery

FAKAOFO, TOKELAU, OCTOBER 2007: A local resident casts a ballot during the second Tokelau referendum on self-government in free association with New Zealand.

referenda to decide its future status. Both events fell just short of producing the required two-thirds majority threshold to change Tokelau's status to self-government in free association with New Zealand. As at 2020, Tokelau, therefore, remains on the list of NSGTs. Since then, Tokelau has been focusing on addressing various development needs in cooperation with New Zealand.

New Caledonia

New Caledonia, a NSGT under the administration of France, held a referendum on accession to full sovereignty and independence on 4 November 2018 in accordance with the Nouméa Accord of 1998: With a turnout of 81 per cent of voters, the option

of full sovereignty and independence was rejected, with nearly 57 per cent of votes cast against the accession to full sovereignty and independence, and approximately 43 per cent in favour. The Accord provides for the possible holding of two more referenda on the same question in 2020 and 2022. Should independence be rejected in all three referenda, the parties concerned would then have to meet to consider the situation thus created. The C-24 dispatched two visiting missions to New Caledonia in 2014 and 2018 during its critical period preparing for the 2018 referendum.



UN Photo / Teadjouline Ali-Diabactre

NOUMÉA, NEW CALEDONIA, NOVEMBER 2018: A polling station in Nouméa, New Caledonia, during the first referendum on self-determination.

Non-Self-Governing Territories

