



Sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly

To convene on
13 September 2011

Backgrounder

United Nations General Assembly opens on 13 September 2011

The General Assembly of the United Nations opens its sixty-sixth session on Tuesday, 13 September at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Following the opening week, Heads of State and Government will gather for three high-level meetings during the second half of September. The first of these meetings will take place on 19 and 20 September and will address the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases worldwide, particularly challenges faced by developing countries. (For further information, go to <http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/65/issues/ncdiseases.shtml>.)

The second high-level meeting, on 20 September, will focus on the issues of desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, as a lead-up to the forthcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), scheduled for June 2012. (For further information, go to <http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/65/issues/desertification.shtml>.)

The Assembly's third high-level meeting, to take place on Thursday, 22 September, will commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action – the international community's blueprint for action in the fight against racism. (For further information, go to <http://www.un.org/en/ga/durbanmeeting2011/>.)

The annual general debate, in which the world assembly hears statements by Heads of State and Government, as well as Ministers, will begin on Wednesday, 21 September, and conclude on Friday, 30 September.

Among key issues on the agenda, the Assembly will address the following:

- » Millennium Development Goals;
- » Climate change and sustainable development;
- » Food security;

- » The role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of conflicts;
- » Reconstruction and strengthening of fragile and post-conflict States;
- » Disarmament;
- » United Nations reform, including reform of the Security Council, revitalization of the work of the General Assembly and reaffirming the central role of the Organization in global governance.

Several other major events will be featured during the sixty-sixth session, which runs through mid-September 2012. In the first week of December 2011 (date to be announced), the Assembly will devote two meetings to follow-up to the International Year for Volunteers, on its tenth anniversary. (For more information, go to <http://www.unv.org/en/news-resources/resources.html>.) In the same week, on 7 and 8 December, the Assembly will hold its Fifth High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development. (For further information, go to <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/>.) In June 2012, the Assembly is also expected to review the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and its implementation by Member States, and to consider updating the Strategy in response to current developments. (For more information, go to <http://www.un.org/terrorism/strategy-counter-terrorism.shtml>.)

Forum for multilateral negotiation

Established in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprised of all 193 Members of the United Nations, it provides a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter. It also plays a significant role in the process of standard-setting and the codification of international law.

The Assembly meets in regular session intensively from September to December each year, and thereafter as required.

Functions and powers of the General Assembly

The Assembly is empowered to make recommendations to States on international issues within its competence. It has also initiated actions – political, economic, humanitarian, social and legal – which have affected the lives of millions of people throughout the world. The landmark Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document reflect the commitment of Member States to reach specific goals to attain peace, security and disarmament along with development and poverty eradication; safeguard human rights and promote the rule of law; protect our common environment; meet the special needs of Africa; and strengthen the United Nations.

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly may:

- » Consider and approve the United Nations budget and establish the financial assessments of Member States;
- » Elect the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the members of other United Nations councils and organs and, on the recommendation of the Security Council, appoint the Secretary-General;
- » Consider and make recommendations on the general principles of cooperation for maintaining international peace and security, including disarmament;
- » Discuss any question relating to international peace and security and, except where a dispute or situation is currently being discussed by the Security Council, make recommendations on it;
- » Discuss, with the same exception, and make recommendations on any questions within the scope of the Charter or affecting the powers and functions of any organ of the United Nations;
- » Initiate studies and make recommendations to promote international political cooperation, the

development and codification of international law, the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and international collaboration in the economic, social, humanitarian, cultural, educational and health fields;

- » Make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of any situation that might impair friendly relations among countries;
- » Consider reports from the Security Council and other United Nations organs.

Pursuant to its “Uniting for Peace” resolution of 3 November 1950 (resolution 377 (V)), the Assembly may take action if the Security Council fails to act, owing to the negative vote of a permanent member, in a case where there appears to be a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression. The Assembly can consider the matter immediately with a view to making recommendations to Members for collective measures to maintain or restore international peace and security (see “Special sessions and emergency special sessions” below).

The search for consensus

Each Member State in the Assembly has one vote. Votes taken on designated important issues – such as recommendations on peace and security, the election of Security Council and Economic and Social Council members, and budgetary questions – require a two-thirds majority of Member States, but other questions are decided by a simple majority.

In recent years, a special effort has been made to achieve consensus on issues, rather than deciding by a formal vote, thus strengthening support for the Assembly’s decisions. The President, after having consulted and reached agreement with delegations, can propose that a resolution be adopted without a vote.

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Over the past years, there has been a sustained effort to make the work of the General Assembly more focused and relevant. This became a major priority as of the fifty-eighth session, and efforts continued at subsequent sessions of the General Assembly to streamline the agenda, improve the practices and working methods of the Main Committees, enhance the role of the General Commit-

tee, strengthen the role and authority of the President and examine the Assembly's role in the process to select the Secretary-General.

At its sixtieth session, the Assembly adopted a text (annexed to resolution 60/286 of 8 September 2006) which encouraged the holding of informal interactive debates on current issues of critical importance to the international community. The text, which had been recommended by the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, also invited the General Assembly President to propose themes for these interactive debates. During the sixty-fifth session, five informal thematic interactive debates were convened: on disaster reduction; rule of law; human security; green economy; and global governance.

It has become an established practice for the Secretary-General to brief Member States periodically, in informal meetings of the General Assembly, on his recent activities and travels. These briefings have provided a well-received opportunity for exchange between the Secretary-General and Member States and are likely to be continued at the sixty-sixth session.

Elections for the President and Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly and Chairs of the Main Committees

As a result of the ongoing revitalization of its work, and pursuant to rule 30 of its rules of procedure, the General Assembly now elects its President, Vice-Presidents and Chairs of the Main Committees at least three months in advance of the start of the new session in order to further strengthen coordination and preparation of work among the Main Committees and between the Committees and the Plenary.

General Committee

The General Committee – composed of the President and 21 Vice-Presidents of the Assembly, as well as the Chairs of the six Main Committees – makes recommendations to the Assembly about adoption of the agenda, allocation of agenda items and organization of its work. (See <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/gasess.htm#gaagen> for more on the agenda.)

Over the last few sessions, the role of the General Committee has been further strengthened with the holding of informal meetings and briefings, open to

all Member States, on specific issues under consideration by, or pertaining to, the work of the Assembly.

Credentials Committee

The Credentials Committee, appointed by the General Assembly at each session, reports to the Assembly on the credentials of representatives.

General debate

The Assembly's annual general debate, which provides Member States the opportunity to express their views on major international issues, will take place from Wednesday, 21 September, through Friday, 30 September. Rather than its usual period of nine working days (as called for in resolution 57/301 of March 2003), this year's general debate will last eight working days to allow for the convening of the high-level events mentioned above. The Secretary-General will present his report on the work of the Organization immediately prior to the general debate, a practice that began with the fifty-second session.

The theme for the sixty-sixth session's general debate will be, "The role of mediation in the settlement of disputes by peaceful means", as proposed by the President-elect of the sixty-sixth session, H. E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, of Qatar, upon his election on 22 June 2011. The practice of selecting a specific issue of global concern for the session dates back to 2003, when the General Assembly decided to introduce this innovation in an effort to enhance the authority and role of the now 193-member body (resolution 58/126 of December 2003).

The meetings of the general debate usually run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. Exceptions will include the opening meeting, on Wednesday, 21 September, which will end at 7:30 p.m., and on Thursday, 22 September, when the morning meeting will take place from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., in order to accommodate the commemorative meeting on the tenth anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (described above).

Six Main Committees

With the close of the general debate, the Assembly begins consideration of the substantive items on its agenda. Because of the great number of issues it is called upon to consider (over 160 agenda items at

the sixty-fifth session, for example), the Assembly allocates to its six Main Committees items relevant to their work. The Committees discuss the items, seeking where possible to harmonize the various approaches of States, and present their recommendations, usually in the form of draft resolutions and decisions, to the Plenary of the Assembly for consideration and action.

The six Main Committees are: the Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee), concerned with disarmament and related international security issues; the Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee), concerned with economic issues; the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (Third Committee), which deals with social and humanitarian issues; the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), dealing with a variety of political subjects not covered by any other Committee or the Plenary, including decolonization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and the human rights of the Palestinian people; the Administrative and Budgetary Committee (Fifth Committee), which is concerned with the administration and budget of the United Nations; and the Legal Committee (Sixth Committee), which deals with international legal matters.

On a number of agenda items, however, such as the question of Palestine and the situation in the Middle East, the Assembly acts directly in its plenary meetings.

Working groups of the General Assembly

The General Assembly has, in the past, authorized the establishment of working groups to focus on matters of importance in more detail, and make recommendations to the Assembly for action, such as the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, which is set to continue its work during the sixty-sixth session.

Regional groups

Various informal regional groupings have evolved over the years in the General Assembly as vehicles for consultation and to facilitate procedural work. The groups are: the African States; the Asian States; the Eastern European States; the Latin American and Caribbean States; and the Western European

and other States. The post of President of the General Assembly rotates among the regional groups. For the sixty-sixth session, the President has been elected on a recommendation by the Group of Asian States.

Special sessions and emergency special sessions

In addition to its regular sessions, the Assembly may meet in special and emergency special sessions.

To date, the Assembly has convened 28 special sessions on issues that demanded particular attention, including the question of Palestine, United Nations finances, Namibia, disarmament, international economic cooperation, apartheid, drugs, the environment, population, women, social development, human settlements and HIV/AIDS. The twenty-eighth special session of the General Assembly, held on 24 January 2005, was devoted to the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps.

Ten emergency special sessions have addressed situations in which the Security Council found itself deadlocked, namely, Hungary (1956), Suez (1956), the Middle East (1958 and 1967), the Congo (1960), Afghanistan (1980), Palestine (1980 and 1982), Namibia (1981), the occupied Arab territories (1982) and illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2009). The Assembly decided, on 16 January 2009, to adjourn the tenth emergency special session temporarily and to authorize the President of the Assembly to resume its meetings at the request of Member States.

Carrying on the work of the Assembly

The work of the United Nations derives largely from the decisions of the General Assembly and is carried out:

- » By committees and other bodies established by the Assembly to study and report on specific issues, such as disarmament, outer space, peacekeeping, economic development, the environment and human rights;
- » By the Secretariat of the United Nations – the Secretary-General and his staff of international civil servants.