

United Nations and Decolonization



The process of achieving self-determination by colonial or dependent territories is known as decolonization.

A half-century ago, much of the world, especially Africa and Asia, consisted of colonies and dependent territories ruled by a small number of colonial Powers. Nowadays, almost all of the former colonies have been transformed into independent countries. The United Nations played an important role in this historic transformation.

The United Nations was established in 1945 by 51 sovereign States. The Charter of the Organization proclaimed “the respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples” as one of its basic purposes. Since then, nearly 750 million people have exercised their right to self-determination, and more than 80 once-colonized territories have gained their independence.



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Non-Self-Governing Territories

At the time the United Nations was established, there were 72 Non-Self-Governing Territories and eleven Trust Territories. The Trust Territories were mostly former colonies of the countries defeated in the First and Second World Wars. They were placed under the United Nations International Trusteeship System and have all since exercised their right to self-determination.

All other colonies were considered as Non-Self-Governing Territories under Chapter XI of the Charter, devoted to the “territories whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government”. The Member States recognized that “the interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount”. The administering Powers, by signing the Charter, accepted as “a sacred trust” the obligation to promote to the utmost the well-being of the Territories under their administration. Under Article 73 e of the Charter, the administering Powers also accepted the obligation “to transmit regularly to the Secretary-General” information relating to “the economic, social and educational conditions in the territories”.



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United Nations list

In 1946, eight Member States—Australia, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States—identified 72 territories under their administration that they considered to fall under the Charter provisions as non-self-governing. Colonial territories ruled by Spain and Portugal, both of which joined the United Nations in 1955, were later added to the list.



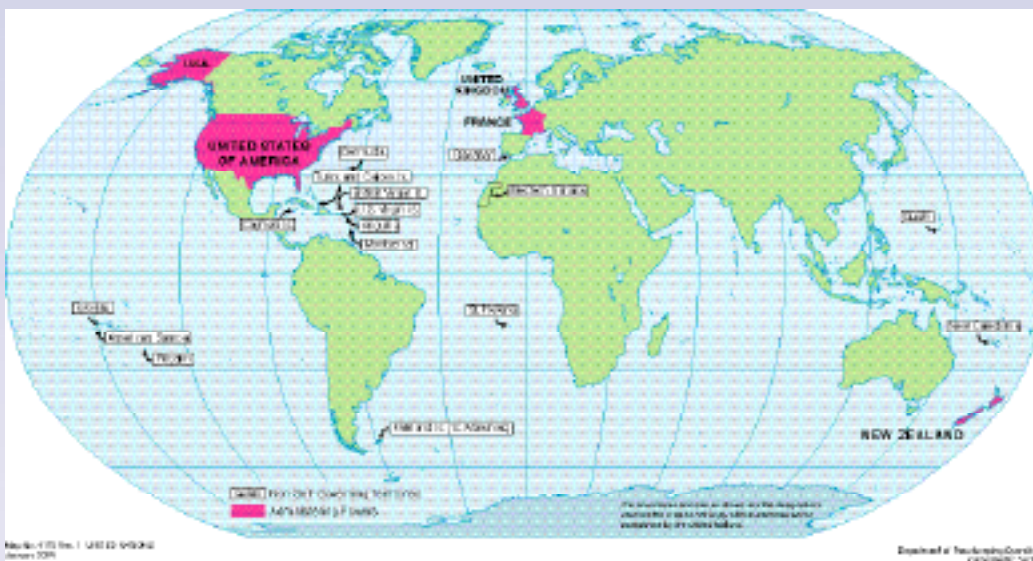
Photo credit: UN Photo

By 1963, the General Assembly approved a revised list of 64 Non-Self-Governing Territories. The list included the Territories for which information was transmitted under Article 73 e; plus the two remaining Trust Territories (Nauru and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands), Namibia (then referred to as South West Africa) and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

The list was expanded in 1965 to include French Somaliland (now Djibouti) and Oman. The Comoro Islands were included in 1972 and New Caledonia in 1986.

As a result of the decolonization process, most of the Territories were removed from the list. Currently there are 16 Non-Self-Governing Territories.

Non-Self-Governing Territories



Territories to which the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples continues to apply (as of 2004)

Territory Administering Authority

Africa

Western Sahara¹

Asia and the Pacific

American Samoa	United States
Guam	United States
New Caledonia ²	France
Pitcairn	United Kingdom
Tokelau	New Zealand

Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean and Mediterranean

Anguilla	United Kingdom
Bermuda	United Kingdom
British Virgin Islands	United Kingdom
Cayman Islands	United Kingdom
Falkland Islands (Malvinas)	United Kingdom
Gibraltar	United Kingdom
Montserrat	United Kingdom
St. Helena	United Kingdom
Turks and Caicos Islands	United Kingdom
United States Virgin Islands	United States



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¹ On 26 February 1976, Spain informed the Secretary-General that as of that date it had terminated its presence in the Territory of the Sahara and deemed it necessary to place on record that Spain considered itself thenceforth exempt from any international responsibility in connection with its administration, in view of the cessation of its participation in the temporary administration established for the Territory. In 1990, the General Assembly reaffirmed that the question of Western Sahara was a question of decolonization that remained to be completed by the people of Western Sahara.

² On 2 December 1986, the General Assembly determined that New Caledonia was a Non-Self-Governing Territory.

Declaration on Decolonization

By 1960, membership of the United Nations had nearly doubled, two thirds of the new Member States being former colonies. There was a growing sense in the General Assembly that the pace of decolonization was too slow, and that in an increasing number of cases the interests of the inhabitants of the colonies were being disregarded by the administering Powers. These developments led the Assembly to adopt, in December 1960, two landmark resolutions.

Resolution 1514 (XV) contained the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. While the Charter of the United Nations treated “self-determination” as a “principle”, rather than a “right”, the Declaration marked a turning point by stating that “all peoples have the right to self-determination”. With its adoption, the General Assembly began actively promoting the goal of self-determination in the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories, rather than simply monitoring the activities of the administering Powers. This change was particularly welcomed by the colonial peoples who were struggling for their independence, especially in those Territories where armed action and repressive measures were being directed against them. Resolution 1514 (XV) also stated that any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity of a country was incompatible with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Resolution 1541 (XV), which complemented the Declaration on decolonization, affirmed that there were three ways in which a Non-Self-Governing Territory could attain a full measure of self-government, as envisaged in the Charter. These were:

- (a) Free association with an independent State as a result of a free and voluntary choice by the people of the Territory expressed through an informed and democratic process;
- (b) Integration with an independent State on the basis of complete equality between the peoples of the Non-Self-Governing Territory and those of the independent State;
- (c) Independence.

Whatever option is chosen by the peoples of a Non-Self-Governing Territory, this choice must be the result of the freely expressed wishes of these peoples.



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DECLARATION ON THE GRANTING OF INDEPENDENCE TO COLONIAL COUNTRIES AND PEOPLES

General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of
14 December 1960 declares that:

1. *The subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and cooperation.*
2. *All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.*
3. *Inadequacy of political, economic, social or educational preparedness should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence.*
4. *All armed action or repressive measures of all kinds directed against dependent peoples shall cease in order to enable them to exercise peacefully and freely their right to complete independence, and the integrity of their national territory shall be respected.*
5. *Immediate steps shall be taken, in Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories or all other territories which have not yet attained independence, to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories, without any conditions or reservations, in accordance with their freely expressed will and desire, without any distinction as to race, creed or colour, in order to enable them to enjoy complete independence and freedom.*
6. *Any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.*
7. *All States shall observe faithfully and strictly the provision of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the present Declaration on the basis of equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of all States, and respect for the sovereign rights of all peoples and their territorial integrity.*

Special Committee on decolonization³

In 1961, the General Assembly created the Special Committee on decolonization, which has become the focal point for the implementation of the Declaration on decolonization. The Committee (also known as the Committee of Twenty-four because of the original number of its members) reviews the political, economic and social situation in each of the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories on the United Nations list. Each year, the Secretariat prepares for the Committee working papers on the developments in these Territories. During its annual sessions, the Committee hears petitioners from the Territories, who speak about the concerns and aspirations of their people. The Committee also holds annual seminars in the Pacific or in the Caribbean regions in order to better understand the conditions in the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories and to make it easier for their representatives to communicate with the Committee and with each other.

Taking into account all the available information, the Special Committee recommends, and the General Assembly adopts, resolutions aimed at protecting the interests of the peoples of Non-Self-Governing Territories.

The principles of the Charter of the United Nations, together with the provisions of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, continue to guide the international community towards a better world where the fundamental rights and freedoms of nations big and small are equally respected.



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To make colonialism a fact of the past, the General Assembly and the Special Committee appeal to the administering Powers to take necessary steps and to develop a programme of work for the decolonization of each Territory on the list.

As each Territory has a unique combination of circumstances and concerns, such programmes can only be developed on a case-by-case basis. In each case, the participation of both the administering Power and the representatives of the Territory is essential.

³ Officially, the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

Meetings at the United Nations Headquarters

The annual meetings of the Special Committee on decolonization take place in June/July at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The Fourth Committee of the General Assembly holds its annual session in September/October. Both Committees discuss recent developments in the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories, hear representatives and petitioners from the Territories, and make recommendations to the General Assembly.

At the end of each year, the General Assembly adopts resolutions on issues related to the Non-Self-Governing Territories.

Seminars

The Special Committee organizes annual seminars in the month of May, which are held alternately in the Caribbean and the Pacific, the regions where the majority of the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories are situated. Participants include representatives of the peoples of the Non-Self-Governing Territories and their administrations, non-governmental and regional organizations, and experts. United Nations Member States, the administering Powers and specialized agencies of the United Nations system also participate. These seminars allow for focused and frank discussions on decolonization and a lively exchange of views on a variety of issues of concern to the peoples of the Territories.

So far, seminars have been held in Vanuatu (1990), Barbados (1990), Grenada (1992), Papua New Guinea (1993, 1996 and 2004), Trinidad and Tobago (1995), Antigua and Barbuda (1997), Fiji (1998 and 2002), Saint Lucia (1999), Marshall Islands (2000), Cuba (2001) and Anguilla⁴ (2003).

Scholarships

Some Member States of the United Nations offer scholarships for which qualified students from Non-Self-Governing Territories may apply. Over the years, more than 50 States have made such scholarships available to the inhabitants of the Territories in response to the General Assembly resolutions. In 2004, scholarship offers were made by Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Cuba, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States of America.



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⁴ For the first time, a decolonization seminar was held in a Non-Self-Governing Territory.

Visiting missions

To fulfil its mandate, the Special Committee has dispatched visiting missions to some Territories for the members of the Committee to see the conditions there for themselves. This requires the co-



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operation of the administering Powers. Visiting missions are considered an important tool to better understand what can be done to bring the process of decolonization for a particular Territory to a successful completion. The most recent visiting mission was to Tokelau, facilitated by the Government of New Zealand in 2002.



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Development assistance

In recent years, a new international awareness of the unique development needs of small island Non-Self-Governing Territories has emerged. Some Territories are already receiving support in the framework of regional programmes of specialized agencies and organizations of the United Nations system. Assistance is provided in such areas as social development, gov-

ernance, capacity-building, health services, environmental management and disaster preparedness.

Regional commissions of the United Nations

A number of Non-Self-Governing Territories participate in the regional commissions of the United Nations. Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands,



Photo credit: Denise Cook

Montserrat and the United States Virgin Islands have associate member status within the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). American Samoa, Guam and New Caledonia are associate members of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Through their membership, these Territories are eligible to take

part in United Nations-sponsored World Conferences and other multilateral activities in the economic and social spheres.

The challenges ahead: the Second International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism

The year 2000 marked the fortieth anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on decolonization. It also signalled the end of the first International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism. Despite its obvious success in overseeing a dramatic transformation of the world's political map, the United Nations goal of complete decolonization remains unfulfilled. To achieve this goal, the General Assembly has declared the years 2001-2010 as the Second International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism. In its resolution, adopted on 8 December 2000, the General Assembly called upon Member States to redouble their efforts to achieve complete decolonization. It called upon the administering Powers to cooperate fully with the United Nations with regard to the implementation of the Declaration on decolonization in developing a constructive programme of work on a case-by-case basis for the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories.

Further information

- ❖ Information on the United Nations and decolonization may be found at our web site: www.un.org/Depts/dpi/decolonization
- ❖ This site presents a history of decolonization and includes recent documentation of the Special Committee, the latest working papers on each of the Non-Self-Governing Territories and press releases. It also provides links to the web sites of specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system.
- ❖ Relevant material can also be found at: United Nations information centres (UNICs) in your region, local universities and United Nations depository libraries. To locate your nearest UNIC, please visit the United Nations web site: www.un.org/aroundworld/unics
- ❖ Requests for participation in the meetings of the Special Committee and the Fourth Committee, or in the regional seminars, may be submitted in writing to the Chairman of the Special Committee at the following address:
Chairman, Special Committee on decolonization
Department for General Assembly and Conference Management
United Nations
New York, NY 10017, USA
Fax: (212) 963-5305
- ❖ Additional information can be obtained from:

Decolonization Unit	Palestine, Decolonization
Department of Political Affairs	and Human Rights Section
United Nations	Department of Public Information
New York, NY 10017, USA	United Nations
Fax: (212) 963-7752	New York, NY 10017, USA
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