

## **United Nations General Assembly Opens on 14 September 2004**

The General Assembly of the United Nations opens its fifty-ninth session on 14 September at United Nations Headquarters in New York. It brings together the delegations of all Member States for an examination of a wide range of international issues. During the two weeks of general debate at the beginning of the session, many of the delegations are led by heads of State or Government or foreign ministers.

### **Forum for multilateral negotiation**

The General Assembly, set up in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations, is the main deliberative organ of the United Nations and provides a forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter. The Assembly comprises all 191 Members of the United Nations and meets in regular session each year from September to December, and thereafter as required.

### **Functions and powers of the General Assembly**

As set out in the Charter of the United Nations, the functions and powers of the United Nations General Assembly are:

- To consider and make recommendations on the general principles of cooperation for maintaining international peace and security, including disarmament;
- To discuss any question relating to international peace and security and, except where a dispute or situation is currently being discussed by the Security Council, to make recommendations on it;
- To 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;
- To 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;
- To make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of any situation that might impair friendly relations among nations;
- To receive and consider reports from the Security Council and other United Nations organs;
- To consider and approve the United Nations budget and establish the financial assessments of Member States;
- To 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, to appoint the Secretary-General.

Pursuant to its "Uniting for Peace" resolution of November 1950 (resolution 377 (V)), the Assembly may also 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).

While the Assembly is empowered to make only non-binding recommendations to States on

international issues within its competence, it has, nonetheless, initiated actions -- political, economic, humanitarian, social and legal -- which have affected the lives of millions of people throughout the world. The landmark Millennium Declaration that was adopted in 2000 reflects the commitment of Member States to reach specific goals spelled out in the Declaration to attain peace, security and disarmament and development and poverty eradication, to protect our common environment, to meet the special needs of Africa and to strengthen the United Nations.

### **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 and the election of Security Council members, require a two-thirds majority of Member States, but other questions are decided by 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**

Throughout the years, there has been an ongoing effort to make the work of the General Assembly more focused and relevant. At the fifty-eighth session, it became a major priority. Resolutions 58/126 and 58/316, adopted on 19 December 2003 and 1 July 2004, respectively, set out concrete measures to reorder the work of the Assembly, streamline its agenda, improve the practices and working methods of the Main Committees and enhance the role of the General Committee.

### **Informal meetings of the General Assembly**

At its fifty-second session, the Assembly initiated a new way of achieving consensus on issues by discussing the reform of the United Nations in informal meetings of the plenary of the General Assembly. The informal meetings were continued during subsequent sessions to discuss, in particular, issues related to the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, the special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, strengthening of the United Nations system and the revitalization of the Assembly. At the fifty-eighth session, the practice further included informal meetings of the General Committee, open to all delegations, as well as panel discussions and thematic briefings chaired by the President of the Assembly.

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

As a result of the ongoing revitalization of its work and pursuant to rule 30 of its rules of procedure, as amended by Assembly resolution 56/509 of 8 July 2002, the General Assembly elected its President and Vice-Presidents and the Chairs of the six Main Committees for the fifty-ninth session on 10 June 2004, at least three months prior to the opening of the session. Pursuant to Assembly resolution 58/126, the other officers of the Main Committees were also elected on the same day.

### **General Committee**

A General Committee, composed of the President and 21 Vice-Presidents of the Assembly and the Chairs of the six Main Committees, makes recommendations to the Assembly about the adoption of the agenda, the allocation of items and the organization of work. With the early election of the President and Vice-Presidents and the Chairs of the Main Committees for the fifty-ninth session, the General Committee for that session was thus fully constituted in advance.

### **Credentials Committee**

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

### **General debate**

The General Assembly will open its annual general debate on Tuesday, 21 September 2004,

providing Member States with the opportunity to express their views on major international issues.

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.

### **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 questions which it is called upon to consider (170 agenda items at the fifty-eighth session, for example), the Assembly allocates items relevant to its work among its six Main Committees, which discuss them, seeking where possible to harmonize the various approaches of States, and then present to a plenary meeting of the Assembly draft resolutions and decisions for consideration. The Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee) is concerned with disarmament and related international security questions. The Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) deals with a variety of political subjects not dealt with by the First Committee, as well as with decolonization. The Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee) is concerned with economic questions. The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (Third Committee) deals with social and humanitarian issues. The Administrative and Budgetary Committee (Fifth Committee) deals with the administration and budget of the United Nations, and the Legal Committee (Sixth Committee) 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, including the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on the Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa and the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Integrated and Coordinated Implementation of and Follow-up to the Outcomes of the Major United Nations Conferences and Summits in the Economic and Social Fields, both of which have completed their work. The Open-ended Working Group on the Question of Equitable Representation on and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council and Other Matters Related to the Security Council may continue its work during the fifty-ninth session.

### **Regional groups**

Over the years, various informal regional groupings have evolved 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. Turkey, which for election purposes is in the Group of Western European and other States, is also a member of the Asian Group. The post of President of the General Assembly rotates among the regional groups. For the fifty-ninth session, the President has been elected from the Group of African States.

### **Special sessions and emergency special sessions in addition to its regular sessions, the Assembly may meet in special and emergency sessions**

Over the years, the Assembly has convened 27 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-seventh special session of the General Assembly, held from 8 to 10 May 2002, was devoted to children.

Ten emergency special sessions have addressed situations in which the Security Council found itself deadlocked, namely, the Middle East (1958 and 1967), Hungary (1956), Suez (1956), 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 and 2004). The Assembly also decided to adjourn the tenth emergency special session temporarily and to authorize the President of the Assembly to resume its meetings upon request from 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.

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