

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY OPENS ON 13 SEPTEMBER 2005

The General Assembly of the United Nations opens its sixtieth session on 13 September at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Immediately following the opening, Heads of State and Government will gather for a three-day High-level Plenary Meeting, also referred to as the 2005 World Summit, from 14 to 16 September. They will take decisions on a range of significant proposals in the areas of development, security, human rights and strengthening of the United Nations, and will also review progress towards fulfilling their commitments under the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted by world leaders at the Millennium Summit of 2000 (resolution 55/2). These pledges include internationally agreed development goals and the global partnership required for their achievement.

The annual general debate will take place over a 10-day period beginning Saturday, 17 September 2005, focusing on the follow-up to the World Summit. The sixtieth session as a whole, running through mid-September 2006, is also expected to concentrate on the follow-up to the World Summit, in addition to its regular agenda. Among the main areas to be discussed are:

- An international convention on terrorism;
- Prevention of armed conflict and agreement on modalities for the proposed Peacebuilding Commission;
- Follow-up on measures to achieve the internationally agreed development goals, including financing for development;
- Coordination of humanitarian assistance, including tsunami relief efforts and humanitarian response capacity;
- Reform of the human rights machinery and agreement on modalities for the proposed Human Rights Council;
- Implementation of agreed reforms of the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the UN Secretariat, in addition to revitalization of the Assembly itself.

FORUM FOR MULTILATERAL NEGOTIATION

The General Assembly, set up in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations, occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprising all 191 Members of the United Nations, it provides a forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter. The Assembly 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 along with 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

Over the past years, there has been an intensified 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. The fifty-ninth session has continued to assess the implementation of those mandates and to find additional ways and means to further revitalize the work of the General Assembly, including the strengthening of the role and authority of the President.

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 and fifty-ninth sessions, 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 sixtieth session on 13 June 2005, 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 sixtieth 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 hold its annual general debate from Saturday to Friday, 17 to 23 September 2005, and from Monday to Wednesday, 26 to 28 September 2005, providing Member States with the opportunity to express their views on major international issues. The sixtieth session will mark the first time that the general debate will be held with a theme proposed to Member States by the incoming President, as envisaged by Assembly resolution 58/126. Given the importance of the 2005 World Summit, the suggested theme for the sixtieth session is, "For a stronger and more effective United Nations: the follow-up and implementation of the High-level Plenary Meeting in September 2005".

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 (163 agenda items at the fifty-ninth 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 sixtieth 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 sixtieth session, the President has been elected from the Group of Western European and other 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.