

The United Nations officially came into being on October 24, 1945; by that date, the Charter had been ratified by China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States, and by a majority of the other signatories.

As set out in the Charter, the purposes of the United Nations are:

- to maintain international peace and security;
- to develop friendly relations among nations; and
- to co-operate internationally in solving economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems and in promoting respect for basic human rights.

The actions of the United Nations are based on certain principles:

- all of its members are equal;
- all members must fulfil their Charter obligations;
- international disputes are to be settled by peaceful means;
- members may not use force or the threat of force against other members;
- members must help the United Nations in any action it might take in accordance with the Charter; and
- the United Nations may not interfere in the domestic affairs of any nation.

Currently, there are 184 member nations.

General Assembly

All member states have seats in the General Assembly. The Assembly can discuss all matters within the scope of the UN Charter. Its recommendations carry only moral weight as an expression of world opinion; the General Assembly cannot compel action by any nation. Decisions on important questions — peace and security, admission or expulsion of members, budget matters — need a two-thirds majority. For other issues a simple majority is all that is required.

The regular session of the General Assembly begins each year on the third Tuesday in September and continues until mid-December. Special sessions are sometimes called to discuss matters of international concern, for example the famine in Ethiopia. The General Assembly receives reports from all other organs of the UN, appoints the Secretary-General and members of other UN bodies, approves the budget, and directs the work of the Secretariat.

The General Assembly has six main committees: Disarmament and International Security (First); Economic and Financial (Second); Social, Humanitarian and Cultural (Third); Special Political and Decolonization (Fourth); Administrative and Budgetary (Fifth); and Legal (Sixth).

Security Council

This is where issues of peace and security are dealt with. The Security Council has 15 members. Of these, five — China, France, Russia (which has assumed the Soviet Union's seat), the United Kingdom and the United States — are permanent. The other 10 members are elected by the General Assembly to serve two-year terms.

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UN Bodies