

Fifteenth Session of the United Nations

AN INTERIM REPORT

ON December 20, the fifteenth session of the General Assembly of the United Nations adjourned, to resume its work on March 7, 1961. Although there are precedents for dividing a session of the Assembly in two, the procedure is an unusual one. Normally, the Assembly convenes in mid-September, proceeds to a general debate, in which the foreign ministers of the member states are customarily the most senior participants, turns to work in the seven main committees early in October, approves the work of these committees in periodic plenary sessions throughout the course of the session, and finally adjourns in mid-December, not to convene again until the following autumn. The facts that the fifteenth session is to resume its sittings in March, with a number of important items still to debate, and that three of the main committees may be called into session again are, in themselves, a sign that the current session has been one of the most unusual in the 15-year history of the United Nations.

Background to Fifteenth Session

There are a number of important political and procedural reasons for the existence of this situation. Some lie outside the organization itself, and some are internal, but the basic causes are probably to be found in two interacting sequences of events that unfolded in the second half of 1960. The first of these was the deterioration in the general state of East-West relations that followed the collapse of the "summit" meeting in May 1960. This apparently led to a decision on the part of the Soviet Union and its allies, strongly influenced as well by internal considerations within the Soviet bloc, to defer further attempts at serious negotiations with the United States, at least until the recent elections had been held and a new President had been installed. This meant that, at best, the fifteenth session of the General Assembly was unlikely to be one in which progress could be expected on issues connected directly with East-West relations. The unavoidable difficulties created by the United States election tended, as well, during the course of the Assembly, to persuade the members to accept the fact that many important questions, especially those at issue between the Soviet Union and the United States, should be deferred. Thus, for example, it proved impossible in the earlier stages of the session for the Assembly to arrive at any agreed resolution calling upon the governments concerned to bring about a resumption of "summit" contacts. At a later stage, the Assembly indicated its unwillingness to vote upon a Canadian resolution designed, among other things, to bring about the earliest possible resumption of the general disarmament negotiations broken off by the departure of the Soviet Union and its allies from Ten-Nation Committee on Disarmament at the end of June.