



United Nations



Sixty-third  
session of the  
General Assembly

To convene on  
16 September 2008

## Backgrounder

# United Nations General Assembly opens on 16 September 2008

The General Assembly of the United Nations opens its sixty-third session on 16 September at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The annual general debate, which traditionally features statements by dozens of Heads of State and Government as well as Ministers, will begin on Tuesday, 23 September 2008, and conclude on 1 October 2008.

Several major events will be featured during the sixty-third session, which runs through mid-September 2009. On 22 September, preceding the opening of the general debate, the Assembly will hold a high-level meeting on the theme "Africa's development needs: state of implementation of various commitments, challenges and the way forward". On 25 September there will be a high-level event on the Millennium Development Goals, convened jointly by the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly; and immediately following the general debate, on 2 and 3 October, the Assembly will hold two days of high-level plenary meetings devoted to the midterm review of the Almaty Programme of Action—a plan, negotiated in 2003, spelling out specific measures to help landlocked and transit developing countries overcome their geographical handicap. In addition, a Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus will be convened from 29 November to 2 December in Doha, Qatar. On 10 December 2008, the General Assembly will hold a commemorative plenary meeting devoted to the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Among other key issues, the Assembly will also address the following:

- » Democratization of the United Nations, including evaluations of the work of the Security Council and of the Bretton Woods institutions, as well as revitalization of the General Assembly;

- » Financing for development to end hunger, poverty and lack of access to clean water and basic health services;
- » Climate change in a divided but ecologically interdependent world;
- » Achieving the goals of the United Nations Decade: "Water for Life" (2005-2015);
- » Implementation of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy, with full respect for human rights;
- » Human security as a part of international peace and security, including disarmament and nuclear control.

The Assembly will examine the above-mentioned priorities also from a gender perspective and will continue to consider issues relating to system-wide coherence, sustainable development and HIV/AIDS.

## Forum for multilateral negotiation

Established in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprising all 192 Members of the United Nations, it provides a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter. It also plays a significant role in the process of standard-setting and the codification of international law. The Assembly meets in regular session intensively from September to December each year, and thereafter as required.

## Functions and powers of the General Assembly

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly may:

- » Consider and make recommendations on the general principles of cooperation for

maintaining international peace and security, including disarmament;

- » Discuss any question relating to international peace and security and, except where a dispute or situation is currently being discussed by the Security Council, make recommendations on it;
- » 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;
- » 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;
- » Make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of any situation that might impair friendly relations among nations;
- » Receive and consider reports from the Security Council and other United Nations organs;
- » Consider and approve the United Nations budget and establish the financial assessments of Member States;
- » 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, 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, adopted in 2000, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document reflect the commitment of Member States to reach specific goals to attain peace, security and disarmament along with development and poverty eradication; safeguard human rights and promote the rule of law; protect our common environment; meet the special needs of Africa; and 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.

### **Follow-up to the 2005 World Summit**

Pursuant to the Millennium Declaration and the groundbreaking 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, the Assembly, to date, has established two new subsidiary bodies: a Peacebuilding Commission and a Human Rights Council. It has also adopted a Counter-Terrorism Strategy as well as a number of measures to strengthen the Economic and Social Council and reform the Secretariat. Some remaining issues—such as implementation of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy, further efforts at system-wide coherence and an institutional framework for environmental activities, as well as management and Secretariat reform—are expected to continue to be considered during the sixty-third session.

### **Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly**

Over the past years, there has been a sustained effort to make the work of the General Assembly

more focused and relevant. This became a major priority as of the fifty-eighth session, and efforts continued at subsequent sessions of the General Assembly to streamline the agenda, improve the practices and working methods of the Main Committees, enhance the role of the General Committee, strengthen the role and authority of the President and examine the Assembly's role in the process to select the Secretary-General.

At its sixtieth session, the Assembly adopted a text, annexed to resolution 60/286 of 8 September 2006, which, among other things, encouraged the holding of informal interactive debates on current issues of critical importance to the international community. The text, which had been recommended by the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly, also invited the President of the General Assembly to propose themes for these interactive debates. During the sixty-second session, five informal thematic interactive debates were convened on: climate change; the Millennium Development Goals; management reform; human security; and human trafficking.

As of the sixty-second session, it has become an established practice for the Secretary-General to brief Member States periodically, in informal meetings of the General Assembly, on his recent activities and travels. These briefings have provided a well-received opportunity for exchange between the Secretary-General and Member States and are likely to be continued at the sixty-third session.

### **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, the General Assembly now elects its President, Vice-Presidents and Chairs of the Main Committees at least three months in advance of the start of the new session in order to further strengthen coordination and preparation of work among the Main Committees and between the Committees and the plenary.

### **General Committee**

The General Committee—composed of the President and 21 Vice-Presidents of the Assembly, as well as the Chairs of the six Main Committees—

makes recommendations to the Assembly about adoption of the agenda, allocation of agenda items and organization of its work.

The role of the General Committee has been further strengthened over the past few sessions with the holding of informal meetings and briefings, open to all Member States, on specific issues under consideration by or pertaining to the work of the Assembly.

### **Credentials Committee**

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

### **General debate**

During the sixty-third session, the annual general debate, which provides Member States the opportunity to express their views on major international issues, will begin on Tuesday, 23 September, and will last until Wednesday, 1 October 2008. The debate will be held under an overarching theme, "The impact of the global food crisis on poverty and hunger in the world as well as the need to democratize the United Nations", that was proposed by the President of the sixty-third session. The practice of selecting a specific issue of global concern for the session goes back to 2003, when the General Assembly decided to introduce this innovation in an effort to enhance the authority and role of the body (resolution 58/126 of December 2003). Rather than its usual period of nine working days (as called for in resolution 57/301 of March 2003), this year's general debate will last six working days to allow for the convening of two days of high-level plenary meetings devoted to the midterm review of the Almaty Programme of Action, which will take place on 2 and 3 October 2008. 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 it is called upon to consider (over 160 agenda items at the sixty-second session, for example), the Assembly allocates to its six Main Committees items relevant to their work. The Committees dis-

cuss the items, seeking where possible to harmonize the various approaches of States, and present their recommendations, usually in the form of draft resolutions and decisions, to a plenary meeting of the Assembly for its consideration.

The six Main Committees are: the Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee), concerned with disarmament and related international security questions; the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), dealing with a variety of political subjects not covered by any other Committee or the plenary, including the question of decolonization; the Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee), concerned with economic questions; the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (Third Committee), which deals with social and humanitarian issues; the Administrative and Budgetary Committee (Fifth Committee), which is concerned with the administration and budget of the United Nations; and the Legal Committee (Sixth Committee), which 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 in more detail and make recommendations to the Assembly for action. A working group on the question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council, established by Assembly resolution 48/26 of 3 December 1993, remained active during the sixty-second session. This working group is expected to continue its work during the sixty-third 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. The post of

President of the General Assembly rotates among the regional groups. For the sixty-third session, the President has been elected from the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States.

### **Special sessions and emergency special sessions**

In addition to its regular sessions, the Assembly may meet in special and emergency sessions.

To date, the Assembly has convened 28 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-eighth special session of the General Assembly, held on 24 January 2005, was devoted to the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps.

Ten emergency special sessions have addressed situations in which the Security Council found itself deadlocked, namely, Hungary (1956), Suez (1956), the Middle East (1958 and 1967), 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, 2004 and 2006). 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.