

# THE UNITED NATIONS

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**THIMUN: Preparation  
and Practice –  
Booklet 1**

*The following is a brief summary of the United Nations Organisation. For more detailed information, students are advised to go to the UN website: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).*

The United Nations is an international organisation of 193 sovereign states, representing almost every country in the world. It was founded after the Second World War to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations and to promote social progress, better living standards and human rights. The Member States are bound together by the principles of the United Nations Charter, an international treaty that spells out their rights and duties as members of the world community.

## THE UNITED NATIONS CHARTER

The Charter of the United Nations and the Statute of the International Court of Justice, which is an integral part of the Charter are the bases in international law under which the United Nations operates.

### Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations

*WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
DETERMINED*

*to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and*

*to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and*

*to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and*

*to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,*

*AND FOR THESE ENDS*

*to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and*

*to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and*

*to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples.*

## THE UN STRUCTURE

### Membership

*“Membership in the United Nations is open to all peace-loving states which accept the obligations of the Charter and, in the judgment of the Organisation, are willing and able to carry out these obligations.*

*The admission of any such State to membership in the United Nations will be effected by a decision of the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.”*

Article 4, Chapter 2, United Nations Charter

At present there are 193 Member States. In addition, the Holy See and Palestine as well as a number of inter-governmental organisations have Permanent Observer Status with the United Nations and maintain missions at UN Headquarters in New York.

The 193 Members of the United Nations meet in the General Assembly (GA) at the UN Headquarters. Each Member State, regardless of size, economic development or military power, has a single vote. This means that China with a population of more than 1.300.000.000 and the small Pacific island of Nauru with a population of less than 10.000, the Russian Federation, which covers 17 million square kilometres and Monaco with just one square kilometre, the United States with a per capita GDP of approx. US\$ 65.000 and Burundi with a per capita GDP of less than US\$ 225 are all equal.

Although the decisions taken by the General Assembly are not binding, nevertheless, the resolutions it passes carry the weight of world opinion and have a strong moral force.

There are six “Principal Organs” created under the UN Charter. They are the Trusteeship Council, the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat. Only five of these are actively functioning, however.

## The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council, made up mainly of the five permanent members of the Security Council, was established to supervise the administration of so-called “Trust Territories”, i.e., non-self-governing territories, and to promote their advancement towards self-government or independence. All Trust Territories have now attained self-government. Thus, the Trusteeship Council suspended operations in 1994.

## The Security Council

The Security Council consists of 15 Member States of the United Nations, five Permanent Members: China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and 10 Member States elected by the General Assembly for a period of two years.

Under Article 27 of the Charter, substantive decisions of the Security Council require nine votes including the concurring votes of the permanent members. This means, in effect, that each of the permanent members has the power of veto over all decisions.

The Security Council has the primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. If there is a threat to peace, the Council usually tries to get the parties involved in the dispute together to reach agreement by peaceful means. The Council might undertake to mediate between the parties itself or it can appoint a special representative or ask the Secretary-General to use his good offices. It can pass resolutions containing principles and guidelines for a peaceful settlement of the dispute.

If war breaks out, the Council's first concern is to bring it to an end as soon as possible. It can call for a cease-fire or send United Nations peace-keeping troops to keep opposing forces apart and help to reduce tension. The Council may also impose enforcement measures, such as economic sanctions, on one or more of the parties in dispute, or even authorize collective military action against a state which fails to obey the demands of the Security Council.

A Member State against which enforcement action has been taken by the Security Council may be suspended by the General Assembly from exercising the rights and privileges of membership on the recommendation of the Security Council. A Member State which persistently violates the principles of the Charter may even be expelled from the United Nations by the General Assembly on the Council's recommendation.

A state which is a member of the United Nations but not of the Security Council may participate, without a vote, in its discussions when the Council considers that that country's interests are affected. Both members of the United Nations and non-members, if they are parties to a dispute, may be invited to take part, without a vote, in the Council's discussions.

## The General Assembly

The General Assembly, which meets in annual session in New York, is the main deliberative organ of the United Nations. It is composed of representatives of all Member States, each of which has one vote. Decisions on important questions, such as those on peace and security, admission of new members and budgetary matters, require a two-thirds majority. Decisions on other questions are by simple majority. **However, nowadays, the aim is to reach as many decisions as possible by consensus.** In plenary meetings, resolutions may be adopted by acclamation without a vote.

The main functions and powers of the General Assembly are:

- to consider and make recommendations on the principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security, including the principles governing disarmament and arms regulation;
- to discuss any question relating to international peace and security and, except where a dispute or situation is being discussed by the Security Council, to make recommendations on it;
- to discuss and, with the same exception, make recommendations on any question 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 realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, and international collaboration in economic, social, cultural, educational and health fields;
- to make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of any situation, regardless of origin, which 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 to apportion the contributions among members;
- to elect the non-permanent members of the Security Council and the members of the Economic and Social Council; to elect jointly with the Security Council the Judges of the International Court of Justice; and, on the recommendation of the Security Council, to appoint the Secretary-General.

The work of the United Nations derives largely from the decisions of the General Assembly - that is to say, the will of the majority of the members as expressed in resolutions adopted by the Assembly. That work is carried out:

- by committees and other bodies established by the Assembly to study and report on specific issues, such as disarmament, peacekeeping, development and human rights;
- in international conferences called for by the Assembly;
- by the Secretariat of the United Nations - the Secretary-General and his staff of international civil servants.

Some issues are considered only in plenary meetings, while others are allocated to one of the six main committees:

First Committee	Disarmament and International Security
Second Committee	Economic and Financial
Third Committee	Social, Humanitarian and Cultural
Fourth Committee	Special Political and Decolonization
Fifth Committee	Administrative and Budgetary
Sixth Committee	Legal

All issues are voted on through resolutions passed in plenary meetings, usually towards the end of the regular session, after the committees have completed their consideration of them and submitted draft resolutions to the plenary Assembly. Voting in Committees is by a simple majority. In plenary meetings, resolutions may be adopted by acclamation, without objection or without a vote, or the vote may be recorded or taken by roll-call.

It should be re-emphasized that, while the decisions of the Assembly have no legally binding force for governments, they do carry the weight of world opinion as well as the moral authority of the world community.

### **Subsidiary body: The Human Rights Council and UN High Commissioner**

The Human Rights Council is an important subsidiary body of the General Assembly. The 47 Members of the Council are elected by an absolute majority of the UN Member States. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) helps to protect and promote human rights around the world. The UNHCHR works to ensure the enforcement of human rights norms by promoting the universal ratification and implementation of human rights treaties.

### **The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**

The ECOSOC is responsible for promoting higher standards of living, full employment, and economic and social progress. It is also charged with identifying solutions to international economic, social and health problems, facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation and encouraging universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Council is made up of 54 Member States elected by the General Assembly for overlapping three-year terms. Seats on the Council are based on geographical representation with fourteen allocated to African States, eleven to Asian States, six to Eastern European States, ten to Latin American and Caribbean States, and thirteen to Western European and other States.

The Functions and Powers of ECOSOC are outlined in Chapter X (Articles 62 to 66) of the Charter. ECOSOC coordinates the work of the Specialised Agencies, the Functional Commissions and the Regional Commissions and makes policy recommendations to the General Assembly and to Member States. The competence and responsibility of ECOSOC extends to over 70 per cent of the human and financial resources of the entire UN system.

In carrying out its work, ECOSOC consults with academics, business sector representatives and several thousand registered non-governmental organisations. The THIMUN Foundation, which organises The Hague International Model United Nations, is itself in Consultative Status with ECOSOC.

### **The International Court of Justice (ICJ)**

The ICJ is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations on the same footing as the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat. The ICJ, located in the Peace Palace in The Hague, acts as a world court. It considers and gives rulings in disputes between states which have been submitted to it by states. In addition, other UN organs and agencies may call upon it for advisory opinions.

The Statute of the ICJ elaborates the general principles laid down in Chapter XIV of the Charter and forms an integral part of the Charter itself.

Article 33 of the United Nations Charter lists amongst others the following methods for the peaceful settlement of disputes between states: “negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement”. Some of these methods call for an appeal to third parties e.g., when two states are in dispute, they can agree to call upon another “neutral” state to “mediate” between them so that they resolve their dispute themselves with the help of this third party. This can happen, of course, without the ICJ being involved at all. “Arbitration” and “judicial settlement” go further than this. In such cases, the dispute is submitted to the decision of an impartial third party, e.g., a legally constituted tribunal or a court so that a binding settlement can be achieved, which is where the ICJ comes in.

The 15 judges of the ICJ are elected by the UN Member States. Voting takes place both in the General Assembly and in the Security Council, where for the purpose of the election, no right of veto obtains and the required majority is eight. The term of office of the judges is nine years, one-third of the Court, i.e., five judges, is elected every three years. Judges may be re-elected. Members of the Court are not representatives of governments but independent judges whose first task, before taking up their duties, is to make a solemn declaration in open court that they will exercise their powers impartially and conscientiously.

## The Secretariat and Secretary-General

The Secretariat has a staff of tens of thousands drawn from some 170 countries. As international civil servants, staff members and the Secretary-General answer to the United Nations alone for their activities and take an oath not to seek or receive instructions from any government or outside authority. Each Member State undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the staff and to refrain from seeking to influence them improperly in the discharge of their duties. The Secretariat staff work in duty stations around the world carrying out the diverse day-to-day work of the Organisation. They service the principal organs of the United Nations and administer the programs and policies laid down by them. The head of the Secretariat is the Secretary-General, who is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a five- year, renewable term.

The duties carried out by the Secretariat are as varied as the problems dealt with by the United Nations. These range from administering peacekeeping operations to mediating international disputes, from surveying economic and social trends and problems to preparing studies on human rights and sustainable development.



Secretariat staff also inform the world's communications media about the work of the United Nations, organise international conferences on issues of worldwide concern and interpret speeches and translate documents into the Organisation's official languages. Apart from New York, Secretariat staff work in other UN centres around the world.

## Conclusion

As we can see, the United Nations has lofty goals in the maintenance of peace and security, in social and economic progress and in promoting human rights. In simulating the United Nations during a Model United Nations conference, you are playing a significant part in achieving those goals.

*The United Nations depends on the support of individuals throughout the world, in particular you, the young, who will take over during this century and lead the world perhaps in a much better manner than my generation has. The Millennium Goals are ambitious. Their impact on reality depends on a great deal of effort, not only by the United Nations Secretariat but also by Member States. It is up to them, above all, to see that it is put into practice. But governments can't do it alone - they need to work in partnership with NGOs, civil society, the private sector and young people like yourselves and I hope you will remain engaged.*

*I know that you have already started thinking about how you can make the United Nations - this truly indispensable instrument - as effective and responsive as it can be, in the service of the people it exists to serve.*

*I want to thank you for your commitment, and hope that many more will follow your example.*

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, addressing the delegates at the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of THIMUN 2002