The General Assembly of the United Nations opens its sixty-ninth session on Tuesday, 16 September, at 3 p.m., at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

The initial week of deliberations will immediately be followed by a number of high-profile events, starting with the first-ever World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, a High-level plenary meeting—taking place on Monday and Tuesday, 22 and 23 September—aimed at shining a spotlight on issues facing indigenous peoples and sharing best practices for realizing their rights according to the objectives spelled out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other instruments. (For further information, go to http://undesadspd.org/IndigenousPeoples/WorldConference.aspx.) Also on Monday, 22 September, the Assembly will convene a special session to assess progress made over the past 20 years in implementing the Programme of Action for social and economic advancement agreed at the watershed International Conference on Population and Development—which took place in Cairo in 1994—and to renew political support toward achieving those goals “beyond 2014”. Another prominent event taking place that week, also on Tuesday, 23 September, will be the Climate Summit 2014, which is being convened by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to mobilize political will and catalyze ambitious action on climate change and sustainable development. (For further information, go to http://www.un.org/climatechange/summit.)

The Assembly’s annual general debate, when Heads of State and Government and other high national officials gather to present their views about pressing world issues, will open on Wednesday, 24 September, and run through Wednesday, 1 October.

For United Nations General Assembly opens on 16 September 2014

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Functions and powers of the General Assembly

The Assembly is empowered to make recommendations to States on international issues within its competence. It has also initiated actions—political, economic, humanitarian, social and legal—which have affected the lives of millions of people throughout the world. The landmark Millennium Declaration (http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/issues/mdg/ares552.pdf), adopted in 2000, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=A/RES/60/1), reflect the commitment of Member States to reach specific goals to attain peace, security and disarmament along with development and poverty eradication; to safeguard human rights and promote the rule of law; to protect our common environment; to meet the special needs of Africa; and to strengthen the United Nations. During the sixty-eighth session, the Assembly decided to launch—during the early part of the sixty-ninth session—a process of intergovernmental negotiations aimed at building consensus towards adoption of the post-2015 development agenda.

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

- 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

- 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 countries
- Consider reports from the Security Council and other United Nations organs

The Assembly may also take action in cases of a threat to the peace, breach of peace or act of aggression, when the Security Council has failed to act owing to the negative vote of a permanent member. In such instances, according to its “Uniting for peace” resolution of 3 November 1950 (377( V )), the Assembly may consider the matter immediately and recommend to its Members collective measures to maintain or restore international peace and security. (See “Special sessions and emergency special sessions” below.)

The search for consensus

Each of the 193 Member States in the Assembly has one vote. Votes taken on designated important issues—such as recommendations on peace and security, the election of Security Council and Economic and Social Council members, and budgetary questions—require a two-thirds majority of Member States, but other questions are decided by a simple majority.

In recent years, an 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

There has been a sustained effort to make the work of the General Assembly more focused and relevant. This was identified as a priority during the fifty-eighth session, and efforts continued at subsequent sessions 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 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 General Assembly President to propose themes for these interactive debates. During the sixty-eighth session, several thematic interactive debates were convened on a wide range of issues, including on: ensuring stable and peaceful societies; the rule of law; promoting investment in Africa; culture and sustainable development; and on water and sanitation. Also at the sixty-eighth session, the President convened six high-level events and thematic debates as a contribution to the elaboration by the Assembly of the post-2015 development agenda.

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-ninth session.

Elections for the President and Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly and Chairs of the 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. (See http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/gasess.htm#gaagen for more on the agenda.)

Credentials Committee

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

General debate

The Assembly’s annual general debate, which provides Member States the opportunity to express their views on major international issues, will take place from Wednesday, 24 September, through Wednesday, 1 October (excluding the weekend). 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.

The theme for the sixty-ninth session’s general debate will be, “Delivering on and Implementing a Transformative Post-2015 Development Agenda,” as proposed by the President-elect of the sixty-ninth session, H.E. Mr. Sam Kutesa of Uganda, upon his election on 11 June 2014. The practice of selecting a specific issue of global concern for the debate dates back to 2003 when the General Assembly decided to introduce this innovation in an effort to enhance the authority and role of the now 193-member body (resolution 58/126 of December 2003).

The meetings of the general debate usually run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. except on the first day when the evening plenary meeting is expected to adjourn at 7:30 p.m.

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 issues it is called upon to consider (176 agenda items at the sixty-eighth session, for example), the Assembly allocates to its six Main Committees items relevant to their work. The Committees discuss 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 the Plenary of the Assembly for consideration and action.

The six Main Committees are: the Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee), concerned with disarmament and related international security issues; the Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee), concerned with economic issues; the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (Third Committee), which deals with social and humanitarian issues; 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 decolonization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and the human rights of the Palestinian people; 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 for Assembly action. These include the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly, which will continue its work during the forthcoming session.

Regional groups

Various informal regional groupings have evolved over the years in the General Assembly as vehicles for consultation and to facilitate procedural work. The groups are: the African States; the Asia-Pacific 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-ninth session, the General Assembly has elected the President from the Group of African States.

**Special sessions and emergency special sessions**

In addition to its regular sessions, the Assembly may meet in special and emergency special sessions. To date, the Assembly has convened 28 special sessions on issues that demanded particular attention, including the question of Palestine, United Nations finances, disarmament, international economic cooperation, drugs, the environment, population, women, social development, human settlements, HIV/AIDS, apartheid and Namibia. 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. As noted above, the twenty-ninth special session of the Assembly, on the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, will convene on Monday, 22 September.


The Assembly decided, on 16 January 2009, to temporarily adjourn the tenth emergency special session on Gaza (http://www.un.org/en/ga/sessions/emergency10th.shtml) and to authorize the President of the Assembly to resume its meetings at the request of 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 mainly carried out by:

- Committees and other bodies established by the Assembly to study and report on specific issues, such as disarmament, peacekeeping, economic development, the environment and human rights
- The Secretariat of the United Nations—the Secretary-General and his staff of international civil servants