



Committee History and Structure
General Assembly Third Committee¹

September 19, 2011

The United Nations General Assembly (GA) was established in 1945 by the Charter of the United Nations.² Each member state has a permanent seat on this committee. Thus the GA is the congress or parliament of the United Nations. It “occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations.”³

In the GA, each UN member state has one vote. No matter how different in military and economic power, all are equal. Thus the United States’ vote counts the same as Egypt’s, and Bolivia has the same voice as China. This is opposed to some UN committees, such as the Security Council, which have limited membership or special voting rules. This feature gives the General Assembly a great deal of legitimacy on the world stage. It is a place where world public opinion can be expressed.

The GA covers all issues of global importance. Article 14 of the United Nations Charter gives the GA the power to “recommend measures for the peaceable adjustment of any situation, regardless of origin, which it deems likely to impair the general welfare or friendly relations among nations.” According to the Charter, the GA “may discuss any questions or any matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs” except “any matters relative to the maintenance of international peace and security which are being dealt with by the Security Council.”⁴

The majority of GA resolutions originate in one of the GA’s many subcommittees, such as GA-1 (disarmament and security), GA-2 (economic and financial), GA-3 (social, humanitarian, and cultural), and ECOSOC (economic and social). Thus, the relationship between the GA and its subcommittees is akin to that between the US Senate and its subcommittees. Resolutions passed by subcommittees are simply working papers. Only when the GA passes a resolution does it go into effect.

Resolutions passed by the GA are recommendations to Member States.⁵ Unlike Security Council resolutions, they are not binding. Nevertheless, GA resolutions are an expression of world public opinion. Moreover, they often inspire treaties and conventions that are binding on the states that sign them.⁶

¹ This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, faculty advisor, with contributions from Kelsi N. Steele (2009), Kedra Hildebrand (2009), Samantha Stephens (2010) and Lindsay Benov (2011). Copyright 2011 by Karen Ruth Adams.

² United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV, available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter>.

³ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website, <http://www.un.org/ga/about/background.shtml>. This quotation is from the General Assembly’s 2000 Millennium Declaration, Resolution A/res/55/2, Chapter VIII, Article 30, available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

⁴ United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

⁵ United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter IV.

⁶ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edition (Boulder: Westview, 2007), p. 33.

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The GA-3 is a forum for UN Member States to discuss social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, especially those related to human rights.⁷ Like the other main committees of the GA, the GA-3 was established in 1947.⁸ The GA-3 meets each fall at UN headquarters in New York, as well as in special sessions as deemed necessary.

Because social, humanitarian, and cultural issues have traditionally fallen within the domestic jurisdiction of states, GA-3 debates can be very contentious. Whether human rights are universal and when, where, and how they should be enforced, remain open questions.

Membership, Voting and Leadership

The membership of the GA-3 includes all 193 UN Member States. In addition, non-member states and other entities recognized by the UN as permanent observers may attend and participate in meetings, but they cannot vote. At present, permanent observers include Palestine and the Holy See (Vatican City), as well as a number of international organizations.⁹

Each UN member state has one vote on matters before the GA-3. Resolutions and reports pass the committee and go on for General Assembly consideration if approved by a majority of Member States. According to the official GA website, “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.”¹⁰ When the Chair determines that a consensus exists, a vote is taken by acclamation. Contentious issues are voted on in the traditional manner of in favor, in opposition, and in abstention.

Regional blocs and other alliances play an important role in building consensus. Blocs consist of both countries in the same region and countries from different regions that have similar concerns. For example, the Group of 77 is a group of less-developed countries that often vote together.¹¹

The Chair of the GA-3 chairs the meetings and corrects any procedural mistakes. The chairs of the GA-3 and other five main GA committees are elected annually by the members of their committees, with one chair from each world region. Elections are held at least three months before the beginning of the annual session. The other officers of the GA-3 (three vice chairs and a rapporteur) are elected at the beginning of each annual session.¹²

⁷ UN General Assembly Third Committee website, available at <http://www.un.org/ga/third/index.shtml>.

⁸ UN General Assembly, “Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly,” A/520, 2 December 1947, Rule 90, page 17, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F520&Lang=E.

⁹ United Nations, “Permanent Observers: Non-Member States and Entities,” available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/nonmembers.shtml> and “Permanent Observers: International Organizations,” available at <http://www.un.org/en/members/intergovorg.shtml>.

¹⁰ “Functions and Powers of the United Nations General Assembly,” United Nations General Assembly website.

¹¹ “The Group of 77 at the United Nations,” available at <http://www.g77.org/>. For more information on voting blocs, see Soo Yeon Kim and Bruce Russett, “The new politics of voting alignments in the United Nations General Assembly,” *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No 4 (1996), 629-652.

¹² UN General Assembly, “Rules of Procedure,” Section V, Rule 30, and Section XIII, Rules 99 and 103, available at http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_prez.shtml and http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_ctees.shtml.

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History and Challenges

In 1945, the founding members of the UN expressed their goals for the organization in Article I of the UN Charter. The third of these goals is:

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.¹³

The GA-3, ECOSOC, and the Human Rights Council take the lead in drafting resolutions on the social, humanitarian, and cultural aspects of these matters. Thus a major focus of the GA-3 is the promotion of international human rights.¹⁴

In 1948, the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which articulates civil and political rights such as the right to assemble and the right to vote, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to work, the right to health, and the right to take part in cultural life and benefit from scientific progress.¹⁵ The UDHR was primarily drafted in and debated by the GA-3.

According to historian Paul Gordon Lauren, the UDHR was revolutionary because states did “something that had never been done before: create a declaration of universally accepted...standards of human rights...and ... establish...a common standard valid ‘for all peoples and all nations.’”¹⁶ Thus the UDHR is best seen as a hope and a vision for the future, not a statement of the extent to which people enjoy these rights today. According to Lauren, John Humphrey, a member of the UN secretariat, described the GA-3 during the drafting of the UDHR as “perhaps the most turbulent body in the United Nations.”¹⁷

In 1966, the rights articulated in the UDHR were codified in two international treaties: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,¹⁸ and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.¹⁹ Since then, some states have signed and ratified both covenants, while others have agreed to uphold only one. In general, Western bloc states signed the former, while Eastern bloc states signed the latter. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been some cross-over among the two. But many debates remain about which of these rights are most important, and why.²⁰

These debates are at the root of many of the discussion of the GA-3. They are especially contentious, however, when it comes to country-specific matters. When particular states are criticized for failing to uphold certain social, humanitarian, and cultural standards, they and their allies often refuse to cooperate with the committee. Thus the body must be mindful of both the substance and the language of draft resolutions. As

¹³ United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” Chapter I, Article 1.

¹⁴ United Nations, “United Nations and Human Rights,” available online at <http://www.un.org/rights/dpi1774e.htm>.

¹⁵ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

¹⁶ Paul Gordon Lauren, *Visions Seen: The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 226.

¹⁷ Lauren, *Visions Seen*, p. 225.

¹⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>.

¹⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, 1966, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>.

²⁰ Thomas M. Frank, “Are Human Rights Universal?,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 2001. ..

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explained by Hamid al Bayati of Iraq, GA-3 Chairman during the 61st session (2006), which addressed human rights abuses in Iran, Myanmar, and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea:

“We need to put as much pressure as possible on countries to improve human rights conditions, and sometimes we are forced to follow the policy of name and shame.... However, we also don’t want to provoke them unnecessarily or accuse them of false things.”²¹

Recent and Current Events

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the centerpiece of the UN’s campaign to improve worldwide living standards, and are thus a perpetual part of the GA-3 agenda. The MDGs were passed in 2000 by the General Assembly.²² The goals are to meet the following benchmarks by 2015:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. A global partnership for development

Since 2000, the General Assembly has demanded and received annual reports quantifying country and regional progress towards the MDGs. In this way, the GA encourages both short- and long-term progress on the goals. The GA has also repeatedly urged all developed member states to commit to donating 0.7 percent of their country’s gross domestic product toward overseas development assistance.²³

The GA-3’s 2008 session occurred as the international financial crisis was unfolding. Thus as Chair Frank Majoor of the Netherlands explained, the focus was “very much on the impact on economic and social development.”²⁴ According to Majoor, one of the most important decisions was to submit for the GA’s approval a draft resolution suggesting an optional protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. If passed, “it would establish a complaint procedure for victims whose economic, social and cultural rights had been violated.”²⁵

Many lower bodies report to and take direction from the GA-3, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Human Rights Council.²⁶ In October 2008, 25 rapporteurs, experts, and working groups from the

²¹ United Nations, “Sixty-first General Assembly: Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural),” *UN Chronicle*, 44:1, March 2007, p. 38, available through Infotrac High School Reference.

²² United Nations, “About the MDGs: Basics,” United Nations Development Programme, available at <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.

²³ Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Security, Solidarity and Sovereignty: The Grand Themes of UN Reform,” *The American Journal of International Law* 99, no. 3 (2005): 630. On the .7% goal, see “The 0.7% target: An in-depth look,” Millennium Project website, available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm>.

²⁴ UN General Assembly, “Third Committee Approves Human Rights Programme for 2010-2011, Concludes 2008 Session,” Press Release GA/SHC/3943, 2 November 2008, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/gashc3943.doc.htm>.

²⁵ UN General Assembly, “Third Committee Approves Human Rights Programme for 2010-2011.”

²⁶ UN General Assembly, “General Assembly Adopts 52 Resolutions, 6 Decisions Recommended by Third Committee” Press Release GA/10801, 18 December 2008, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/ga10801.doc.htm>.

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Human Rights Council reported to the committee.²⁷ One of the ideas brought to the GA-3 by the Human Rights Council was the “right to development,” which the committee endorsed in a draft resolution.²⁸

In September 2009, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon congratulated the GA adopting its first resolution on the international community’s “responsibility to protect” (R2P) civilians from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and other atrocities even if this means violating national sovereignty.²⁹ In March 2011, the Security Council acted on this principle when it authorized “all necessary means” to protect civilians in Libya. After that, several members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assisted Libyan rebels in their fight to depose President Moammar Kadafi. In doing so, they exceeded the Security Council mandate to protect civilians. As a result, some observers, such as Philippe Boloignon of Human Rights Watch, argue that the international consensus behind R2P has weakened.³⁰ According to others, such as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, “The history of atrocity crimes is not one of acting too boldly, but of doing too little, too late. ...[T]hose facing mass rape and violence ... look to us for protection, not comforting words or another five years of debate.”³¹

In 2010, the Third Committee considered 56 draft resolutions,³² most of which passed both the GA-3 and GA Plenary. Topics included: racism (A/RES/65/240); human rights in Myanmar (A/RES/65/241); international cooperation on drugs (A/RES/65/233); and torture and other “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (A/RES/65/205). In addition, the GA-3 passed a number of draft resolutions related to the rights of women and girls.³³

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

At the 2011 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly Third Committee will consider the following topics:

1. Protecting the Rights of Indigenous People
2. The Role of Women in Military Conflict
3. Abolishing the Death Penalty

When writing your position papers and resolutions, think broadly about these issues, remembering both the overarching goals of the United Nations General Assembly, the human rights stated in the UDHR and other resolutions and covenants, and the perspective of the country you represent.

²⁷ UN General Assembly Third Committee website, 63rd session, <http://www.un.org/ga/third/63/>.

²⁸ UN General Assembly, “Third Committee Draft Text Endorses Recommendations, Future Workplan of Human Rights Council’s Working Group on Right to Development,” Press Release GA/SHC/3941, 2 November 2008, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/gashc3941.doc.htm>

²⁹ “General Assembly agrees to hold more talks on responsibility to protect,” UN News Centre, 14 September 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32047>

³⁰ Philippe Boloignon, “After Libya, the question: To protect or depose?,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 2011, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/aug/25/opinion/la-oe-boloignon-libya-responsibility-t20110825>

³¹ UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, “UN General Assembly discusses the Responsibility to Protect (R2P),” 25 July 2011, available at <http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article3521>

³² United Nations, “General Assembly Third Committee,” 13 September 2011, available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/third/index.shtml>

³³ For the full text of these and other 2010-2011 GA resolutions related to social, cultural, and humanitarian issues, as well as press releases summarizing their debate, see United Nations General Assembly, “Resolutions, 65th Session,” available at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/65/resolutions.shtml>

Recommended Reading

Amin, Samir. "The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South." *The Monthly Review*. available at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0306amin.php>

This is a scholarly critique of the Millennium Development Goals from the perspective of less-developed countries.

Annan, Kofi. "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All." Report of the Secretary General. 21 March 2005. Available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>.

The "Strengthening of the UN" sections of this report by the former secretary general summarizes some of the problems of the General Assembly. In addition, the "Freedom from Want" and "Freedom to Live in Dignity" sections summarize many contemporary issues related to human rights.

"Charter of the United Nations." Available at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>.

This document lays out the purposes and procedures of the UN. Delegates should be familiar with this document, especially Chapter IV, which addresses the GA.

Human Rights Watch. Website. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/>.

This non-governmental organization is an excellent source for human rights news and analysis, as well as special reports on specific countries and issues.

United Nations. "The General Assembly of the United Nations." Available from <http://www.un.org/ga>.

This is the official website of the General Assembly. It is the best place to start for information on the General Assembly's actions and duties, as well as the agendas and resolutions of its various committees.

United Nations. "General Assembly Third Committee." Available at <http://www.un.org/ga/third/index.shtml>.

This is the official website of the GA-3. It offers basic facts about the committee, its focus during this session, and links to many vital documents and subsidiary groups.

United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2011." Available from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/reports.shtml>

This report uses graphs and photos to show the work that has been done to meet the MDGs in various countries and regions since 2000. It also provides suggestions for meeting the goals by 2015.