Committee History and Structure
General Assembly Third Committee[1]

September 16, 2013

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]

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[1] This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, Montana Model UN faculty advisor, with contributions from Kelsi N. Steele (2009), Kedra Hildebrand (2009), Samantha Stephens (2010) and Lindsay Benov (2011). Copyright 2013 by Karen Ruth Adams.

[2] United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter IV, 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, 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.

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]

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[7] UN General Assembly Third Committee website, 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, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F520&Lang=E.

[9] United Nations, "Permanent Observers: Non-Member States and Entities," http://www.un.org/en/members/nonmembers.shtml and "Permanent Observers: International Organizations," 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," 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, http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_prez.shtml and http://www.un.org/ga/ropga_cttees.shtml .

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 and its subsidiary body, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), take the lead in drafting general resolutions on the social, humanitarian, and cultural matters (economic issuess are referred to the GA-2). According to the GA-3 website, social, humanitarian, and cultural issues include:

> the advancement of women, the protection of children, indigenous issues, the treatment of refugees, the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and the right to self- determination. The Committee also addresses important social development questions such as issues related to youth, family, ageing, persons with disabilities, crime prevention, criminal justice, and international drug control.[14]

The GA-3 also works with the Human Rights Council (HRC) to address the human rights situation in particular UN member states. Specifically, the HRC reports to the GA-3 on specific human rights situations and its recommendations and resolutions for dealing with them. In October 2012, the GA-3 received 45 such briefings.[15] The GA-3 then discusses the HRC's recommendations and usually endorses them.

In considering human rights in general and in specific countries, the GA-3 is guided by the General Assembly's 1948 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.[16] 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.'" 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.[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

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[13] United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," Chapter I, Article 1.

[14] United Nations, "General Assembly Third Committee," http://www.un.org/ga/third/index.shtml.

[15] United Nations, "General Assembly Third Committee."

[16] United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/.

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

[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.

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 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

Each year, the GA-3 sends about 50 resolutions to the GA Plenary for final passage. Of those, more than half address human rights issues, and several address the human rights situation in particular countries.[22] During its 67th (2012-2013) session, the GA-3 debated and passed resolutions on criminal justice, freedom of religion and belief, the right to food, racial discrimination, and human trafficking.[23]

Country-specific resolutions are often contentious. For example, in 2011, just 75 percent of states in the GA Plenary voted for a GA-3 resolution about human rights in Iran (89 in favor, 30 opposed, and 64 abstentions). The same year, a resolution about rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) was adopted with an 88 percent majority (123 in favor, 16 opposed, and 51 abstentions).[24] Both the fact that consensus was not achieved and the fact that 26 to 33 percent of UN member states abstained from these votes demonstrates that international human rights norms have yet to fully take hold.

In September 2009, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon congratulated the GA for 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.[25] 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.

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[20] Thomas M. Frank, "Are Human Rights Universal?," *Foreign Affairs*, February 2001. ..

[21] United Nations, "Sixty-first General Assembly: Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)," *UN Chronicle,* 44:1, March 2007, p. 38,.

[22] United Nations, "General Assembly Third Committee."

[23] For the full text of 2012-2013 GA resolutions related to social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, as well as press releases summarizing their debate, see United Nations General Assembly, "Resolutions, 67th Session," http://www.un.org/en/ga/67/resolutions.shtml Resolutions that originated in the GA-3 are indicated in the second column from the left by "C.3." The fourth column contains links to meeting records.

[24] UN General Assembly, "General Assembly Adopts More Than 60 Resolutions Recommended by Third Committee, Including Text Condemning Grave, Systematic Human Rights Violations in Syria," press release GA/11198 , 19 December 2011, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2011/ga11198.doc.htm

[25] "General Assembly agrees to hold more talks on responsibility to protect," UN News Centre, 14 September 2009, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32047

Since then, the international consensus behind R2P has weakened,[26] as is evident in the UN's inability to stop the civil war in Syria. Although the GA has twice condemned the violence by large majorities,[27] the Security Council has been paralyzed and unable to act on the situation.[28] According to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon,

> we face an urgent test here and now. Words must become deeds. Promise must become practice. You have all seen the horrible images and reports coming out of Syria: aerial bombardments of civilians; mothers weeping, clutching their dead children in their arms. Inaction cannot be an option for our community of nations. We cannot stand by while populations fall victim to these grave crimes and violations. We must uphold the core responsibilities of the United Nations.[29]

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.[30] 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

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[26] Philippe Bolopion, "After Libya, the question: To protect or depose?," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2011/aug/25/opinion/la-oe-bolopion-libya-responsibility-t20110825

[27] In 2011, a GA-3 resolution criticizing and calling for action to stop the civil war and improve the human rights in Syria was passed by the GA Plenary with a 92 percent majority (133 in favor, 11 opposed, and 43 abstentions). In 2012, after many thousands more Syrians had been injured, killed, and displaced from their homes, a similar resolution passed with two more votes in favor and one more vote opposed. For a summary of the debate on the 2011 resolution, see UN General Assembly, "General Assembly Adopts More Than 60 Resolutions Recommended by Third Committee." On the 2012 resolution, see UN General Assembly, "General Assembly Strongly Condemns Widespread, Systematic Human Rights Violations in Syria, as It Adopts 56 Resolutions Recommended by Third Committee," Press Release GA/11331, 20 December 2012, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/ga11331.doc.htm

[28] Security Council Report, "Syria," http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/syria/

[29] UN Department of Public Information, "Responsibility to Protect Faces Urgent Test 'Here and Now', Secretary-General Tells General Assembly, Stressing Immense Human Cost of Failure in Syria," press release SG/SM/14490 GA/11271, 5 September 2012, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sgsm14490.doc.htm. For a more recent speech on this matter, see UN Secretary General, "With Syria 'Biggest Challenge of War and Peace' Today, Secretary General says at Peace Palace Commemoration, 'Stop Fighting and Start Talking," Press Release, 28 August 2013, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sgsm15240.doc.htm

[30] United Nations, "About the MDGs: Basics," United Nations Development Programme, http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml.

country's gross domestic product toward overseas development assistance.[31] As of June 2013, progress on the 144 regional targets for the eight MDGs was as follows:

-- 51% (73) targets with insufficient progress to meet the reach the 2015 goals if prevailing trends persist
-- 44% (64) targets met or are expected to be met by 2015
-- 5% (7) targets deteriorated or have shown no progress.[32]

Many lower bodies report to and take direction from the GA-3, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Human Rights Council.[33] In October 2008, 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.[34]

In November 2011, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) António Guterres urged the Third Committee to address the forced displacement of people from their homes in response to "population growth, urbanization, climate change and food, water and energy insecurity." According to Guterres, "displacement patterns [have] changed over the years, and further dramatic changes [are] likely. The world community [needs] to recognize protection gaps … and open the way for innovative approaches to address those gaps."

According to Guterres, if UN member states do not develop the capacity and will to respond early and effectively to natural disasters, famines, and wars, states in other regions will be vulnerable to the complex humanitarian emergencies recently see in the Horn of Africa, which he described as "the worst I have seen in my time as High Commissioner." According to him,

All of us could see this escalation coming from a long way away. Nonetheless, we, the international community, were slow to react to signs that things were starting to deteriorate. What is worse, we also didn't have the capacity to prevent them from getting this bad in the first place… In such challenging circumstances, we must recognize our shared responsibility. And we must exercise our shared commitment."[35]

In 2012, the UNHCR estimated that 5.5 million persons in the East and Horn of Africa needed humanitarian assistance to avoid illness and death due to lack of food, water, and shelter. Most (20%) of those persons were from Somalia and were in or outside of refugee camps in Kenya.[36]

[31]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, http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm.

[32] United Nations, "Millennium Development Goals: 2013 Progress Chart," http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/2013_progress_english.pdf

[33] UN General Assembly, "General Assembly Adopts 52 Resolutions, 6 Decisions Recommended by Third Committee" Press Release GA/10801, 18 December 2008, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/ga10801.doc.htm.

[34] UN General Assembly, "Third Committee Draft Text Endorses Recommendations, Future Workplan of Human Right's Council's Working Group on Right to Development," Press Release GA/SHC/3941, 2 November 2008, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/gashc3941.doc.htm

[35] UN General Assembly "21st Century Proving to Be 'Century of People On the Move', Innovative Approaches Needed to Address New Patterns of Forced Displacement, Third Committee Told," press release GA/SHC/4024, 1 November 2011, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/gashc4024.doc.htm

[36] UNHCR, "2012 Regional Operations Profile - East and Horn of Africa," http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e45a846.html

Agenda Topics for the MMUN Conference

        At the 2013 Montana Model United Nations Conference, the General Assembly Third Committee will consider the following topics:

1. Refugees, Internally-Displaced Persons, and the Right to Humanitarian Aid
2. Development as a Drug Control Strategy

        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.

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 provides access to the GA-3's current draft resolutions and reports. For GA-3 resolutions and meetings from last year, see the source described above in footnote 23.

United Nations. "Member States." http://www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml

        This site provides access to each state's UN mission website, where you can research your country's position on the issues before the UN.

United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2013." 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.

United Nations General Assembly. "General Assembly Strongly Condemns Widespread, Systematic Human Rights Violations in Syria, as It Adopts 56 Resolutions Recommended by Third Committee." Press Release GA/11331. December 20, 2012. Available at http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/ga11331.doc.htm

> This press release summarizes a Fall 2012 GA Plenary debate on resolutions initiated by the GA-3. Search for your country's name to see what position it has taken on recent social, cultural, and humanitarian issues.

United Nations General Assembly. "Plenary Speeches." Available at http://www.unol.org/gaspeeches.html

> From this site you can read or watch your country's speeches at high-level GA Plenaries. This will give you a sense of its policy priorities and diplomatic style.