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THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations (UN) is an important international institution of our times. It was set up in 1945 with 51 countries as member nations and its current membership is 192. Most of the countries in the world today are members of the United Nations. The activities of the United Nations reflect the needs and hopes of not just the governments but the people of the world at large. The United Nations is, therefore, a world organization and its activities are wide-ranging. Without exaggerating, there is not a single aspect of our life that is not touched by the ever-increasing scope of the United Nations' activities.



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Objectives

After studying this lesson, you will be able to

- trace the origins of the United Nations (UN);
- identify its objectives and basic principles;
- describe the composition and functions of the principal organs of the UN;
- recall its contributions in the fight against evil practices like apartheid, colonialism and promotion of human rights;
- emphasize the need for restructuring of the Security Council to make it more representative;
- explain that the United Nations is the only hope for a peaceful and better world.

30.1 Origins of the United Nations

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed two World Wars that caused death to 80 million people. Each of those wars strengthened the determination of world leaders and people to set up institutions for peaceful world.

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Notes

Even before the complete defeat of the enemy countries (viz. Germany, Japan, and Italy) in the Second World War, the allied powers led by the USA, former Soviet Union and the UK started planning an organization in place of the League of Nations. The US president, Roosevelt and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter in August 1941 indicating their desire for a post-war peace institution. Then, a series of conferences followed at Moscow, Teheran, Dumbarton Oaks and Yalta to discuss various ideas and proposals. Finally, the United States hosted the San Francisco Conference in early 1945 to finalise and sign the Charter of the new organisation, the 'United Nations'. The United Nations was established on 24th October 1945. Since then, we celebrate 24th October as UN Day.

The Charter is the Constitution of the United Nations. It lists the purposes of the organization, the principles guiding the conduct of both the United Nations and its member countries, the principal organs along with their composition and powers.

30.1.1 Purposes and Principles

The Charter indicates, at the very beginning, four broad objectives of the United Nations. They are

- (i) to maintain international peace and security through collective measures for suppression of aggression and through peaceful settlement of disputes;
- (ii) to develop friendly relations among countries based on full respect for the principle of equality and self-determination;
- (iii) to achieve international cooperation in the economic, social, cultural or humanitarian fields, and
- (iv) to encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In pursuit of the above objectives, both the United Nations and its member states are required to adhere to a set of important guiding principles. The foremost among them is the principle of equality among countries whether big or small, strong or weak. The United Nations will not interfere in the domestic matters of the member countries.

The member states of the United Nations are expected to resolve their disputes with other states in a peaceful manner without endangering international peace and security. Further, the member states should refrain from threats or use of force against another member. It is the duty of the members to assist the United Nations in the enforcement of peace.

As we have already noted, the maintenance of international peace and security is a very important purpose of the UN. Other purposes are complementary to the purpose of peace. In discussing the role of the UN, we should bear in mind one basic aspect of the world body: it is a political body serving its member governments in the context of global politics. Neither the preferences of governments, nor the trends in international politics are static; they change from time to time. Hence, in the exercise of its powers, the UN cannot be rigid, mechanical or uniform. The role of the UN is marked, therefore, by flexibility and pragmatism. Generally, the UN preferred not to take a harsh view or condemn the aggressor country whenever it received complaints on a breach of peace. Instead, it directed its efforts to stop the fighting immediately and to seek withdrawal of troops to pre-war locations.



Intext Questions 30.1

Fill in the blanks :

1. The United Nations Charter was signed in 1945 at the city of _____ (Geneva, New York, San Francisco)
2. _____ countries were the original members of the United Nations (45,51,191)
3. The main purpose of the United Nations Charter is _____.

Mark the following sentences as True or False

4. Sovereign equality among the member states is a cardinal principle of the United Nations. (True/false)
5. The United Nations cannot normally take up domestic problems of its member countries. (True/ false)
6. The United Nations membership has not increased since its existence. (True/False)

30.2 Principal Organs : Composition and Functions

To promote the goals of peace and cooperation, the United Nations has six principal organs. They are;

- 1 The General Assembly
- 2 The Security Council
- 3 The Economic and Social Council
- 4 Trusteeship Council
- 5 International Court of Justice
- 6 Secretariat

Although these principal organs are inter-linked in many ways, each one of them is distinct in terms of its compositions and powers. Let us examine them one by one.

30.2.1 The General Assembly

Among the principal organs, the General Assembly is the central body. The principles of sovereign equality and universality are embodied in its composition. All members of the United Nations (presently 191) are members of the General Assembly. Irrespective of size or strength, every member has one vote in the Assembly. A vote cast by the United States, for example, is equivalent to the vote of Bhutan or Cuba. The Assembly discusses problems brought to it, makes recommendations on peace and security questions, admits new members, and adopts UN budget. On important matters, it adopts resolutions with the support of two-third majority. Procedural decisions require only a simple majority. The Assembly meets in regular session every year. It has convened 59 such sessions so far. The Assembly also meets, when need arises, in special sessions and emergency special sessions.

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The General Assembly is some times called as the world parliament. It can discuss any matter. It discusses matters which include peace and security questions, environmental protection, economic development, problems of colonial administration, disarmament, refugees, population explosion, use of global commons like outer space and deep seaboard. It can only make recommendations. As part of this function, the Assembly has adopted a number of important declarations containing principles of international cooperation in political, economic, social and other matters. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Declaration on Decolonisation (1960), Declaration on New International Economic Order (1974), Declaration on Rights of the Child (1989), Declaration on International Terrorism (1994) are only a few examples. They are common goals desirable for governments to implement in their national policies and programmes. The Declarations are not binding on countries. Yet, they carry great moral and political weight. Therefore, governments find it difficult to ignore them.

The Assembly has also adopted several laws like the covenant on civil, political, economic rights of individuals, the laws of exploitation of seas, laws prohibiting or controlling chemical and biological weapons, and so on. These laws are not like the laws of our Parliament which are automatically binding on all of us whereas these international laws and conventions are legally binding only on those states that agree to comply with them. The Assembly elects members of various organs. It appoints the Secretary General. It supervises the work of the Economic and Social Council, the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council and other bodies. The Assembly has the power to approve the budget of the United Nations and to apportion the amount among all the member countries.

30.2.2 The Security Council

The Security Council is the most powerful decision-making body of the United Nations. It has the main responsibility to maintain international peace and security. The Council is a contrast from the General Assembly, in respect of both its composition and the decision-making procedure. Unlike the Assembly, the membership of the Council is limited to 15 countries only, out of which five are permanent members. These five countries are China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA. The remaining ten members- called non-permanent members are elected by the General Assembly for a term of two years. They represent different geographical regions of the world like Asia, Africa, Latin America, Western and Eastern Europe. It was initially hoped that its small size could make it easy for the Council to take decisions on procedural matters by nine affirmative votes (simple majority). On substantive questions, the nine affirmative votes should include concurring vote of the permanent members. In other words, the Council cannot take decisions of major significance if any one of the five permanent members casts a negative vote. This special privilege of the permanent members is popularly known as the veto power. To abstain from voting in the Security Council is not veto. The veto provision has faced criticism from the very beginning. The veto power dilutes the principle of sovereign equality of member countries.

Veto: The five permanent members of the UN have power or privilege to cast a negative vote on substantive questions or matters. This privilege is known as veto power.

The power and functions of the Security Council are limited to the task of maintenance of international peace and security. In case, a dispute arises between two or more countries the Council can make appropriate recommendations in the interest of peaceful settlement of the dispute. Nevertheless, these recommendations are not binding on the unwilling



states. For example, on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, the Security Council resolutions are not legally binding on either India or Pakistan unless both countries willingly accept them. The Council can use extraordinary power to deal with wars or threats of war between countries. In such an event, the Council can determine who the aggressor is and can call for necessary steps to restore peace. These steps may include, at the discretion of the Council, economic sanctions like freezing of assets abroad, banning of exports and imports, or military action by land, sea or air. Notably, whenever the Security Council takes such steps, they are binding not only on the states directly involved in the war but also on all members of the United Nations. Once, the Security Council takes a decision, it is the duty of the member countries to carry out decisions. Obviously, the Council can take such important decisions only with the agreement among the permanent members. In the recent years, after the end of the cold war, the Council has frequently used its binding powers to deal with various problems of international peace and security. The role of the Security Council in discharging its functions depends on the specific circumstances of each case and the existence of broad agreement among the five permanent members. It is important to note that the Security Council has imposed varying sets of economic and diplomatic sanctions against 25 countries so far. These sanctions included cutting off diplomatic relations, stopping of oil imports and exports, banning weapons supplies, freezing of assets abroad, etc. Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, South Africa were among the targets of these sanctions. Since no armed forces are placed under the UN to fight an aggressor even after five decades of the Charter's commitment to it, it has requested member countries to contribute towards such a force to take military action for restoring peace. The UN authorized military action to push North Korean forces from South Korea in 1950 and Iraq from Kuwait in 1990. Notability in a recent case, the Council refused to authorize the US war against Iraq. Therefore, the US war on Iraq (2003) was illegal. The Security Council sends soldiers of member countries to a troubled area, with the agreement of the governments concerned, to bring calm and normalcy. This largely successful activity is known as 'peace keeping operations'.

30.2.3 The Economic and Social Council

The Economic and Social Council works to promote international cooperation in economic and social fields. It comprises 54 members all of whom are elected for a term of three years by the General Assembly, giving representation to various geographical regions. Decisions are taken by a simple majority of members present and voting. It considers international economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems. The Council has set up commissions to study and advise on the status of women, population, human rights, etc. It has the power to coordinate the activities of various specialized agencies like the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organisation etc. (which are discussed in a separate lesson in this book). Another important function of the Council is to bring Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to take part in its deliberations. The powers of the Council are quite modest as compared to its responsibilities. By means of study, discussion and coordination, the Council is expected to promote full employment, higher standards of living and solution of international economic and social problems.

30.2.4 The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council was created to supervise the working of the international trusteeship system. All the 11 territories, originally placed under the trusteeship system have become



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free. Now that there is no trust territory to be administered, the Trusteeship Council has ceased to play an active role in the UN system and does not hold meetings. The Charter has to be amended to dissolve this organ.

International trusteeship system was created for administration and supervision of such territories, which had not attained independence. It replaced the League mandate system

30.2.5 The International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice, known as the World Court, located at The Hague (The Netherlands), is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. The Court consists of 15 judges, who are elected jointly by the General Assembly and the Security Council for a term of nine years. Let us not confuse this court with national court like the Supreme Court of India. Only member nations, not private individuals, can bring cases before the Court. And the judgements are not binding. So far the Court has handled 72 cases.

30.2.6 The Secretariat

The Secretariat General comprises the international staff posted at the UN headquarters, New York and other locations throughout the world. They are expected to be impartial and independent in the discharge of their responsibilities. the United Nations and not any particular member country. The Chief of the Secretariat is the Secretary General who is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council for a term of five years. Since the inception of the Organization, six persons have served as the Secretary-General. They are; Trygve Lie of Norway, Dag Hammarskjold of Sweden (1953 – 61), U Thant of Myanmar (1961 – 71), Kurt Waldheim of Austria (1972 – 96) and Javier Perez De Cuellar of Peru (1982 – 91) Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt (1992 – 96) Kofi Annan from Ghana. Presently, Ban Kimoon of South Korea is occupying this prestigious office.



Intext Questions 30.2

Fill in the blanks :

1. The permanent members of _____ enjoy the veto power. (all organs of the UN/the Security Council)
2. How many territories did The Trusteeship Council used to administer? (5/11/15)
3. Which organ of the United Nations performs the function of coordinating the activities of the specialized agencies? (General Assembly/Security Council/Economic and Social Council)
4. Private individuals can bring disputes before the World Court. (True/False)
5. _____ is at present the UN Secretary General . (Kofi Annan/Bam Kimoon)
6. The judges of the World Court are elected by _____ (General Assembly/ Security Council/both Security Council and General Assembly)



30.3 Fight against Colonialism and Racism

As we know India was a British colony for nearly 200 years before Independence in 1947 India was not alone to come under colonial rule. Most parts of Africa and Asia were not free in 1945 when the United Nations was set up. For UN, ending colonial rule became essential for achieving world peace and progress. Freeing millions of people from foreign colonial rule is a historic achievement of the UN. The UN's anti-colonial territories covered two categories of dependent population. They were the trust territories for which UN was directly responsible. Then there were several territories administered by western colonial powers like Britain, France, etc. 'Trust' territories were placed under the responsibility of the UN until the people of the territories concerned would be able to determine freely their future status. Cameroon, Nauru, New Guinea, the Pacific Islands, Rwanda-Urundi, Somaliland, Tanganyika, Togoland were among them. By 1994 all trust territories became free with the help provided by the UN. Seven have become independent and four chose to merge with the neighbouring countries. The UN interest in the liberation for subject people extended beyond trust territories. Its built up this campaign against colonialism was the adoption of the Declaration of Decolonisation by the General Assembly in 1960, demanding immediate independence of all colonial territories and populations. Since that time, 60 territories have become free under the sustained pressure built in the UN. Namibia, Eritrea, East Timor are among the recent examples of successful fight against colonialism. There are now only very few like western Sahara waiting to exercise their free choice. There is some confusion that the fight against colonialism blesses the right of some disgruntled people to separate from their newly formed independent state. Right to 'self-determination' applies to people under foreign colonial rule only.

The UN opposition to racism in South Africa known as apartheid-is also remarkable. The organizations interest in the matter dates back to early 1946. South African white minority regime did not pay heed to the gentle pleas by the UN. Later pressure was built to force white South Africa government to end its policy of discrimination against the Black population. South African teams were passed to participate in international sports events. The Security Council joined the effort later by banning arms sales. South Africa felt the heat and agreed to end its policy in 1993. The widely respected black leader, Nelson Mandela was released after 27 years of imprisonment. The apartheid laws were revoked. Internationally supervised free elections were held, leading to the installation of a government under President Mandela in 1994. Soon after wards, the UN revoked all previous punishments and restored to the new South Africa its rightful place in the world body.

30.4 Promotion of Human Rights

Promotion of human rights culture through world wide human rights standards has been another major contribution of the United Nations. Nearly 80 declarations and conventions touching upon various facets of human rights have been adopted by the UN in the past five decades.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the first among the UN declarations. The day of its adoption-10 December 1948 is observed every year as the Human Rights day. The Declaration contains a broad range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all people are entitled to, without any discrimination. Admittedly, the Universal Declaration, as any declaration, is not binding on governments. However, it gave inspiration

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to the drafting of two legally binding covenants, one on economic, social and cultural rights and the other on civil and political rights. Both these covenants became applicable to the signatory states from 1976 onwards. These two covenants, together with the universal declaration, are known as 'the International Bill of Rights'.

The covenant on economic, social and cultural rights highlights the right to work in just condition, the right to adequate standard of living and the right to social protection. The Covenant on civil and political rights emphasizes freedom of movement, equality before the law, freedom of religion, freedom of participation in elections, and protection of minority rights. A specially constituted committee monitors the compliance of the signatory states to this covenant on HR. A remarkable feature is the UN is empowered under the civil and political rights covenant to receive and redress complaints from individuals against the behavior of their own respective governments.

The UN has adopted other declarations and covenants with the aim of stopping the practice of torture and racial discrimination or protecting vulnerable section like children, women and migrant workers

The activities of the UN include the convening of periodical conferences on human rights. Recently, in 1993 the UN organized at Vienna an international conference on Human rights. Acting upon the recommendations of the conference, the General Assembly appointed in 1994 the UN high commissioner for HR whose task is to promote more scrupulous respect for human rights throughout the world.

30.5 Need for Re-Structuring The United Nation

Although the United Nations has done a responsible job there are some obstacles which limit its performance. For example, a few organs of the United Nations have not changed, though the changes in the world around require it. Let us look at the Security Council as an example. Unlike the General Assembly; the permanent membership of the Security Council is limited to 15 countries only. Out of that, P-5 (China, France, Russia, UK and USA) are permanent. They were given permanent status in 1945 due to some historical and political reasons. The remaining ten members are non-permanent members elected by the General Assembly for a term of two years. This arrangement is six decades old, when most of Africa and Asian countries were not part of the United Nations. Now with membership of the world body rising by four times, the council's composition needs to be suitably changed. There is a strong case to add a few countries like India as permanent members. The member of non-permanent members should also be increased so that different countries can get a feeling that the Council works for their future. The Third World countries are of the opinion that United Nations is an agent of Western countries especially the United States. To correct this image, the number of Permanent members has to be increased. Japan, India, Germany, Brazil and Nigeria are the claimant for it. Japan and Germany are no longer enemy states and because of their economic strength and contribution to the UN budget are considered as the most eligible for permanent membership of the Security Council. India's contribution in several UN Peacekeeping forces and its active role in peace making processes facilitates its obvious claim to be a permanent member of the Council. India has been a founder member of the United Nations. Besides India is the second largest populous country and is the largest democracy in the world.



Intext Questions 30.3

Answer the following questions:

1. The declaration on Decolonisation was adopted in _____ (1945,1960,1995)
2. The UN was responsible for the administration of the trust territories. (True/False)
3. The native leader of the resistance movement against apartheid in South Africa was _____ (Mahatma Gandhi/Nelson Mandela)
4. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is binding on all member countries of the UN. (True/false)
5. Which day every year is observed as the HR Day? (26 January/10 December /15 August)
6. The two covenants on human rights came into force in _____ (1948/1976/1997)
7. Which important office was established on the recommendation of the 1993 UN conference on Human Rights (Ombudsman/High Commissioner for Human Rights).



What You Have Learnt

The United Nations was formed on 24th October 1945 with the objective of maintaining world peace and security. It has six main organs, the General assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Secretariat, the Trusteeship Council and International Court of Justice to achieve its multiple aims and objectives: played a key role in maintaining world peace. The UN tried to create better conditions for peace by working for ending colonialism and racism and also its efforts to promote human rights in the world have brought about encouraging results. Over the years, the UN acquired a moral status. The UN is engaged in promoting peace and progress through diplomatic and non-violent means; strong actions like sanctions and use of military force are rare.

The UN has its advantages & limitations too. Yet it remains the unique forum available to humanity as a whole to pursue the ultimate goal of building a world of peace, prosperity, equality and justice. Six decades are too short to realize these ideals; but with the support of the people and governments it can be made more effective to meet the challenges of the twenty first century.



Terminal Exercises

1. Discuss the purposes and principles of the UN charter
2. Compare and contrast the composition and functions of the General assembly and the Security Council.
3. Discuss the importance of the UN role in the decolonisation effort.
4. Explain the need for restructuring the Security Council

OPTIONAL MODULE-1

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5. Write a short note on the following
 - (a) UN Secretary General
 - (b) Universal Declaration of Human Rights
 - (c) Trusteeship Council
 - (d) Economic and Social Council



Answers to Intext Questions

30.1

1. San Francisco
2. 51
3. Maintenance of international peace and security
4. True
5. True
6. False

30.2

1. The Security Council
2. 11
3. The Economic and Social Council
4. Bam Ki-moon
5. Both the Security Council and the General Assembly

30.3

1. 1960
2. True
3. Nelson Mandela
4. False
5. 10 December
6. 1976
7. High Commissioner for Human Rights

Hints for Terminal Exercises

1. Refer to Section 30.3
2. Refer to Sections 30.4



3. Refer to the first paragraph in Section 30.5
4. Refer to first paragraph in Section 30.8
5. (a) 30.4 (b) 30.8 (c) 30.4 and 30.7 (d) 30.4

Extended Learning

Basic Facts about the United Nations (New York, 1995)

Image and Reality: Question and Answers about the UN (New York 1996)

Glossary

1. Allied Powers
2. League of Nations
3. Charter