

A briefing for the 75th session of the UN General Assembly – September 2020



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What is UNGA?

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) is one of the main bodies of the United Nations. It is the only UN forum in which all members receive equal representation, and as such it is the main debating chamber of the UN.

It is also responsible for the UN's budget, for the membership of the UN, and for electing and appointing other important roles within the UN, such as the members of the Human Rights Council, the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council and (in principle) the UN Secretary-General.

Unlike resolutions of the Security Council, resolutions of the General Assembly are non-binding on states but, as well as putting the thoughts of the world on record, they can be great motivators for action, particularly within the UN system: commissioning reports, finding funds and establishing offices and processes.

When does it meet?

The UN General Assembly meetings are divided into annual sessions which start every year in late September. The latest session, the 75th, began on 15 September. The sessions then run for almost a year.

However, the phrase UNGA is often used as a synecdoche for the “annual general debate” and sometimes the “high level plenary meeting” that take place in weeks 2 and 3 of the session. Week 2 is often referred to as “UNGA week” because this is when world leaders make speeches. In addition, important announcements and events involving high-profile participants such as CEOs and celebrities are timed to take place during this week. This year most of those events, and appearances, will be virtual.

One of the largest meetings of world leaders annually, UNGA week is usually an important part of the diplomatic calendar, providing ample opportunity for negotiations and discussions in the corridors of the UN headquarters. This year's theme “The future we want, the UN we need: reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism -- confronting Covid-19 through effective multilateral action” was chosen by the new President of the General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir of Turkey. The theme is often broad in order to avoid constraining leaders' speeches.

UNGA week tends to attract a lot of media attention, but the real work of UNGA takes place during the rest of the year, so we strive to support journalists and the public in continuing to follow the more substantive developments at the UN throughout the year.

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Virtual UNGA

For the first time in its 75 year history, the UN General Assembly will be held mostly online.

In July 2020 the President of the General Assembly announced that UNGA 2020 would, in part, be going virtual. As countries across the world continue to grapple with the impact of Covid-19, Tijjani Muhammad-Bande announced that members would be invited to submit pre-recorded remarks by their designated high-level official to be played in the General Assembly hall. These videos will be introduced by a representative of each State, who will be present in the hall.

This procedure will apply to the General Debate, as well as for the series of high-level events scheduled to take place. Although there was widespread speculation US President Trump would deliver his remarks in the General Assembly Hall, he will join the other leaders in remotely participating.

Also appearing by video on the opening day of the debate will be Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping, who ordinarily have diplomats deliver remarks as they do not attend the General Assembly in person. On Wednesday Venezuela's president Nicolas Maduro, who a significant number of countries including the UK see as illegitimate, will address the assembly by video. Missing as speakers are the leaders of Syria and North Korea. The first woman to speak will not come until [after a day and a half](#) with the 51st speaker: Zuzana Čaputová, President of Slovakia.

UNGA without the usual in-person presence of delegations and diplomats, leaders and changemakers, risks being a more [muted affair](#). The high-level week is usually one of the most important moments of the global political calendar as it is the unique moment when the UN becomes the meeting point for leaders who would otherwise never cross paths. Many of the most important moments usually come in the corridors of the secretariat building, or behind the stage of the general hall.

But all eyes are still keenly focused on the UN, albeit via our computers, and the need for global cooperation could not be more pressing.

Timetable and Committees

The session started on Tuesday 15 September. The start of the session includes a moment of silent reflection, and an address from the Secretary-General and the new President of the General Assembly.

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On Wednesday 16 September the General Assembly formed a [General Committee](#) consisting of the President, Vice Presidents, and committee chairs. They come up with a draft programme of work, which is then voted on by the General Assembly.

This programme of work divides up the tasks of the General Assembly between its main body and its six committees:

- [The First Committee](#): Disarmament and International Security (DISEC)
- [The Second Committee](#): Economic and Financial (ECOFIN)
- [The Third Committee](#): Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian (SOCHUM)
- [The Fourth Committee](#): Special Political and Decolonisation (SPECPOL)
- [The Fifth Committee](#): Administrative and Budgetary and General
- [The Sixth Committee](#): Legal

Each UN member can have a representative on each Committee. These Committees, led by their chairs, work up proposals which they present to the General Assembly for a vote. The President of the General Assembly, in consultation with the General Committee, is responsible for managing the workload of the whole.

On most issues, both within a committee and within the main or “plenary” session of the General Assembly, a simple majority vote of those in attendance is required, but some more substantive or important issues, such as admitting a state to UN membership, require a two-thirds majority.

Key events

- **21 September** - [Commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations](#) to present the outcomes of the UN75 initiative
- **22-29 September** - [General Debate](#)
- **17 September - 5 October** - [Country-specific high-level Meetings on Peace and Security](#): four closed meetings on Lebanon, Yemen, Libya and Central African Republic
- **23 September** - [High-level event on digital cooperation for future generations](#) convened by UNICEF/Generation Unlimited, ITU, UNDP and the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General
- **24 September** - [High-level roundtable on climate action](#) convened by the UN Secretary-General will showcase high-impact solutions by governments and real economy leaders, in line with the Secretary-General’s six climate-positive actions to recover better together.
- **29 September** - [Financing for development, high-level event](#) convened by the UN Secretary-General and the Prime Ministers of Canada and Jamaica aims to articulate a coordinated and comprehensive multilateral response to the urgent financing for the development crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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- **30 September** - [UN Summit on Biodiversity](#) convened by the President of the UN General Assembly aims to provide political direction and momentum for the development of a post-2020 global biodiversity framework.
- **1 October** - [Beijing +25](#) event will showcase concrete actions, plans and commitments to accelerate the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by 2030
- **2 October** - [High-level Meeting to Commemorate and Promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons](#) aims to advocate for resuming dialogue and negotiations for nuclear arms control and disarmament and to consider how States can return to a common path to nuclear disarmament

You can find a comprehensive list of all the meetings taking place [here](#).

To follow the up-to-date schedule of daily meetings, check out the [UN Journal](#), which is updated every morning. It contains information on the meetings of the day and forthcoming meetings, including:

- Official meetings (summaries will be added after the meetings, where applicable)
- Informal consultations
- Other meetings
- Forthcoming meetings

Also don't miss the [UN delegates handbook](#) that gives an overview for participants in UNGA of the ways the UN is encouraging UNGA interactivity. See also [this outline](#) of how to engage with the session via social media.

The finalised list order of speakers for the [General Debate](#) can be found [here](#).

By tradition Brazil goes first (Brazil's delegates were very effective in the very first few General Assembly sessions in getting to the podium first, and the tradition stuck!). Then, as host, the US goes second. After that, speaker order is by negotiation, but Heads of State (Presidents and Kings) tend to go first, followed by heads of government (Prime Ministers) followed by Foreign Ministers, followed by other diplomats.

First five speakers of day one:

- Jair Bolsonaro
- Donald Trump
- Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- Xi Jinping
- Sebastian Piñera

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Things that will be discussed

Covid-19

As the General Assembly takes place in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the PGA for the 75th session has urged speakers to focus their remarks on multilateralism in the context of responding to the pandemic.

The WHO has set out their [3 main messages](#) for this year's UNGA:

1. World leaders must support equitable access to Covid-19 tools;
2. We must maintain the momentum towards achieving the SDGs;
3. We must prepare for the next pandemic together, now.

At the top of the agenda will be the [draft resolution](#) on “international cooperation to ensure global access to medicines, vaccines and medical equipment to face Covid-19”. Member states started this conversation in April, but must make progress on negotiating a way to ensure equal access to any future vaccine.

In outlining his three priorities for the year ahead, Secretary-General Guterres [stated](#) that it would be a “stupid mistake” for states to not support the call for an affordable vaccine for all. He has urged the global community to build solidarity and view the vaccine as a public good that should be fairly accessible to all.

In April WHO launched the [Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator](#) platform for Covid-19 testing, treatment, and vaccine distribution. As part of the platform the [COVAX](#) Facility has been established as a mechanism to pool funding from wealthy nations and other donors, in order to develop and distribute Covid-19 vaccines. The scheme is led by WHO, GAVI, and the Coalition for Pandemic Preparedness Innovations so far has 172 countries signed-up and intends to deliver 2 billion doses of the vaccine to 20% of the population of participating countries by the end of 2021.

Another priority for the Secretary-General will be to pursue his call for a global ceasefire. Although the UN Security Council eventually agreed to a resolution supporting this in July, it came after months [of political inaction](#).

Unfortunately the delay in endorsing the ceasefire is typical of Security Council inaction with respect to Covid-19. Although the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution on Covid on 2 April, calling for “global solidarity, multilateralism and international cooperation” the UN

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Security Council is yet to come to consensus on a resolution to recognise Covid19 as a threat to international peace and security.

Last year UNGA hosted the first High-Level Meeting focused on [Universal Health Coverage](#). As the outgoing PGA noted, “the emergence of the novel coronavirus has shown that we have to continue to deepen multilateral cooperation in the health sector...to build a healthier world for all.” It remains to be seen if member states will take heed from this crisis and step up to take firm action for a fair and cooperative multilateral plan to tackle this crisis.

UN75

The UN celebrates this landmark anniversary not only at a time when the world is gripped by a health crisis, the economic and social fallout of which is yet to be fully released, but also at a time when the very fundamental tenets of the rules-based order and multilateralism are under threat.

On Monday 21st September, UN member states are set to adopt the UN75 political declaration at [the high-level event to commemorate the 75th anniversary](#). For the event, pre-recorded messages from heads of state and governments will be broadcast.

This declaration has been shepherded throughout the course of the last year by the co-facilitators appointed to the process, Permanent Representative of Qatar to the UN, Her Excellency Ambassador Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani and the Permanent Representative of Sweden, Ambassador Anna Enestrom. UNA-UK’s [Together First](#) campaign for global governance reform has closely followed and advocated around this process. You can find out [here](#) more about the different stages of the draft declaration, and [here](#) you can find out more about how Together First along with partners advocated to make sure the UN75 process was open, transparent and accessible to civil society.

UNA-UK issued statements on the political obstacles the draft faced, the [first](#) on the occasion the UK “broke silence”, the [second](#) when a member state objected to a reference of the Paris Agreement. Ultimately, the final agreed document is a reaffirmation of multilateralism and is inspiring and clear - the outgoing PGA along with the co-facilitators should be commended on such an outcome considering the current global political environment.

However while, the declaration is a positive commitment to multilateralism and the pillars of the UN’s mission, it is still not enough. Instead, this moment needs to be a launchpad for a serious agenda of reform, one that truly meets the scale of the challenges we face. The declaration mandates that the UN Secretary-General reports back before September 2021 with his recommendations for our common agenda.

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In January of this year the UNSG launched the “largest ever global consultation” under the banner of “the future we want, the UN we need”. Taking place during a moment of global upheaval, the urgent need for renewed international cooperation has only been heightened. The UN is to release its [report](#) documenting the outcomes of this global conversation, and we can expect it to highlight 10 main items that respondents and participants have highlighted as their main concerns for the UN.

As the SG has rightly said “business as usual” cannot be the route of post-Covid recovery. As we aim to “build back better” the United Nations must lead by example - the UN75 report and declaration should serve as the launchpad for a year of meaningful and innovative reform.

Beijing +25

2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) on gender equality. On 1 October a high-level meeting of the General Assembly will focus on the theme “Accelerating the realisation of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.”

This session will focus on the review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and assess the current challenges impeding implementation of the Platform for Action and attaining gender equality and women’s empowerment. As this important anniversary coincides with five years since the agreement of the SDGs, and the start of the “decade of action” to deliver them. Gender equality has been [recognised](#) as an essential factor in achieving all 17 Goals; special focus will be paid to the contribution of women’s empowerment to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda.

The high-level commemoration of Beijing +25 comes after the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was unable to carry out their periodic review in March 2020 as Covid19 forced the suspension of the session after just one day.

The agenda for women’s rights is facing a critical moment. A [major report](#) by UN women, published earlier this year, shows that progress towards gender equality is under threat, and many gains and advances are being reversed. Currently no country in the world is on track to achieve gender equality in 2030. Moreover, Covid19 has disproportionately affected those most vulnerable in our societies, and the impact on women and girls has been widespread. UN Women created a new [“in focus”](#) hub in order to share up-to-date information and analysis on the impact of Covid19 on women, and how gender equality matters in the world’s Covid response.

In the lead up to the October meeting, a [number of side events](#) supported by UN Women will highlight the fundamental importance of placing women at the heart of Covid-19 response and

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recovery. UNA-UK echoes the call from the Centre For Feminist Foreign Policy that urges governments and ministers to apply a [feminist perspective to their Covid19 responses](#), not only to safeguard existing progress, but to ensure women's rights do not face further setbacks during this crisis, and to kick start progress towards achieving the 2030 goal of gender equality.

SDGs

There is just a decade left to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals - and the annual [SDG progress report](#) released in July 2020 revealed that efforts to deliver the Goals has been insufficient. Covid19 has unleashed a crisis beyond the immediate health concerns, and has set back progress on the SDGs even further. It has been noted that Covid19 is no leveler, rather it has shone a harsh light on the vast inequalities that exist at global and local levels affecting the poorest and most vulnerable.

On Friday 18th September the UN Secretary-General hosted the first "[SDG Moment](#)" of the [Decade for Action](#). Member states were invited to participate at the level of head of state with the aim to:

- Set out a vision for a Decade of Action and recovering better from Covid19;
- Provide a snapshot on SDG progress;
- Highlight plans and actions to tackle major implementation gaps;
- Demonstrate the power and impact of action and innovation by SDG stakeholders.

This 'moment' was followed by a major media broadcast of a special 30 minute video entitled "Nations United" on Saturday 19 September. A [video](#) the UN hopes "will elevate the vision of the 2030 Agenda, showcase critical actions, and emphasize the need to transform our future to deliver the SDGs."

For the SDGs to be realised, and indeed for the Decade of Action to meaningfully commence, it is vital civil society, and other stakeholders beyond UN member states, meaningfully participate in discussion and action on the SDGs. Despite the limitations of a virtual UNGA, two key SDG initiatives will continue virtually:

- The [SDG Action Zone](#) will take place for 3 days from 22-24 September and aims to facilitate more in depth and detailed multi-stakeholder conversations on accelerating the SDGs.
- [The SDG Media Zone](#) is taking place virtually from 15-29 September under the theme *Science, Solutions and Solidarity to Transform our World*. A main feature of UNGA since 2016, this media zone is organised by the UN Department of Global Communications and brings together member states, journalists and media professionals.

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It is imperative that world leaders heed the call from Antonio Guterres to [“build back better”](#) and ensure that the post-Covid recovery is in line with the 2030 agenda.

Climate

The climate emergency has not abated, and although national lockdowns across the world led to a short-term improvement in carbon emissions, urgent action is needed if we are to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees and avoid the catastrophic consequences of not doing so.

UN Secretary-General Guterres has stated one of his three main goals for next year is to make sure the world is put on track to keep warming below 1.5 and achieve carbon neutrality through climate action by 2050.

At last year’s UNGA, the Secretary-General hosted the [largest ever high-level summit](#) on climate change. This year, climate change and climate action will be focused on primarily through the [UN Summit on Biodiversity](#), a high-level event that will hopefully see world leaders raise ambition and take action on protecting biodiversity.

2020 marks the end of the UN Decade on Biodiversity, and so far action to achieve global biodiversity targets, including those of the SDGs, has not been sufficient. Recently the UN published the fifth edition of its [Global Biodiversity Outlook](#) report in which they reported that the world has failed to meet a single one its targets to reduce the destruction of wildlife. While certain targets were partially reached, and there were examples of localised success, overall biodiversity is globally declining at unprecedented rates. Notably, the report highlights the importance of protecting biodiversity in fighting climate change and preventing future pandemics.

The Summit is a vital opportunity to establish political momentum to develop a post-2020 biodiversity framework to be adopted at the 15th Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, in Kunming, China, now postponed to 2021.

For more on global progress on the Paris Agreement, check out UNA-UK’s expert report [Climate2020](#).

Miscellany

We thought we’d brighten your UNGA week with a tour through some of UNGA’s most memorable moments.

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Longest speech (during high level week): In 1960 President Castro of Cuba stood at the podium and [said](#), “although we have been given the reputation of speaking at great length; the Assembly need not worry. 'We shall do our best to be brief, saying only what we regard it as our duty to say here”. He finally sat down 4 hours and 29 minutes later, having given the longest speech on record in the general debate. His speech gave a potted history of US aggression towards Cuba, US aggression more generally, the achievements of his government, a refutation of the claim that he was staying in a brothel and two sections for which he was cautioned by the chair: one in which he gave his opinions on the rival candidates in the US’ 1960 presidential election (“As far as we are concerned, both of them lack political sense”) and one in which he asked the chair for permission to be rude about the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, which was denied.

Shortest speech: This would appear to be Australia’s H. V. Evatt who took a mere minute in 1948 to thank the UNGA for electing him its President.

Worst prop: At the height of the cold war, the 1960 general debate was particularly stormy. In addition to Castro’s marathon, the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev became so incensed by the speech of the Philippine delegate that he [banged his shoe](#) repeatedly on the desk (this led to a further incident with the gavel – see below). However, the shoe was at least well made. In 13 2012 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [brandished](#) a crudely drawn cartoon bomb at delegates.

Strangest speech: Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe’s [speech](#) in 2015 included the line “we are not gays”, with limited context to widespread offence and confusion. However, in 2009 Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi gave an even stranger [rambling 90-minute speech](#), suggesting that JFK’s assassination was the work of Mossad, and Jack Ruby was an agent of Israel and that swine flu had been made in a laboratory. He also symbolically ripped a copy of the UN Charter, and complained about his jet lag. President Trump had his first brush with UNGA controversy as a consequence of Gaddafi’s speech, Gaddafi having stayed as a guest on Trump’s property, his [oversized tent](#) raising planning concerns.

Most awkward silence: In 2015 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spent an increasingly awkward 45 seconds [staring down delegates](#) in silence.

Most aggressive speech: While most General Assembly speeches attempt to avoid personal abuse there have been some extraordinary exceptions. In 2012 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [called](#) for Israel to be eliminated and questioned the Holocaust and the September 11 attacks. In 2006 Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called the American President George W. Bush [the devil](#), and claimed he could still smell the sulphur from Bush’s speech at the podium.

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Best speech: The title of best speech ever given to the General Assembly is of course highly subjective, but Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia's [speech](#) to the 1963 General Assembly is the only one to have been paraphrased and set to music by Bob Marley; his line that "until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned... the African continent will not know peace" forming the key refrain in Bob Marley's 1976 hit "[war](#)".

Did you know?

- The General Assembly has not always met at UN Headquarters. It first met in Central Hall Westminster, London. Over the first seven years the UNGA cycled between Flushing Meadows in New York and the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. It took up permanent home at UNHQ in 1954, although in 1988 it moved to the Palais de Nations in Geneva to allow Palestinian President Arafat to speak (the US had [refused](#) him a visa).
- The [gavel](#) used by the President of the General Assembly is known as "Thor's gavel" as it was originally a gift from the Icelandic ambassador Mr Thor Thors at the 1952 opening of 12 the new UN Headquarters. This gift was to mark Iceland's status as the world's oldest democracy. The precise gavel has been replaced twice: in October 1960, then President of the General Assembly, Frederick Boland of Ireland broke the first one when energetically using it to silence Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev who was banging his shoe on the desk. In 2005 the second gavel was stolen. The current gavel is made of 14 pear tree wood to a Viking design, and bears the Icelandic phrase "society must be built on the basis of laws" in both Latin and Icelandic

What is UNA-UK?

UNA-UK is the only UK charity devoted to building a credible and effective UN. We have a strong track record of securing change at the national and international level, from helping to reverse UK objections to the Cluster Munitions Convention, to leading a global campaign (1 for 7 Billion) to transforming how the UN selects its Secretary-General.

More about our organization and our aims can be found on our [website](#). Our present work is grounded in deep concern about the health of our international system, which, for all its flaws, has improved the lives of millions of people worldwide. Strained to breaking point, it will not endure unless governments actively work to improve it; governments, in turn, won't act unless people call for action – a principle at the heart of our theory of change: UK action > stronger UN > better world.

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Further questions?

UNA-UK are always happy to answer any further questions you have and senior members of staff will be available for interviews on request. Please contact us on info@una.org.uk.

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