



Simply put, United Nations Day is the birthday of the UN – an international organisation that strives to improve the lives of people everywhere. Created in the aftermath of the Second World War, the UN's founders hoped that it would help to prevent a repeat of the destruction by stabilising international relations and giving peace a more secure foundation.

Since then, the UN's role has expanded greatly. It now tackles a range of global challenges such as climate change and terrorism, which no one country can deal with alone.

## What does the UN do?

The 'blue helmets' worn by UN peacekeepers are among the most common images associated with the UN, and conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peacebuilding continue to be core activities of the organisation. But the UN is not only an international peacekeeper.

The primary aims of the UN are:

**AIM 1** Secure international peace

**AIM 2** Eliminate poverty

**AIM 3** Promote human rights

These aims cover a vast array of issues, including sustainable development, gender, health, education, trade and energy. From its headquarters in New York City to its local offices around the world, the UN tackles all these issues and works to improve the lives of people everywhere.

### What's in a name?

Legend has it that when US President Franklin D. Roosevelt coined the term 'United Nations', he burst into the bathroom only to find Winston Churchill, the visiting British Prime Minister, in the tub. Apparently Churchill brushed aside Roosevelt's apologies, saying 'the Prime Minister of Great Britain has nothing to hide from the President of the United States'.

## Who runs the UN?

The UN is not a 'world government'. Its purpose is to bring all nations together to work for a better world. All countries can join the UN by signing the UN Charter – this serves as the constitutional document of the UN and sets out the structure and powers of its main bodies. It came into force – i.e. became legally-binding – on 24 October 1945, which is now celebrated all over the world as 'UN Day'.

When the UN was founded in 1945, just 51 countries were 'member states'. This number grew steadily as more countries gained independence from their former colonies – a transition that the UN played a central role in – and today the UN has 192 member states.

The member states finance the UN's activities and govern its programme of work. They also contribute in different ways to its various functions, for example, by providing peacekeeping troops or medical equipment. To facilitate its role as an international forum for discussion, the UN has adopted six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

## What is the structure of the UN?

The UN is made up of many different bodies, each with a different function and remit. Two of the most well-known bodies of the UN are:

- ⇒ **The General Assembly:** all the UN's 192 member states meet in the General Assembly, which is the closest thing there is to a world parliament. Each country, large or small, rich or poor, has a single vote. While the Assembly's decisions are not binding on member states, they carry the weight of world governmental opinion. The first UN session was held on 10 January 1946 in the Westminster Central Hall in London.

### Did you know?

- The UN's two-year budget for 2010-11 is \$5.2 billion, less than half of the cost of the 2012 London Olympics
- Both McDonalds and Coca Cola employ more people worldwide than the entire UN system
- The UK is one of the top five donors to the UN's core budget, contributing 6.6% (£111 million) in 2009



⇒ **The Security Council** is responsible for maintaining peace, and tries to settle conflicts that threaten international security. All UN member states must respect and abide by its decisions. It can set up peacekeeping operations in countries. These operations protect civilians and help warring parties to resolve their differences peacefully. The Security Council has 15 members of which five are permanent: China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA. The permanent members can veto any major decision in the Security Council.

### Who works for the UN?

People from all over the world work for the UN. While the UN often recruits locally for work on the ground, to lower its costs and harness local expertise, UN staffers can expect to be posted to a number of locations during their period of employment. They are international civil servants and answer to the United Nations alone for their activities. When joining the UN, staff members take an oath not to seek or receive instructions from any government or outside authority. The UN Secretary-General, who is currently Mr Ban Ki-moon of South Korea, acts as the UN's chief administrative officer.

### How does the UN work to achieve its aims?

The UN's work reaches every corner of the globe. Much of this work is carried out by UN agencies focussing on a particular area of work, such as:

The **UN's Children Fund** (UNICEF) works to protect children's rights and supports opportunities for development, so that every child can fulfil its potential.

The **UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization** (UNESCO) promotes peace and international cooperation in education, the sciences, culture, communications and information.

The **World Health Organization** (WHO) leads the international response to diseases such as polio, malaria and avian influenza.

### What has the UN achieved?

The aims of the UN – peace, development and human rights for all – are lofty. Has it had any successes?

- ✓ *Since 1945 the UN has assisted in negotiating more than 170 peace settlements that have ended regional conflicts.*
- ✓ *More than 50 million refugees fleeing persecution, violence and war have received aid from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.*
- ✓ *The UN has created a comprehensive system of international laws to protect human rights.*
- ✓ *The World Food Programme, the world's largest humanitarian agency, provides food for on average 90 million hungry people in 80 countries every year.*
- ✓ *Polio has been virtually eliminated from all but four countries – Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan – as a result of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, the largest international health effort to date.*

There are, of course, also major challenges facing the UN. The economic downturn, for examples, has had a particularly strong impact on the poorest people across the world, as have large-scale natural disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti and the floods in Pakistan.

Dag Hammarskjöld, a former UN Secretary-General, has pointed out: the UN was not created to take us to heaven but to save us from hell. There are limits to what the UN can achieve.

Yet whether it is clearing landmines in Lebanon or working to stop communicable diseases reaching the UK, the UN continues to be a lifeline for millions of people around the world.

### What about me?

The UN doesn't only work in developing countries. It also makes a difference to lives of people in the UK:

- ✓ The International Labour Organization sets standards for equal pay and working conditions
- ✓ UNESCO has helped 151 countries to preserve over 900 stunning cultural and natural sites, including Stonehenge, the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey
- ✓ The International Telecommunications Union helps phone systems in every continent to connect
- ✓ The Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) sets limits for additives and pesticides – it was the first international body to recommend expiry dates on food packages

