



United Nations Association – UK

3 Whitehall Court,
London SW1A 2EL

T. 020 7766 3445
carver@una.org.uk
www.una.org.uk

Briefing for the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly

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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 the UNGA meet?

The UN General Assembly meetings are divided into annual sessions which start every year in late September. The current session, the 72nd, started on September 12. The sessions then run for almost a year. Indeed, the 71st session has only just finished and UNA-UK's Laurel Hart [reported](#) from one of its meetings just last week.

However, the phrase UNGA is often (incorrectly) 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 – last year's Summit on Refugees and Migrants is one example. One of the largest meetings of world leaders annually, UNGA week is an important part of the diplomatic calendar, providing ample opportunities for negotiations and discussions in the corridors of UN headquarters.

This UNGA week is the first for new Secretary-General António Guterres, and the first for the host President Trump. This will add to the already disproportionate media attention UNGA week tends to attract, but the real work of UNGA takes place during the rest of the year, and we strive to support journalists and the public in continuing to follow the more substantive developments at the UN throughout the year.

How does the UNGA work?

Three months before the session starts, the General Assembly elects its [President, 21 Vice-Presidents and the Chairs of the 6 Main Committees](#). For this 72nd Session H. E. Mr. Miroslav Lajčák of Slovakia – who stood as a candidate for UN Secretary-General last year – will be the President. In advance of the session the Secretary-General picks a name at random, on this occasion he picked the Czech Republic, and they sit in the “first” seat at the front left of the Assembly. All other countries then sit in alphabetical order following the Czech Republic.

Timetable and committees

The session starts on **Tuesday 12 September**. The start of the session includes a moment of silent reflection, and an address from the Secretary-General and new President of the General Assembly.

On **Wednesday 13 September** the General Assembly forms a General Committee consisting of the President, Vice Presidents, and committee chairs. They come up with a [draft programme of work](#), which is voted on by the General Assembly on **Friday 15 September**. 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 issues, such as UN membership, require a 2/3rds majority.

What can we expect in the first few weeks?

UNGA does not meet on **Monday 18 September** but a number of very important meetings will take place:

- The opening of [Climate week](#)
- [The opening of Global Goals week](#)
- A “[High-level meeting](#) on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse: building momentum for change”, hosted by the Secretary-General with a small number of invited speakers, at which the UN will launch its idea of a [voluntary compact](#) for nations to assist in efforts to prevent Sexual Exploitation and Abuse between 1500 and 1630
- A [high level meeting](#) chaired by President Donald Trump and featuring comments from the Secretary-General to discuss the United States’ agenda for reforming the United Nations

UNGA then meets for its “general debate” between **Tuesday 19 September** and **Monday 25 September**. By tradition Brazil goes first (Brazil’s delegates were very effective in the very first 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. The debate organisers also try to ensure that there is a good geographic mix to the speaker order, and that speakers’ personal schedules and availability are taken into account.

Provisional timings are [here](#). Highlights include:

- Around 0915 Tuesday 19 Donald Trump
- Around 1100 Tuesday 19 Emmanuel Macron
- Around 1230 Tuesday 19 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- Around 1245 Tuesday 19 Benjamin Netanyahu
- Around 0930 Wednesday 20 Abdel Fattah el-Sisi
- Around 1030 Wednesday 20 Hassan Rouhani
- Around 1100 Wednesday 20 Mahmoud Abbas
- Around 1245 Wednesday 20 Theresa May

Notable absences: Aung San Suu Kyi, Nicolas Maduro, Angela Merkel, Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping.

There is also a potentially important discussion at the Security Council on Peacekeeping on the **20 September** as well as a Signing Ceremony of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Tuesday 26 September sees a “High-level plenary [meeting](#) convened by the President of the General Assembly to commemorate and promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.”

Wednesday 27 and Thursday 28 September will be taken up by a “high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the appraisal of the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons”. Every year the UN devotes a part of this week to a high level meeting to draw attention to a particular issue. This year that issue is human trafficking. More information can be found [here](#). The subject is a priority for the UK, but it is unclear at present at what level the UK will be represented.

After that UNGA resumes its normal work. As UNGAs agenda is decided it will become clearer what issues will be discussed at what time, but we should expect:

- The election of Human Rights Council members in **October**
- The confirmation of the UN’s budget for 2018 to 2020 in **December**
- The election of non-permanent Security Council members in **June**
- The election of the next PGA and committee chairs in **June**
- The confirmation of the peacekeeping budget in **June/July**

Practicalities

UNGA meets in the General Assembly hall of the UN Headquarters building in Turtle Bay, New York (760 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan, New York City, USA).

Information for delegates, including accreditation, is available in the delegates handbook [here](#).

Information for the media, including accreditation (although the deadline has passed), is available [here](#) and in [this press guide](#).

Social media assets can be found via the UN’s “[VIP Social Media Space](#)” on Trello. (We would also recommend you follow UNA-UK on Twitter @UNAUK and Facebook /UNAUK)

Further details can be found in the General Assembly’s “[Information note for delegations](#)”.

UNGA week will be broadcast live on:

- [UN Web TV Facebook Live stream](#)
- [UN Web TV Twitter Periscope](#)
- [UN Web TV Website](#)
- [UN Web TV YouTube](#)

You can obtain broadcast quality download links from the United Nations AV Library: avlibrary@un.org

For further queries contact UNTV News & Facilities - (212) 963-7650/7667 - untv@un.org / (914) 367-9231 - redi@un.org or visit <https://www.un.org/en/media/accreditation/index.shtml>.

Five things UNGA will discuss

The following issues are already guaranteed to be raised, as they are the focus of particular events which have been scheduled over the next few weeks.

1. Financial reforms to the UN system

President Donald Trump has announced his desire to cut both the overall cost of the UN, and the proportion of the cost that is paid by the United States. As we explained [in a recent briefing](#), neither approach is straightforward, yet neither is impossible.

However, there are risks that too precipitous a rush to cut costs would damage the long-term efficacy of the UN, and thus actually increase costs in the long run. This is particularly true when it comes to peacekeeping, where [UNA-UK has been campaigning](#) for long-term sustainable thinking and restraint in budget discussions. Further, President Trump has indicated his desire to cut all funding to [family planning](#) and [climate change](#) programmes, a counterproductive move which – in addition to the human impacts – will increase long-term costs for the Organisation and the United States.

The fact that President Trump and the Secretary-General are co-hosting an event on 18 September suggests that they have been able to find some common ground with respect to reform. Thus far the [only details](#) about what that common ground might look like suggest a [fairly limited](#) agenda, focussed on reducing duplication and increasing accountability. However, new announcements cannot be ruled out.

2. The voluntary compact on ending sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers

Also on 18 September the UN will announce its [voluntary compact](#) on ending sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers. The five-page compact commits the UN to providing more assistance to victims of abuse; to working with member states to build capacity; and to strengthening investigation and accountability mechanisms. In return the UN asks states to pledge to cooperate with the UN; to conduct thorough screening; and to implement accountability measures, including reforms to domestic law to ensure that they can hold perpetrators to account.

UNA-UK is also campaigning on the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse and have recently published a [statement](#) regarding the compact. Overall, we welcome this move which will help focus attention on the crucial need for the countries that contribute peacekeeping troops to control and – if necessary – prosecute them.

3. “Climate week”, climate change and the Paris Agreement

This year’s “climate week” aims to draw attention to how accelerated climate leadership can drive innovation, jobs & prosperity. No doubt, much attention will focus on the US’s announcement of intent to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. UNA-UK hopes that the proactive response by other states and stakeholders including American businesses, mayors and communities will also attract publicity.

UNA-UK is launching a [major report on the Paris Agreement](#). Featuring contributions from António Guterres, Patricia Espinosa, AC Grayling, Achim Steiner, Lise Kingo and other experts, our publication makes the case that climate action is accelerating the shift in global power relations as the centre of gravity continues to move eastwards, southwards and downwards.

4. North Korea, Iran and nuclear non-proliferation

Tuesday 26 September is the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and will be marked by a high-level summit on the issue. Three issues are likely to be covered:

- North Korea: the UN Security Council were able to agree a set of targeted measures aimed at containing the North Korean regime. The Secretary-General has said: “The solution can only be political. Military action could cause devastation on a scale that would take generations to overcome.”

UNA-UK hopes the Secretary-General will repeat his offer of using his good offices to facilitate dialogue, and then sit back. While neither side seems to be interested in negotiation at present, this could have a calming effect, and pressure to change tracks, by keeping the option of negotiations open.

- Iran: the “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action”, colloquially known as the Iran nuclear deal, represents one of the most [effective and successful](#) attempts at making the world safer through diplomacy in recent times. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has [said](#) that “the nuclear-related commitments undertaken by Iran under the JCPOA (“Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” on Iran’s nuclear programme); are being implemented”. UNA-UK hopes that states will support IAEA’s conclusions.
- Nuclear ban treaty: UNA-UK supports the ban treaty as an important statement of intent towards a nuclear-free world. This is particularly important in light of the nuclear powers’ failure to uphold their part of the bargain written into the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which requires them to make meaningful steps towards disarmament leading to a nuclear-free world. Further information is available in our briefing: [here](#).

5. Modern slavery and human trafficking

Last year, UK Prime Minister Theresa May highlighted the issue of modern slavery and human trafficking in her speech to the UNGA. The UK subsequently made this a focus of its presidency of the UN Security Council, and the issue will now be discussed at the UNGA’s two-day high-level forum on 27 and 28 September.

Discussion will focus on the implementation of the [Global Plan of Action](#) on human trafficking, agreed in 2010. One of the key issues for the forum will be ensuring that states [differentiate](#) between the distinct issues of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Human trafficking is a form kidnapping, it consists of forceful movement of people for purposes of exploitation and can lead to modern slavery. Migrant smuggling consists of the (often voluntary) movement of individuals over state lines in violation of that state’s border regulations. Last year we explored these issues in an edition of our [magazine](#).

As such the issues are related, but they are not the same. An effective strategy for combatting modern slavery and human trafficking should therefore not make travel across borders for vulnerable individuals more difficult. A holistic approach to the issue would include steps to reduce vulnerability by increasing the number of safe passageways for seeking refuge and for migration.

Five things UNGA should discuss

Here are some issues that we hope will be raised during UNGA.

1. Rakhine state

One third of the Rohingya ethnic community have been driven out of Rakhine state in northern Myanmar and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has heard “consistent accounts of extrajudicial killings, including shooting fleeing civilians”. Both the High [Commissioner](#) and the [Secretary-General](#) have described the actions of the government in Myanmar as tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Several government officials, reportedly including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, have used [dehumanising language](#) about the Rohingya in a manner which is traditionally a precursor to atrocity crimes.

After catastrophic failures to protect civilian lives in Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, UN member states established the doctrine of “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) in 2005 to ensure that such atrocities would never happen again. But they did, in Sri Lanka in 2009 and in Syria and Yemen to the present day. In response to Sri Lanka the UN established the Human Rights Up Front (HRUF) initiative. Yet while some [reforms have been instituted](#) as a result, and actions taken, the international community now once again appears powerless in the face of significant atrocities.

The UN itself certainly still has room for improvement. In the run up to the Rakhine crisis there was [controversy](#) surrounding the UN’s “Resident coordinator”, the top official in the country, which indicates that there is still some way to travel in overcoming the challenges in delivering both a development and human rights agenda on the ground. The Secretary-General’s reluctance to refer to the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” in relation to Myanmar also shows that despite unanimous backing by UN member states in 2005, R2P remains challenging to implement in practice.

But processes and policies can only go so far. As ever, it is political will that is needed. States [should have acted earlier](#) and more strongly in response to violations against the Rohingya and targeted development assistance more precisely to prevent matters from getting to this point. States also [failed to hold Sri Lanka to account](#) in very similar circumstances perhaps leading the government of Myanmar to believe that they could act with impunity. States now need to act firmly and decisively through the Security Council, deploying whichever tools (mediation, sanctions, travel bans, criminal prosecutions, arms embargos, diplomatic pressure, intervention, peacekeeping and forced demilitarisation) are most appropriate to the situation, and deploying immediate humanitarian and refugee assistance to the region.

2. Reform of the development system

The Secretary-General has [announced](#) that overhauling the UN’s development system as one of his most pressing priorities. The need is clear: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN’s vision for the world we want in 2030, will require a formidable effort to achieve, and we are currently about halfway through the crucial first thousand days of the ambitious fifteen year agenda. The UN cannot and should not do all the work itself. Instead, it should support and coordinate activity.

The Secretary-General’s [proposals](#), which may form part of his reform package that he discusses at his event with President Trump on September 18, involve aligning the work of the UN with these Goals and ensuring that the work of the UN’s development arm (UNDP) and its emergency response and humanitarian assistance arm (OCHA) are reconciled without their different functions (short term needs and long term solutions respectively) being compromised.

Most importantly the Secretary-General wants to take the long overdue step of de-linking the functions of UN Resident Coordinators (the most senior UN official in the country) from UNDP Resident Representatives (the most senior development official in the country). As was seen in Myanmar, the fact that a Resident Coordinator is also responsible for development programmes can cause difficulties as they attempt to balance the good relations required to pursue an effective development agenda, with the moral imperative to raise human rights concerns.

We hope that these positive steps form a basis for yet deeper reforms. We would like to see the UN [moving away](#) from direct delivery on the ground, where it is no longer always the best-placed actor, and instead focus on encouraging, advising and monitoring states and other implementers.

3. Disaster management

War-driven [famine](#) grips Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia. [Mudslides](#) killed hundreds in Sierra Leone, 41 million people were affected by [floods](#) in Bangladesh and India, 2.5 million Mexicans are in need of aid after an [earthquake](#) and [typhoons](#) threaten China and Japan. Meanwhile, the US and Caribbean were recently hit by two of the largest hurricanes in recent memory: Harvey and Irma. Climate change means that this new state of affairs may represent a new normal.

Overstretched and underfunded, how is the UN expected to respond to increased demands in a climate where short-sighted populist nationalism increasingly sees politicians pretend that such problems can be stopped at a nation's border? At a UNA-UK [hosted event](#) in May 2017 Secretary-General Guterres outlined some of the answers, but we will be looking to UNGA to come up with others.

4. Peace and security architecture reforms

Secretary-General Guterres has sent a paper to staff and member states for consultation outlining his plans to part merge two UN departments: the Department for Political Affairs (DPA) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). Depending on how consultations go he may make a public announcement shortly, or use the event on 18 September with President Trump or the Security Council's discussions about peacekeeping on 20 September to discuss them further.

Under the proposals the roles previously held by DPA and DPKO will be shuffled into two new but still separate departments: the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO). These two departments would then co-manage three regional Assistant Secretary Generals (ASGs) and their teams, each of which would have combined responsibility for political and peacekeeping missions in their area.

The idea is to have the 'best of both worlds' combining the strengths of having two separate departments in New York with the strengths of having one united focal point for work on the ground.

The idea has considerable merit, but will require careful implementation. In particular, the new structure could create many overlapping lines of accountability and authority. It also remains to be seen what substance the new departments are tasked with delivering. This is an issue UNA-UK [has written](#) about [previously](#).

UN peacekeeping could certainly be done in a different, and cheaper, way. A smaller mission staffed by highly trained and disciplined troops could be as effective as a much larger mission. But the transition to this new kind of peacekeeping must be handled with [care](#), or else civilians in some of the worlds' most at-risk regions will pay the price for a failed transition.

5. The Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs provide a 15-year global blueprint to "promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom" in the memorable words of the UN Charter. As we argued in our [publication](#) in May, in these crucial first 1,000 days states must not prioritise low-hanging fruit, as many did with the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs' predecessors. They must target those groups most at risk of being left behind, such as refugees and migrants, and concentrate on the most transformational interventions, which may relate to Goal 16 on just, peaceful and inclusive societies, rather than more traditional development areas. UNGA will represent a clear opportunity for states to demonstrate a willingness to do that.

Miscellany

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

Longest speech: 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. However, the shoe was at least well made. In 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 (now President Trump had his first brush with UNGA controversy as a consequence of Gaddafi's speech, Gaddafi having stayed as a [quest](#) 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 September 11. In 2006 Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez [called](#) the American President George W. Bush the devil, and claimed he could smell the sulphur still.

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 in UN Headquarters. It first met in Central Hall Westminster, London, where earlier this year UNA-UK [hosted](#) the Secretary General. 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)

- [5 nations](#) – North Korea, South Korea, Tanzania, Moldova, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – sit outside of expected alphabetical order due to their wish to have their preferred adjective (such as Democratic or Republic) in front of their name.

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 transform 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.

Any 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 or +44 (0) 020 7766 3454 if we can be of any assistance.