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A briefing for the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly – September 2018

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What is the UNGA?

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) is one of the main bodies of the United Nations. It is the main debating chamber of the UN – all 193 member states are represented and have one vote each. 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 they can be said to reflect the weight of world opinion. They can also be great motivators for action: adopting shared agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals, making recommendations to states and other UN bodies, commissioning investigations and reports, and establishing conferences, 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 73rd, started on September 18. The session then runs for almost a year.

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 two and three of the session. Week two 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 – a high-level plenary meeting on global peace takes place on Monday 24 September, for 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, informal discussions and bilateral meetings in the corridors of UN headquarters.

UNGA week this year will be themed around ‘Making the United Nations Relevant to All People: Global Leadership and Shared Responsibilities for Peaceful, Equitable and Sustainable Societies’. This theme was announced in July 2018 by María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President-elect of the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

UNGA week tends to attract disproportionate 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.

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 six Main Committees](#). For this 73rd Session María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés will be the President (PGA). She was the Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the United Nations in Geneva from October 2014 to May 2017 and the Ecuadorian Foreign Minister from then until June 2018.

In advance of the session the Secretary-General picks a state at random, to sit in the “first” seat at the front left of the Assembly. On this occasion, the first country picked was Mali. All other countries then sit in alphabetical order following Mali.

Timetable and committees

The session started on **Tuesday 18 September**. The start of the session included a moment of silent reflection, and an address from the Secretary-General and new President of the General Assembly.

The General Assembly usually forms a General Committee beforehand, 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. This programme of work divides the tasks of the General Assembly between its main body and its six Main 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.

What can we expect in the first few weeks?

A number of important meetings will take place alongside the formal work of the UNGA, including:

- [Global Goals Week 2018 \(22-29 September\)](#), focused on the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- [Climate Week NYC 2018 \(24-30 September\)](#) launched in 2009 by The Climate Group. Events during Climate Week NYC will include, for example, the Sustainable Investment Forum North America, seeking to build knowledge on how to increase sustainable investment.
- On **Monday 24 September**, the [Nelson Mandela Peace Summit](#) sees the plenary adopt a political declaration prepared by the Permanent Representatives of South Africa and Ireland in May 2018.
- On **Monday 24 September**, US President Trump leads a high-level discussion on global drug problems.
- On **Tuesday 25 September**, the Secretary-General will lead a [high-level discussion](#) on UN Peace Operations. In preparation for this event at least 115 states have signed a “declaration of shared commitment” in support of the [Action for Peacekeeping](#) agenda.
- On **Wednesday 26 September**, a high-level meeting will be held on the fight to end tuberculosis, convened by the President of the General Assembly. This meeting was agreed by member states in February 2018.
- On **Wednesday 26 September**, President Trump will chair the UN Security Council (the United States has the monthly rotating Presidency of the Council and so has been able to arrange this) for a discussion on nuclear proliferation (although President Trump has tweeted that he intends to use the session to talk about Iran).
- On **Wednesday 26 September**, there will also be a commemoration and promotion of the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, convened by the President of the General Assembly.
- On **Thursday 27 September**, there will be a comprehensive review of the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases.

UNGA meets for its “general debate” between **Tuesday 25** and **Monday October 1**. By tradition Brazil goes first (Brazil’s delegates were very effective in the first General Assembly sessions in 1946 in getting to the podium first, and the tradition has stuck!). Then, as host, the US goes second. After that, speaker order is by negotiation, but Heads of State (presidents and monarchs) 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](#). They include:

- Around 0945 Tuesday 25 Donald Trump
- Around 1015 Tuesday 25 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- Around 1100 Tuesday 25 Emmanuel Macron
- Around 1345 Tuesday 25 Hassan Rouhani
- Around 2100 Tuesday 25 Theresa May
- Around 1330 Thursday 27 Mahmoud Abbas
- Around 1415 Thursday 27 Benjamin Netanyahu

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

After all this, UNGA resumes its normal work. As UNGA's 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** (sadly a shortage of candidates means these elections will be [uncontested](#))
- The confirmation of the UN's budget for 2019 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](#).

Information for the media, including accreditation (although the deadline has passed), is available [here](#). This year the UN is not producing a traditional "press kit" but have instead developed a [website introducing the President of the General Assembly](#).

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](#)".

A daily list of speakers, with links to on-demand video(s), the country statement (.pdf), a summary of the statement, a downloadable photo and audio files (.mp3) will be available from the [UNGA General Debate website](#) once the High-Level debate starts.

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>.

Six things the UNGA will discuss

1 A recommitment of values and a renewal of our international system – an opportunity for Global Britain?

María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President-Elect of the 73rd Session of the General Assembly, has [written](#) to members outlining the theme of this year's debate as "Making the United Nations relevant to all people: Global leadership and shared responsibilities for peaceful, equitable and sustainable societies". Further guidance in the letter suggests the president is hoping states will use the opportunity to publicly champion the value of multilateralism and cooperation.

This theme is very broad, as is the tradition for UNGA themes, but timely. In 2016 we commissioned a [poll](#) which showed that the British public have internationalist instincts, but that recent political trends have made them wary of an explicitly 'global' political agenda. The upsurge of populist nationalism globally suggests that the UK is far from unique in this respect.

Given the increasingly interconnected reality in which we live – with huge global challenges that require global solutions, and where events and decisions in other parts of the world can have an outsize impact on domestic agendas – UNA-UK believes that it is vital for senior politicians to make the case for multilateralism. At the same time, we believe they should also use this UNGA debate to suggest ways in which to address the continued exclusion, actual and perceived, of people from decision making processes at the international level.

This will be particularly important as we prepare for the 75th anniversary of the UN in 2020. UNA-UK believes that multilateralism today has to mean more than simply the relations between sovereign states: it must be a conversation we are all part of. This was the conclusion of the largest annual UN NGO conference last month, which called for a "[people-centred multilateralism](#)".

There is a significant opportunity for politicians to demonstrate leadership, through calling for an inclusive UN reform process which reaches beyond traditional UN circles and engages activists across the world. A good starting point could be calling on the UN to appoint an appropriately high-level focal point for civil society. This sort of intervention could be particularly beneficial for the permanent members of the UN Security Council, given the deep dissatisfaction with the Council's performance in the last year. It could also form an element for the UK's *Global Britain* strategy.

2 Finances and funding – running out of cash

The UN Secretariat budget is currently \$5.4 billion for the two-year period 2018-2019. The system as a whole spends about [\\$33 billion](#) a year, including a further \$6.7 billion for UN Peacekeeping and the remainder via voluntary contributions to the UN's development and humanitarian programmes, for all its offices worldwide. The UK contributes a total of around [\\$3 billion](#) to the UN – just over \$500 million in mandatory assessed contributions, the rest in voluntary funding – which works out as about 66p per person per week (55p of it voluntary).

The Secretary-General recently wrote to member states warning that the UN was running out of cash. As of 30 June, core funding had a deficit of \$139m, and he said the UN had "never faced such a difficult cash flow situation this early in the calendar year". The deficit was a consequence of states paying later in the year than usual.

While the majority of this money relates to late payments by the United States, the US has frequently been late with payments over the past years due to its budgetary year. Instead it seems the crisis is caused by a large number of mid-level donor countries that have been waiting until later in the year to pay. This includes: Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Argentina.

These cash flow problems are resolvable, but a more general issue remains. Years of efficiency savings and a reduction in voluntary spending by member states, compounded by demands from the Trump administration for deep budget cuts, have left the organisation dangerously under resourced. UN Peacekeeping has been [particularly hard hit](#) and most of the UN's responses humanitarian emergencies [are underfunded](#).

The biggest impact has been on programmes that the Trump administration opposes for ideological and (domestic) political reasons. The UN's work on reproductive health, for instance, has been [hit by the US's "global gag"](#) and the UN's Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has been plunged into crisis by the US's [decision to cut](#) all funding to the organisation. The organisation provides services to around 5 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and surrounding countries, and is considered to be a [cornerstone of stability](#) in the region. Other countries have promised to help plug the gap, but so far have only provided limited additional funds – far short of the \$350 million lost. The UK, for example, [increased](#) its contribution by £10 million (from £28.5 million to £38.5 million) and agreed to provide it earlier in the year than usual.

Meanwhile, as part of the Secretary-General's [reform proposals](#), the UN Secretariat will next year [move](#) from a two-year to a one year budget, and replace all of the overlapping five-to-seven year sequences of the UN Planning, Programming, Budgeting, Monitoring and Evaluation cycle (PPBME) with a simpler three year planning cycle.

In addition, the UN will go through its three-yearly [renegotiation of scales of assessment](#) with the US in particular looking to reduce the percentage of the UN's budget it pays. Providing 22% of the regular budget and 28.5% of the peacekeeping budget, the US is by some distance the largest financial contributor (however, as it is the only state to have secured a 'cap' on its contribution, it is also the only state to contribute less than the amount assessed by the contribution formula).

3 Atrocity prevention – still failing

[A recent report](#) of the UN Human Rights Council suggested that Myanmar's armed forces committed genocide and other crimes against humanity against the Rohingya. In Yemen, a schoolbus was destroyed by an American bomb dropped from a Saudi aircraft acting as part of a UK-backed coalition, killing 40 children. In Syria and Cameroon the world waits anxiously to see if further atrocities will follow those which have already occurred.

Meanwhile, the failure of the countries on the Security Council to uphold their [responsibility to protect](#) populations in any of these cases is yet again causing people to doubt the relevance of the UN to such situations and its ability to maintain global peace and security. This is compounded by the fact that China is the [only permanent member](#) of the Council not to have been recently complicit in the bombing of a hospital, although China too has worked to block action to address atrocities in countries such as Myanmar and Syria.

As UNA-UK [argued](#) in evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, the failure of the Security Council to act in such cases means that other parts of the UN system (such as the General Assembly) must step up, and use tools such as "[Uniting for Peace](#)" to participate in proceedings.

But while states bear the primary responsibility for these failures, the Human Rights Council report on Myanmar highlighted a number of failures by the UN system too, including some of the same structural issues that were highlighted by the 2012 report on UN action in Sri Lanka. Many of the Secretary-General's reform proposals, including changes to the country teams, are likely to help in the longer-term, but more needs to be done now to prevent recurrence of these horrific crimes (see below).

Sri Lanka itself, meanwhile, has indicated that it will use its speech at the UN General Assembly to ask the UN to drop demands for accountability against the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the final stages of their civil war in 2009. This demand is as incoherent as it is offensive. The accountability mechanism in question was agreed to by the Sri Lankan Government in collaboration with the Human Rights Council. The Sri Lankan Government will have to explain to its people and to the Council why it has failed to [keep the promises](#) it has made regardless of any discussion that takes place in the General Assembly.

In the UK, a [recent report](#) of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee suggested that Britain's approach to atrocities highlighted that "there is an urgent need to develop a specific

atrocities prevention strategy within the UK Government.” At times the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has made statements which suggest its policies do not fully appreciate the difference between atrocities prevention and conflict prevention – which are overlapping but distinct issues. The Committee recommended the Government devise a comprehensive atrocities prevention strategy as a matter of urgency, suggesting April 2019 as a deadline.

4 UN reform – some progress

As we highlighted in [our briefing](#) earlier this year, the Secretary-General’s reform agenda has three primary parts:

- streamlining the UN’s management functions to reduce costs and duplication;
- reforming the UN’s development work to align it with the Sustainable Development Goals and better integrate it with its work on peace and security;
- reorganising the UN’s peace and security work, emphasising mediation and better integration of the peacekeeping and political parts of the UN’s work.

The [latest](#) is that:

- the peace and security reforms are largely completed (there is further information about peacekeeping below);
- some of the more contentious management reforms, involving jobs potentially moving from one country to another, have been deferred until later this autumn. Others have been tweaked, so for example, rather than merging the Department of Management and Department of Field Support they will now be reorganised into a Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, and a Department of Operational Support;
- states agreed to many of the development reforms, but watered down others with the result that the new system will be a hybrid of the Secretary-General’s ideas and the old system.

One of UNA-UK’s primary concerns relates to the place of human rights in this reform agenda, particularly when it comes to development reform. As the situation in Rakhine state so sharply articulated UN agencies – despite scathing internal reports on their conduct in Sri Lanka and on previous occasions – continue to prioritise the delivery of development assistance over human rights and political concerns, with the consequence that they frequently find themselves complicit in the commission of atrocities.

The [Human Rights up Front](#) (HRuF) initiative of previous Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was supposed to ensure that this never happened again. Yet, in Myanmar it did. We [argued](#) at the time that this was because the structural changes necessary to make HRuF a reality had not been implemented. Key among them was the reorganisation of the system of UN Resident Coordinators (UNRCs) who act as the most senior officials of the UN in most countries.

UNRCs previously answered to the development agency, UNDP, and were thus symptomatic of the development-first approach the UN system had a tendency to take. Secretary-General António Guterres rightly pushed for UNRCs to be delinked from UNDP, both financially and managerially. States resisted this and a [compromise](#) was agreed involving a complicated three-part funding system, managerial control by the Deputy Secretary-General but via her role as chair of the development-heavy UN Sustainable Development Group, and special arrangements to ensure that UNDP retain an important role in the UN Country Teams that the UNRC will manage.

The Secretary-General has stated that further [details](#) and a plan for a 24-month transition process will be announced in mid-September. We will be watching closely to ensure that change is meaningful.

The UK, meanwhile, has [come in for criticism](#) for its human rights work at the UN from the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee and House of Lords [International Relations Committee](#). The former committee accused the UK of shielding human rights abusing allies such as Saudi Arabia, sacrificing human rights in the name of trade, and stated that "The FCO should publish clear and measurable objectives for its work at the UN".

Citing our evidence, it also had this to say on the impact of global power shifts on human rights:

16. The human rights backlash is accompanied by a broader shift in power towards the Global South. The P5 have lost credibility,⁵² and the General Assembly has become more assertive. A wider range of countries are growing adept at using the human rights system, albeit often for political ends.⁵³ This broader engagement is welcome, but there is a risk that it could strengthen the sceptics. In our inquiry into the UK's failed re-election campaign to the ICJ, witnesses pointed—among other factors—to a decline in respect for the Security Council among the UN membership, a wish by some to attack the privileges of the P5,⁵⁴ and a lack of UK influence in the General Assembly.⁵⁵ When we asked whether the FCO should shift resources away from the Security Council to build relationships with smaller states in the General Assembly, former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen said: “We have to do both and we have to staff up the UN”.⁵⁶

5 Action for Peacekeeping – progress on addressing poor performance

Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) is the name of the Secretary-General's [agenda](#) for peacekeeping reform and also for the “[declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations](#)” made by 130 countries in support of this agenda. It will be further supported by a [high-level event](#) and [social media campaign](#).

As our Head of Policy discussed in [a recent piece for IPI's Global Observatory](#), A4P has a number of parts:

- a recommitment by states to the concept of peacekeeping;
- a recognition – building on the work of the earlier “[HIPPO](#)” report – of the centrality of political peace processes to peacekeeping;
- a reorganisation of the Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department for Political Affairs (DPA) into two new Departments: the Department for Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (DPPA) and the Department for Peace Operations (DPO), in order to eliminate the arbitrary distinction that had previously existed between political and peacekeeping missions;
- some tough talk on the robust use of force in self defence and in the defence of civilians, building on the controversial [dos Santos Cruz report](#) released earlier in the year.

There is much in this agenda that is positive and welcome. However, UNA-UK is concerned that fundamental tensions between various stakeholders remain unaddressed, and that the views and needs of the “peacekept” – those living in the conflict affected area in whose name the mission exists – continue to be side-lined.

Perhaps more substantively, on Friday 21 September the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution on peacekeeping [performance](#). This resolution called for objective measures to be used for the assessment of the performance of both uniformed troops and civilian staff and for these measures to have an impact in terms of recruitment and “force generation” (the process by which military contingents are picked for use as peacekeepers).

UNA-UK is delighted by this development, which reflects recommendations that we have made as part of our [Mission Justice campaign](#) on sexual violence in peacekeeping.

Previously, while DPKO conducted performance assessments of various contingents, it was not clear to what extent performance reviews influenced force generation. While there had been recent efforts to place more emphasis on performance in decisions on troop composition, including by reaching out to additional troop contributors and by rewarding good performance, there was a perception that political considerations remained paramount – not least given the sensitivities involved with UN staff telling states their troops are not wanted. There was even less clarity with regards to civilian staff.

Performance isn't just crucial to achieving mission objectives. The ability to repatriate contingents and send home civilian staff is vital to attempts to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers. Further, as we told [the UK House of Commons International Development](#)

[Committee](#), it is in the interests of Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) who are better served by “establishing objective and evidence-based baseline criteria for contributing troops to UN peacekeeping missions” which “take the decision out of the hands of the overstretched DPKO, thus avoiding both the political sensitivities of UN officials being seen as ‘evaluating’ TCCs and reducing the risk of selectivity and politicisation that TCCs fear.”

Finally, as was [noted](#) by Security Council Report, “a recurrent element in the discussions about peace operations is the sense of disconnect between those who determine the mandates of peace operations and cover most of their financial burden, and those who deploy most of the troops and police to implement these mandates. Pressure from the US and others to reduce the peacekeeping budget and focus on the performance of uniformed personnel may add to this friction.”

It is therefore very important that donor states and permanent members of the UN Security Council, such as the UK, demonstrate “skin in the game” by [maintaining and developing](#) meaningful contributions of personnel to UN Peacekeeping missions. The old colonialist dynamic: “we lead, you bleed” is no longer acceptable and damages the coherence and legitimacy on which peacekeeping depends.

6 Nuclear security – a global threat

President Trump will chair the UN Security Council on Tuesday 25 September. This is the third time in history a US president has chaired the Security Council, following Barack Obama’s involvement in 2009 and 2014 .

It is still unclear precisely what the session will focus on with President Trump seemingly intent on focusing the session on Iran and other diplomats keen to widen out discussions to nuclear proliferation and security in a more general sense. In either case the meeting could be fraught.

On nuclear security, [the gap between the positions of nuclear and non-nuclear states has been growing for some time](#). The failure of the five official nuclear powers (N5 - also the five permanent members of the Security Council) to [take meaningful steps](#) towards disarmament has called the historic compromise at the heart of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) into question, and means that agreement at the 2020 NPT Review Conference looks unlikely. Non-nuclear states have instead invested their energy in the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). 122 states voted for its creation: [60 have signed and 15 have ratified](#). The treaty will come into force 90 days after the 50th state has ratified it. A high-level event and further commitments are expected on Wednesday 26 September.

The N5 have been highly critical of the TPNW process, even going so far as to stage a protest outside the room in which the text was being negotiated. This has further deepened ill feeling between nuclear and non-nuclear powers and makes further work on disarmament more difficult. Izumi Nakamitsu, UN High Representative on Disarmament Affairs, speaking in the House of Commons at a meeting UNA-UK helped to convene, [implored](#) the N5 to take a more nuanced view of the TPNW: “don’t ignore it, don’t attack it”.

If debate turns to Iran, it will hopefully present the international community with an opportunity to reiterate their strong support for the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#) or ‘Iran deal’ – one of the most effective diplomatic agreements of recent times and one of the few successful examples of negotiated non-proliferation. President Trump is likely to strongly condemn the deal, despite repeated confirmation from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors that Iran is complying with its commitments. In part this is due to wider regional dynamics and the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran where the US (and the UK) have firmly taken the side of Saudi Arabia, despite the [view of many regional and security experts](#), including the House of Lords International Relations Committee, that taking sides is “not in the UK’s interest, nor in that of its principal allies” and that it should instead take steps to encourage rapprochement.

Six questions NOT to ask

UNA-UK exists to make the case for an effective UN. We are always thrilled by the attention that is given to the UNGA during the high-level week and the light that is shone on this important areas of global governance. However, over the years there have been a number of questions that resurface time and time again. Our eyes will probably glaze over if we are asked any of the following – see the answers in the links instead:

1 Is the UN still relevant?

[Yes](#)

2 Should the veto be abolished?

[No](#)

3 Is the UN just a talking shop?

[No](#)

4 Is the UN a world government?

[No](#)

5 Does the UN deliver value for money?

[Yes](#)

6 Will the UK lose its Security Council seat as a result of Brexit?

[No](#)

Miscellany

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

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 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.

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. 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

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 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.

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.