

UN News

The UN’s 71st General Assembly: the world body rolls up its sleeves

By Javier Delgado Rivera

The world’s greatest diplomatic spectacle kicked off in New York City on September 13th with the start of the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). With an agenda that dissects the world’s main threats (e.g. the situation in the Middle East); the United Nations’ key challenges (e.g. strengthening its humanitarian and disaster relief assistance); and the organization’s plans (e.g. the reduction of military budgets), the work of the United Nations derives largely from the deliberations, standard-setting and policymaking that take place annually at the UNGA from September to August.

Comprising all the 193 country members of the United Nations (UN), the UNGA is the largest global forum of multilateral discussion on the full spectrum of international issues covered by the UN Charter.

The UNGA is also the only organ of the UN in which all its member nations have equal representation – each has one vote. The Assembly makes recommendations on issues such as peace and security; adopts resolutions; elects the ten non-permanent members of the Security Council; and approves the UN budget. However, some critics point out that the Assembly is in fact a toothless body, given that apart from budgetary matters, its resolutions are not binding on the members – although carry considerable political weight.

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Over the last seven decades the UNGA has initiated actions —political, economic, humanitarian, social and legal— that have had an impact in the lives of millions of people throughout the world. In its landmark 70th session of last year, the Assembly adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – the Global Goals- and 169 targets as part of a new sustainable development agenda. A historic commitment that will be followed up during the UNGA General Debate: the round of speeches delivered by world leaders in the Assembly Hall that occasionally attracts the attention of the world’s newsrooms. This year’s debate will take place from September 20 to 26 and will be framed around the theme “The SDGs: a universal push to transform our world.”

Each session of the UNGA is chaired by a president, a ceremonial but prestigious role that heads the September to August Assembly meetings. The President of the 71th UNGA is Fiji’s UN Ambassador Peter Thomson, who has already made clear what will be the focus of his tenure: “We bring special perspectives on climate change and on oceans issues and you can expect me to be vocal on those in the 71st session,” said Mr. Thomson in its acceptance statement two months ago. He took over the presidency from Mogens Lykketoft, a respected former Danish foreign minister widely praised for trying to enhance the transparency of the process to elect the next UN Secretary-General (UNSG).

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The race to become the UN's next Secretary-General

The 71th UNGA will also mark UNSG Ban Ki-moon's last Assembly, as he will be stepping down on December 31st after two terms of five years at the helm of the world body. The process to name Ban's successor started in late July when the UN's Security Council (UNSC) held its first anonymous and informal vote (called straw poll) to gauge support on who will succeed Ban Ki-moon.

After decades of criticism and relentless calls for transparency, candidates running to become the 9th UNSG have been invited to run public campaigns and have already been questioned by the Assembly, a first time in the history of the UN – on July 12th Al Jazeera even co-hosted a televised debate at the Assembly Hall. However, the fact that the four straw polls held so far by the UNSC have left António Guterres - former Portuguese Prime Minister and the previous UN High Commissioner for Refugees – as a frontrunner is perceived by many UN observers as a disregard of the calls by civil society groups and dozens of governments to favor one of the strong woman candidates for the role.



Whatever is the end result – Kristalina Georgieva, a well-liked European Union top official from Bulgaria is expected to enter the campaign and may still agitate the race - this UNGA session will grab the headlines of the world's media when the Assembly votes on the candidate 'recommended' to become the new UN Secretary-General – the UNGA has traditionally rubber-stamped the Security Council's 'recommended' candidate. The timing for this to happen remains unclear, although many Council members are eager to see the selection done by October to give the new person time to get used to the job.

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Events and meetings to keep an eye on

Because of the great number of issues considered in the agenda (they are 70 items in the provisional program), the Assembly's six committees and its numerous working and regional groups will hold several high-level meetings and side events. The events likely to draw the most attention are:

- **Summit for Refugees and Migrants**, September 19th, 8am to 8pm (GA Hall): <http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/summit>

This is the first time the UNGA calls for a summit at Heads of State and Government to address large movements of refugees and migrants - a historic opportunity to bring countries together behind a more humane and coordinated approach for a better international response on this urgent issue.

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This high level meeting will be a watershed moment to strengthen governance of international migration and a unique opportunity for creating a more responsible and predictable system for responding to large movements of human beings fleeing chaos, violence and poverty.

In addition to the Summit, key issues on refugees and migrants will be discussed in four side events (<http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/related-events>). Perhaps the most eye-catching of the four will be the one entitled “Combating xenophobic language in the media” to be held on September 15th (10 am – 1 pm). This event will look at how the dissemination of negative narratives towards migrants and refugees heavily impacts the perception of these populations, and hinders their integration in the host societies.

- **High-Level Meeting On Antimicrobial Resistance**, September 21th, 10am to 6pm (Trusteeship Council Chamber): <http://www.un.org/pga/70/events/high-level-meeting-on-antimicrobial-resistance/>

Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) has become one of the biggest threats to global health and endangers other major priorities, such as human development. This is only the fourth time in the history of the UN that a health topic is discussed at the General Assembly (HIV, noncommunicable diseases, and Ebola were the others). Heads of State and Heads of Delegations are expected to address the seriousness and scope of the situation and to agree on sustainable, multisectoral approaches to addressing antimicrobial resistance.

- **Pledging Conference for the Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund**, September 21th, 3pm to 6pm (Conference Room 2): <http://pbfpledgingconference.org>

On April the UNGA and the Security Council agreed that, to change the way the United Nations addresses violent conflict worldwide, the focus must not only be given to preventing the recurrence of wars, but also to preventing conflict from breaking out in the first place. But in its corresponding resolution earlier this year, the UN acknowledged that prevention and peacebuilding efforts are both underfunded and under prioritized, so that there is an urgent need to make it more sustained, adequate and predictable.

This conference will seek to increase the level of contributions, the number of donors and the predictability of the UN Peacebuilding Fund’s finances so that it delivers fast, flexible and risk-tolerant support to sustaining peace and prevent the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of violent crisis.

- **Plenary meeting on the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons**, September 26th (Trusteeship Council Chamber)

This event will present an opportunity to raise awareness of international community about the threat posed to humanity by nuclear weapons and the necessity for their total elimination in order to mobilize international efforts towards achieving the common goal of a nuclear weapon-free world. A timing discussion that comes just as North Korea conducted its most powerful nuclear test days before the 71th session of the UNGA started.