

The United Nations

A Reading A-Z Level Z2 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,235

Connections

Writing

Choose one of the six main divisions of the United Nations to research further. Write a report about the division and how it works to serve humanity. Present your report to the class.

Art

Design a symbol for the division you researched. Write a paragraph describing the meaning behind what you created.

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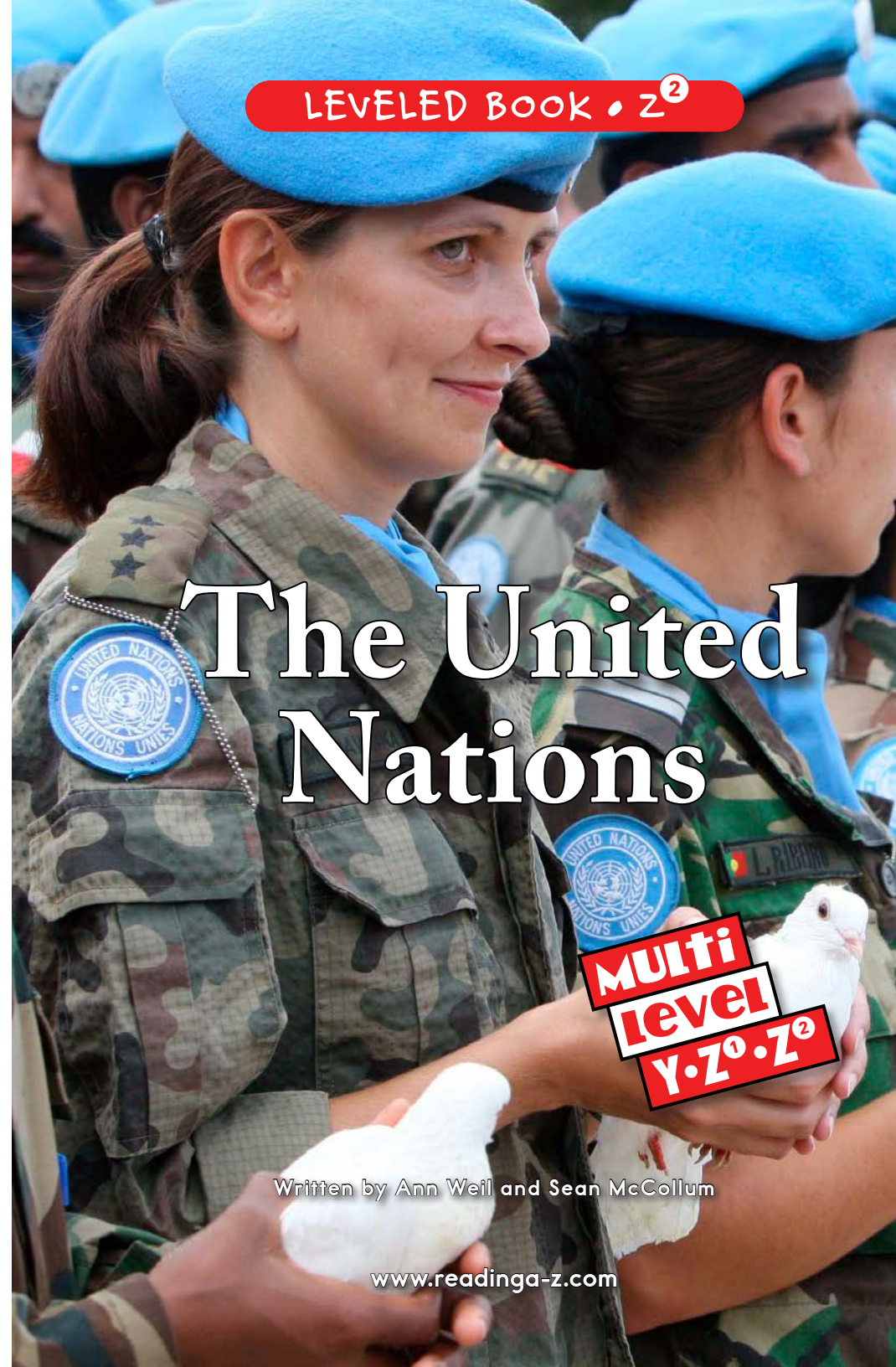
LEVELED BOOK • Z²

The United Nations

MULTI
level
Y•Z¹•Z²

Written by Ann Weil and Sean McCollum

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Glossary	
climate change (<i>n.</i>)	the long-term, lasting changes in Earth's weather patterns or the weather patterns of a region (p. 13)
committees (<i>n.</i>)	groups of people who consider or decide on a course of action (p. 9)
composure (<i>n.</i>)	the state of having control over one's emotions; calmness of mind or appearance (p. 8)
controversial (<i>adj.</i>)	causing much disagreement (p. 18)
diplomats (<i>n.</i>)	people who represent their government to another government (p. 5)
disarmament (<i>n.</i>)	the reduction of armed forces and weapons (p. 9)
human rights (<i>n.</i>)	the rights that are considered by most societies to belong automatically to all people, such as justice, freedom, and equality (p. 7)
humanitarian (<i>adj.</i>)	of or related to a person or group that helps people, especially by eliminating pain and suffering (p. 9)
international (<i>adj.</i>)	concerning two or more nations, or countries (p. 4)
negotiate (<i>v.</i>)	to try to reach a formal agreement through discussion (p. 8)
organization (<i>n.</i>)	a group or system acting for a specific purpose (p. 4)
sanitation (<i>n.</i>)	the act, process, or facilities used to keep a place clean or remove waste (p. 15)

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Focus Question

What is the United Nations, and how does it address the needs of the world?

Words to Know

climate change	human rights
committees	humanitarian
composure	international
controversial	negotiate
diplomats	organization
disarmament	sanitation

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Correlation

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Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+



Children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo receive help from a UN program called the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The news people hear about is usually bad news—war, violence, and other conflicts. However, in the big picture there has been a lot of good news to share since the UN was founded. For the first time ever, less than 10 percent of the world is living in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank. A Human Security Report study indicates that deaths from warfare have fallen steeply and fairly steadily since World War II. WHO reports that people's average life span has increased, and fewer children die before age five. Many factors contribute to these positive changes, but the UN has been one of them.

Humanity faces many challenges in the decades ahead—climate change and environmental concerns among them. There is no easy way to solve these and other problems once and for all. How the United Nations will rise to meet the challenges remains a big question.

Complexity and Controversy of the UN

The United Nations has programs and projects that touch almost every corner of the globe. It is active in trying to promote world peace and calm conflicts when they break out. It has ambitious goals to educate the world's young people, keep them healthy, and help them live full and productive lives. It seeks human rights for all people, whatever their race, religion, income, or gender.

However, the UN remains a **controversial** organization and has many critics. Some opponents complain that its operations cost too much and waste money. Others point to the Security Council's failures to prevent war and genocide—the mass murder of civilians. Another complaint is that the UN plays favorites, overriding the best interests of some countries in favor of others.

At the same time, the organization has done a lot of good in its more than seventy years. It provides food to more than ninety million people worldwide who might otherwise starve. It vaccinates over half the world's children, helping prevent international epidemics. It provides a forum where leaders can talk through their differences rather than fight about them.



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Delegates from all over the world meet to discuss the founding of the United Nations.

A Charter for Peace

It was one of the largest **international** gatherings in history. Some 850 delegates from about 50 countries had come to the United States to meet in San Francisco. More than 2,500 reporters and observers were there as well.

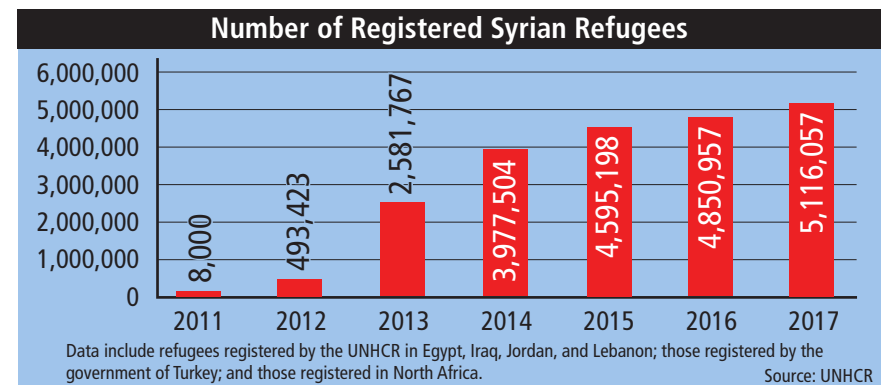
It was June 1945, and World War II was drawing to a close. Nazi Germany had fallen the month before. Japan continued to fight until the following August as the Allies—the United States, Russia, Great Britain, China, and others—closed in.

The international delegates in San Francisco met, debated, and argued about what should happen once the war ended. They made promises, outlined plans, and cut deals. Their great hope was to create an **organization** that could manage the sweeping changes to come.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees

There are about sixty-five million refugees in the world today. These people are forced from their homes due to war, violence, or natural disasters. Some refugees seek safety in their own land. Others escape or are transported to another country. In the mid-2010s, close to five million Syrians fled their war-torn home country. Many live in UN-run camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that there are more refugees in the world now than at any time since World War II.

The UNHCR must be able to respond quickly to a refugee crisis. Its teams deliver emergency aid, including food, clean water, shelter, and health care. Its ultimate goal is to help refugees return home safely. When that is impossible, it seeks host countries willing to take in these exiles.





The Sphinx and the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt are some of the oldest and largest structures in the world.

UNESCO

UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. This agency's overarching goal is to promote international cooperation in the areas of education, science, communication, and culture.

Identifying and preserving World Heritage Sites around the globe is one of UNESCO's highest-profile assignments. These are places of great natural beauty or cultural importance that are preserved with the UN's help. The Sphinx and the Pyramids of Giza are among the most recognizable monuments in the world. In 1995, Egypt had plans to build a new highway close to these ancient structures. A UNESCO mission persuaded the Egyptian government to move the highway farther from the sites to help preserve them.

On June 25, 1945, the full session of delegates came together for a final meeting at the San Francisco Opera House. "The issue upon which we are about to vote," said the meeting's chairperson, Lord Halifax of Great Britain, "is as important as any we shall ever vote in our lifetime."

The delegates were asked to stand if they approved the Charter of the United Nations, the blueprint for an international organization that **diplomats** had been working on for years. Every delegate stood. So did the three thousand people in the audience. The hall filled with applause.

World War II (1939–1945) had been the most destructive conflict in human history. Now, countries had come together to create an organization they hoped could keep the peace. That October, the United Nations officially opened its doors.



A delegate from the United States signs the United Nations Charter.



A UN-run center distributes food at a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.

The United Nations Today

Today, the United Nations is frequently in the news. Where there is famine, you may see white trucks stamped with “UN” in big black letters delivering food. Where tensions are high between countries and in the case of a civil war, you may see UN Peacekeepers in sky-blue UN helmets trying to keep order. Where an earthquake has leveled a town, UN workers may be hustling to raise tents to serve as temporary shelters.

More than seventy years after its creation, the UN continues to foster the goal of international cooperation. However, its membership has nearly quadrupled in size and now includes 193 member countries. Its headquarters are in New York City, but the organization employs some 44,000 people around the world. It also teams with governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver expertise and aid where it’s needed.



A health worker immunizes a child against polio in Nigeria.

The World Health Organization

The UN’s World Health Organization (WHO) is dedicated to promoting better health practices around the world. It offers advice and education about **sanitation**, hygiene, nutrition, and other factors that can help prevent disease.

In 1967, WHO led a global effort to put an end to smallpox, a deadly disease. In places where the disease was common, UN workers educated the public on how to prevent its spread. Vaccination programs were introduced worldwide. In 1980, WHO declared smallpox officially extinct—a worldwide victory for public health.

WHO also collects important data to alert UN members where health crises exist. For example, the organization developed plans to slow an outbreak of Zika virus. This virus, spread by mosquitoes, can cause severe birth defects in children born to infected parents.

The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council is a UN organ that is no longer in operation. Its responsibility was to help colonies controlled by other countries to gain their independence. The council helped guide the African lands of Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanganyika (now Tanzania), as well as others, toward self-government. In 1994, the Trusteeship Council suspended operations after Palau, its last trust territory, located in the Pacific Ocean, gained independence.

The International Court of Justice

The UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) is located in the Peace Palace, in The Hague, Netherlands. Fifteen judges, dressed in black robes with white scarves, sit on the court. Judges serve nine-year terms, and each of the five permanent members of the Security Council always has a judge on the court. No two judges can be from the same country.

The ICJ offers opinions and rulings about legal questions brought to it by UN member states.

It makes decisions about border disputes, the rights to natural resources such as fishing grounds, and confrontations between countries.



The ICJ, based in the Peace Palace, is also known as the World Court.

The world population has more than tripled since the UN was founded, so the organization's missions have grown in size and complexity. At the UN's core, though, remain the goals of helping people in trouble, promoting **human rights** and freedoms, and addressing global challenges that can only be addressed by countries working together. Its missions do not always succeed, but the UN is often willing to confront disasters no one else will touch.

The UN includes six main divisions, or *organs*. These are the Secretariat, General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, Trusteeship Council, and International Court of Justice. Each one serves a different purpose in trying to address the needs of a growing and ever more complicated world.

The League of Nations

The idea of an international organization like the United Nations was not new. Following World War I (1914–1918), countries came together to form the League of Nations. Its essential purpose was to maintain world peace. However, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was unable to convince the U.S. Congress to approve the treaty that would make the United States a member. Congress voted to keep the United States out, fearing that membership would force the country to surrender control of its own affairs. The League had some successes but slowly broke apart. It was dissolved in 1946 after the United Nations began operations.

The Secretariat

The Secretariat is the executive branch of the United Nations. Its headquarters in the United Nations Secretariat Building is a famous New York City landmark on the East River. From there, UN executives oversee the day-to-day operations of the global organization.

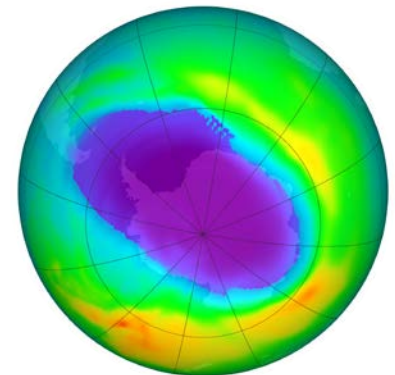
The secretary-general serves as the Secretariat's top executive. He or she guides UN operations and efforts, and often acts as the organization's main spokesperson. However, the secretary-general does not have commanding powers like those of the leader of a country or head of a company. Instead, this person functions more as a master communicator and top diplomat. The secretary-general uses powers of persuasion to convince others to **negotiate** or to help out during a crisis. It is a very demanding job—one that requires determination, **composure**, and a talent for communication.

The secretary-general, who is elected by UN members, serves a five-year term and may be reappointed. So far, no secretary-general has served more than two terms. There have been eight secretary-generals in the history of the UN, chosen from eight different countries on five continents.

The healing of Earth's ozone layer is a good example of a UN success. The ozone layer in Earth's atmosphere acts like a filter to protect all life from harmful radiation. In the 1980s, scientists discovered holes growing in this layer that put people at much higher risk for skin cancer.

The UN responded to this alarming problem by establishing the Montreal Protocol in 1987. This agreement required nations to greatly reduce the release of certain chemicals that were creating the holes. Since then, the holes have been shrinking, and the ozone layer has been healing. According to former secretary-general Kofi Annan, the Montreal Protocol was "perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date." It demonstrated that nations could cooperate to solve a global environmental problem.

For ECOSOC and the UN as a whole, the crisis of **climate change** may prove its next great challenge. Warming global temperatures, rising sea levels, and shifts in weather patterns are already affecting more and more communities and nations.



The purple spot shows the world's largest ozone hole, located over Antarctica, at its maximum size.

The Economic and Social Council

This organ of the UN deals with economic and social issues that impact cultures, countries, and the globe. ECOSOC, as it is known, includes fifty-four members that each serve overlapping three-year terms.

One of its ongoing missions is to bring attention to and support vulnerable groups. For example, ECOSOC's Commission on the Status of Women works to advance women's rights around the world. It also has the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to protect smaller, local cultures such as Aboriginal groups in Australia. In some places, these cultures are in danger of disappearing due to outside pressures.

One of ECOSOC's most important tasks is monitoring the balance between economic growth and preservation of the environment.

Economic development is important to meeting human needs. It creates new jobs and inspires new technologies. However, it can also use up or damage valuable natural resources. Clean air, water, and land are also vital to keep the planet healthy. Balancing these two needs is important but not always easy.

The General Assembly

The General Assembly (GA) functions as the main decision-making body of the UN. It is composed of the 193 member countries. The GA is where member countries discuss, debate, and sometimes vote on important questions. They may also gather to hear addresses by world leaders. The UN has six official languages: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese. Members often wear headphones so they can listen through an interpreter.

In some cases, the members of the General Assembly vote for or against recommendations, called *resolutions*. For example, the GA may agree to send **humanitarian** assistance after a natural disaster. In 2010, the Caribbean country of Haiti received financial and technical support from the United Nations to help rebuild after a huge earthquake. However, if resolutions are not specifically about internal UN issues, the UN has no power to force a country to obey them.

The General Assembly also includes smaller **committees** that study and advise on specific subjects. One committee deals with issues related to **disarmament** and international security, for example. It develops programs to try to reduce international violence.

The Security Council

The Security Council's main purpose is to work to maintain international peace and security. It is composed of fifteen member countries. Five seats on the council are always held by permanent members: China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States—the five main Allied victors from World War II. Each of them has the power to veto, or reject, any resolution, even if the other ten countries side against them. The other ten spots are voted on by the General Assembly to serve two-year terms.



The UN and Human Rights

The UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This document lists what all people deserve, regardless of their race, religion, or social and economic status.

According to the declaration, human rights include the following:

- the right to life, liberty, and security
- the right to privacy
- the right to an education
- the right to freedom of opinion and expression
- the right to own property



Peacekeepers from Lebanon and Italy prepare for the UN's International Day of Peace, which recognizes those who work to end conflict and promote peace.

The Security Council is often in the news when a war or other conflict breaks out. Members must be ready to meet on short notice in the event of an international crisis. In some cases, the Security Council sends armed peacekeeping forces from various countries to police a truce. However, these soldiers have limited powers. As a rule, they can only fight in self-defense and must not take sides if violence breaks out again. In the 1990s, about 2,500 UN Peacekeepers were sent to Rwanda, Africa. Their purpose was to prevent bloodshed between two ethnic groups, the Hutu and Tutsi. However, they could not prevent Hutus from murdering more than 800,000 Tutsis. This episode is considered perhaps the worst failure ever by the UN Security Council.