

The United Nations

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,952

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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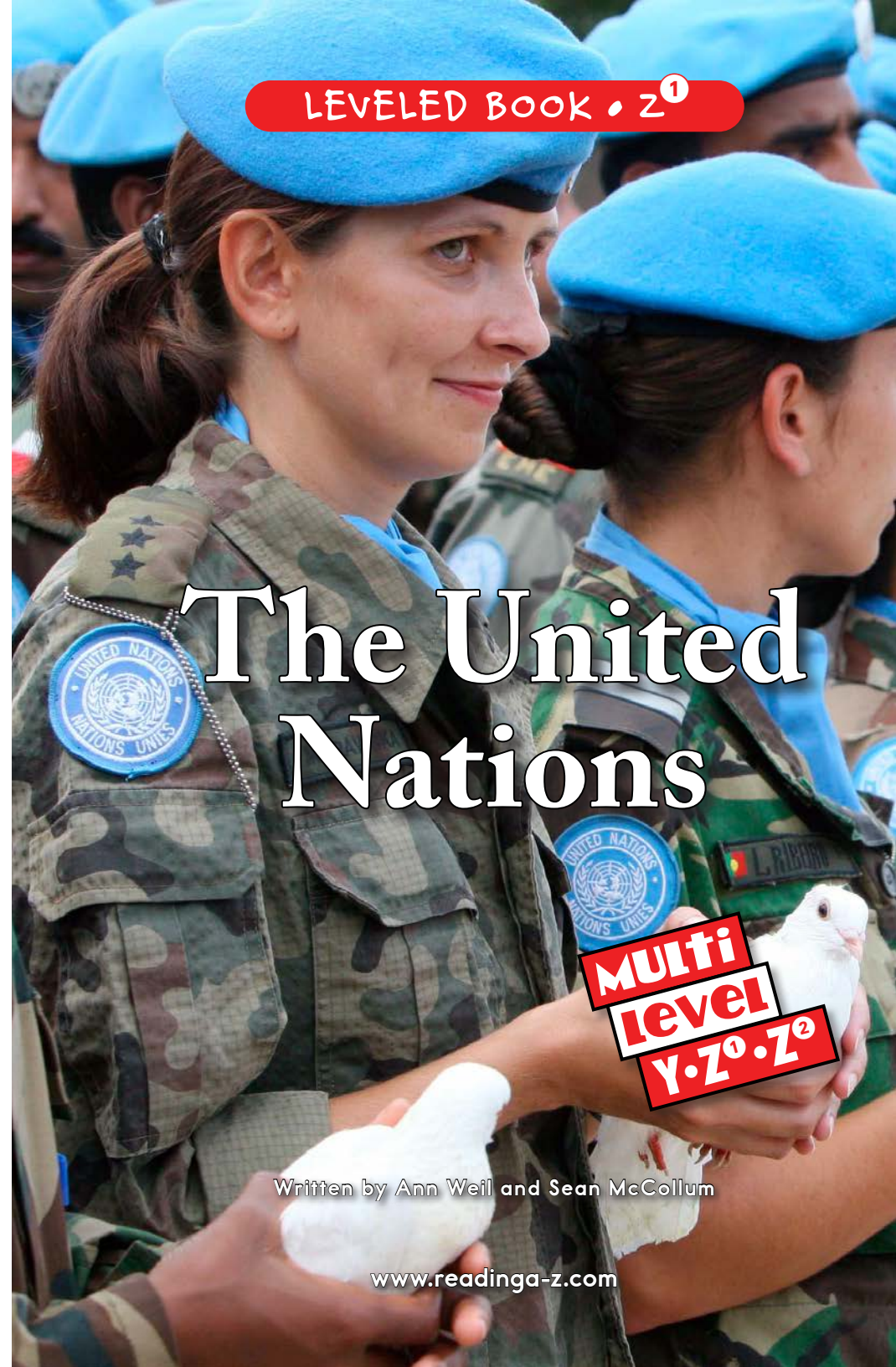
LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

The United Nations

MULTI
level
Y•Z¹•Z²

Written by Ann Weil and Sean McCollum

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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	humanitarian
committees	international
controversial	negotiate
diplomats	organization
disarmament	sanitation
human rights	vaccination

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60



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

Some 850 **international** delegates from about 50 countries met in San Francisco, California, to discuss what should happen once the war ended. Their great hope was to create an **organization** that could handle the sweeping changes to come.

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 head of the meeting, 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 agreed to the Charter of the United Nations, the guide for an international organization that **diplomats** had been working on for years. Everyone stood. 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 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 often in the news. Where there is famine, you may see white trucks stamped with “UN” in big black letters delivering food. Where there is fighting between countries or in the case of a civil war, you may see UN Peacekeepers in sky-blue helmets trying to keep order. Where an earthquake has leveled a town, UN workers may be raising tents to serve as temporary shelters.

More than seventy years after its creation, the UN still aims for international cooperation. However, it now includes 193 member countries. Its headquarters are in New York City, but the organization employs some 44,000 people around the world. The UN also teams with governments and other organizations to deliver aid where it’s needed.

Since the world's population now tops seven billion people, the UN and its missions have also grown in size and complexity. However, at the UN's core remain the goals of helping people in trouble, promoting **human rights**, and addressing global challenges. Its missions do not always succeed, but the UN is often willing to handle disasters no one else will touch.

The UN includes six main departments, or *organs*. These include 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 complex 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 Building recently underwent a five-year, \$1 billion renovation.

The Secretariat

The Secretariat is the executive branch of the United Nations. Its headquarters 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 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. Instead, this person functions more like a top diplomat. The secretary-general uses powers of persuasion to convince others to **negotiate** or to help out during a crisis. It is a demanding job that requires determination and a talent for communication.

The secretary-general, who is elected by UN members, serves a five-year term and may be reappointed. There have been eight secretary-generals in the history of the UN, all chosen from different countries.

The General Assembly

The General Assembly (GA) is the main decision-making body of the UN. It is composed of the 193 member countries. The GA is where member countries discuss 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 GA vote for or against recommendations, called *resolutions*. For example, the General Assembly may agree to send **humanitarian** aid after a natural disaster. In 2010, the Caribbean country of Haiti received support from the United Nations to help rebuild after a huge earthquake. However, if a resolution is not specifically about internal UN issues, the UN has no power to force a country to obey it.

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

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 Allies from World War II. Each of them



Peacekeepers from Lebanon and Italy prepare for the UN's International Day of Peace.

has the power to reject any resolution, even if the other ten countries side against them. The Security Council 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 different countries to police a truce. However, these soldiers have limited powers. 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. It is considered perhaps the worst failure ever by the UN Security Council.

The Economic and Social Council

This organ of the UN deals with economic and social issues that impact the globe. ECOSOC, as it is known, includes fifty-four members.

One of its missions is to 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 local cultures such as Aboriginal groups in Australia. In some places, these cultures are in danger of disappearing.



The UN and Human Rights

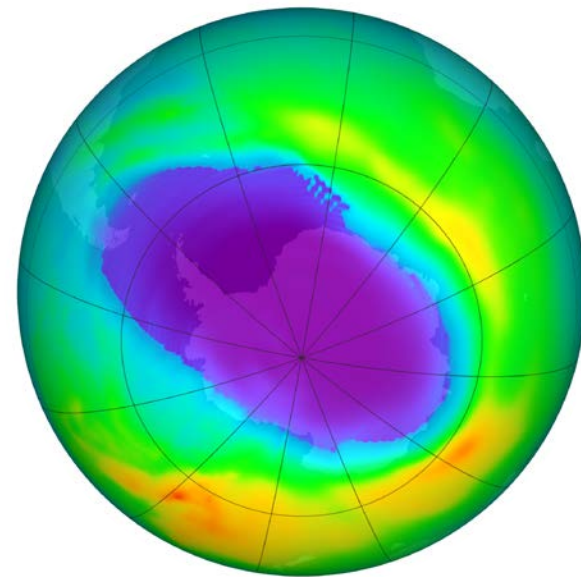
The UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This document lists what all people deserve, regardless of their race, religion, or social and economic status.

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

One of ECOSOC's most important tasks is monitoring the balance between economic growth and preservation of the environment. Economic development creates new jobs and inspires new technologies. However, it can also use up or damage important natural resources like forests and lakes. Balancing these two needs is important but not always easy.

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



Products such as refrigerants, aerosol sprays, and insulation contain chemicals that harm the ozone layer.

The UN responded to this alarming problem by forming the Montreal Protocol in 1987. This agreement required nations to reduce the release of certain chemicals that were creating the holes. Since then, the holes have been shrinking. According to former secretary-general Kofi Annan, the Montreal Protocol was “perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date.” It showed that nations could work together to solve a global environmental problem.

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



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, no two from the same country, sit on the court. Each of the five permanent members of the Security Council always has a judge on the court.

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 fighting between countries.

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.



A health worker immunizes a child against polio in Nigeria.

The World Health Organization

The UN's World Health Organization (WHO) promotes better health practices around the world. It offers education about **sanitation**, 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. UN workers taught the public where the disease was common and how to prevent its spread. **Vaccination** programs were introduced worldwide. In 1980, WHO declared smallpox extinct.

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 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. Its goal is to promote international cooperation in the areas of education, science, communication, and culture.

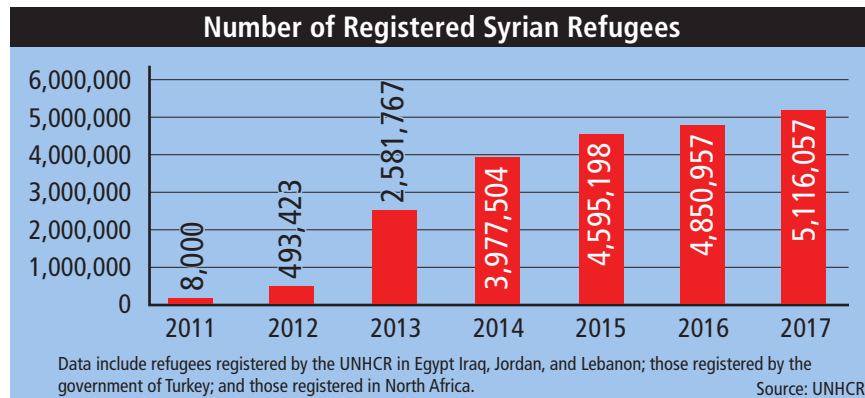
Identifying and preserving World Heritage Sites around the globe is one of UNESCO's highest-profile tasks. These are places of great natural beauty or cultural importance that are preserved with the UN's help. The Sphinx and the Pyramids of Giza are among the most recognizable monuments in the world. 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.

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.

The refugee crisis has been growing. In the mid-2010s, close to five million Syrians fled their war-torn 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 countries willing to take them in.



Complexity and Controversy of the UN

The United Nations is a huge, complex organization with programs that touch almost every corner of the globe. It is active in trying to promote world peace and calm conflict. It has ambitious goals for helping the world's young people 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. Others point to the Security Council's failures to prevent war and 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 over ninety million people worldwide who might otherwise starve. It vaccinates more than half the world's children, helping prevent international epidemics. It allows leaders to talk through their differences rather than fight about them on the battlefield.



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 and violence. However, 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 shows that deaths from war have fallen steeply 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 years ahead, and there is often no easy way to solve these problems once and for all. How the United Nations will rise to meet these challenges remains a big question.

Glossary

climate change (n.)	the long-term, lasting changes in Earth's weather patterns or the weather patterns of a region (p. 13)
committees (n.)	groups of people who consider or decide on a course of action (p. 9)
controversial (adj.)	causing much disagreement (p. 18)
diplomats (n.)	people who represent their government to another government (p. 5)
disarmament (n.)	the reduction of armed forces and weapons (p. 9)
human rights (n.)	the rights that are considered by most societies to belong automatically to all people, such as justice, freedom, and equality (p. 7)
humanitarian (adj.)	of or related to a person or group that helps people, especially by eliminating pain and suffering (p. 9)
international (adj.)	concerning two or more nations, or countries (p. 4)
negotiate (v.)	to try to reach a formal agreement through discussion (p. 8)
organization (n.)	a group or system acting for a specific purpose (p. 4)
sanitation (n.)	the act, process, or facilities used to keep a place clean or remove waste (p. 15)
vaccination (n.)	a medical treatment made of weak or dead microbes that teaches the body to fight and become immune to a particular disease (p. 15)