

The United Nations at 50

The United Nations was established in the aftermath of a devastating war to help stabilize international relations and give peace a more secure foundation.

Amid the threat of nuclear war and seemingly endless regional conflicts, peace-keeping has become an overriding concern of the United Nations. In the process, the activities of blue-helmeted peacekeepers have emerged as the most visible role associated with the world organization.

The United Nations however, is much more than a peacekeeper and forum for conflict resolution. Often without attracting attention, the United Nations and its family of agencies are engaged in a vast array of work that touches very much of the people's lives around the world.

Child survival and development, Environmental protection, Human rights, Health and medical research, Alleviation of poverty and economic development, Agricultural development and fisheries, Education, Family planning, Emergency and disaster relief, Air and sea travel, Peaceful uses of atomic energy, Labour and workers rights. The list goes on.

Here, in brief, is a sampling of what the United Nations organizations have accomplished since 1945 when the world organization was founded.

Maintaining peace and security By deploying more

than 35 peacekeeping forces and observer missions, the United Nations has been able to restore calm to allow the negotiating process to go forward while saving millions of people from becoming casualties of conflicts. There are presently 16 active peacekeeping forces in operation.

Making peace—Since 1945, the United Nations has been credited with negotiating 172 peaceful settlements that have ended regional conflicts. Recent cases include an end to the Iran-Iraq war, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and an end to the civil war in El Salvador. The United Nations has used quiet diplomacy to avert over 80 imminent wars.

Promoting democracy—The United Nations has enabled people in over 45 countries to participate in free and fair elections, including those held in Cambodia, Namibia, El Salvador, Eritrea, Mozambique, Nicaragua and South Africa. It has provided electoral advice assistance and monitoring of results.

Promoting development—The UN system has devoted more attention and resources to the promotion of the development of human skills and potentials than any other external assistance effort. The systems

annual disbursements, including loans and grants, amount to more than \$10 billion. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) in close cooperation with over 170 Member States and other UN agencies, designs and implements projects for agriculture industry education and the environment. It supports more than 5,000 projects with a budget of \$1.3 billion. It is the largest multilateral source of grant

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development assistance. The World Bank, at the forefront in mobilizing support for developing countries worldwide, has along loaned \$333 billion for development projects since 1946. UNICEF spends more than \$800 million a year primarily on immunization, health care, nutrition and basic education in 138 countries.

Promoting human rights—Since adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the United Nations has helped enact more than 80 comprehensive agreements on political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights. By investigating individual complaints of human rights abuses, the UN Human Rights Commission has focused world attention on

cases of torture, disappearance, and arbitrary detention and has generated international pressure to be brought on governments to improve their human rights records.

Protecting the Environment—The United Nations has played a vital role in fashioning a global programme designed to protect the environment. The "Earth Summit," the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, resulted in treaties on biodiversity and climate change, and all countries adopted "Agenda 21"—a blueprint to promote sustainable development or the concept of economic growth while protecting natural resources.

Preventing nuclear proliferation—The United Nations through the International Atomic Energy Agency, has helped minimize the threat of a nuclear war by inspecting nuclear reactors in 90 countries to ensure that nuclear materials are not diverted for military purposes.

Promoting self-determination and independence—The United Nations has played a pivotal role in bringing about independence in 80 countries that are now among its Member States.

Strengthening international law—Over 300 international treaties on topics as varied as human rights conventions to agreements on the use of outer space and seabed, have been enacted through the efforts of the United Nations.

Heading down judicial settlements of major international disputes—By giving judgements and advisory opinions the International Court of Justice has helped settle international disputes involving territorial issues, non-interference in the international affairs of states diplomatic relations hostage-taking, the right of asylum rights of passage and economic rights.

Ending apartheid in South Africa—By imposing measures ranging from an arms embargo to a convention against segregated sporting events, the United Nations was a major factor in bringing about the downfall of the apartheid system, which the General Assembly called "a crime against humanity." Elections were held in April 1994 in which all South Africans were allowed to participate on an equal basis, followed by the establishment of a majority government.

Providing humanitarian aid to victims of conflict—More than 30 million refugees fleeing war, famine

or persecution have received aid from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees since 1951 in a continuing effort coordinated by the United Nations that often involves other agencies. There are more than 19 million refugees, primarily women and children who are receiving food, shelter, medical aid, education and repatriation assistance.

Aiding Palestinian refugees—Since 1950, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has sustained four generations of Palestinians with free schooling, essential health care, relief assistance and key social services virtually without interruption. There are 2.9 million refugees in the Middle East served by UNRWA.

Alleviating chronic hunger and rural poverty in developing countries—The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has developed a system of providing credit, often in very small amounts for the poorest and most marginalised groups that has benefited over 230 million people in nearly 100 developing countries.

Focusing on African development—For the United Nations, Africa continues to be the highest priority. In 1986, the United Nations convened a special session to drum up international support for African economic recovery and development.