

A briefing for the 74th session of the UN General Assembly – September 2019



UNA-UK

What is UNGA?	1
When does the UNGA meet?	1
How does the UNGA work?	2
1. Timetable and committees	
2. What can we expect in the first few weeks?	
Practicalities	5
Five things that will be discussed in New York	5
1. Climate Change	
2. Universal Health Coverage	
3. Sustainable Development Goals	
4. Nuclear Weapons	
5. Small Island states	
Things that should be discussed	8
1. UN75/Multilateralism	
2. Escalating tensions in the Middle East	
Miscellany	12
What is UNA-UK?	14
Any further questions?	14

What is UNGA?

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) is one of the main bodies of the United Nations. It is the only UN forum in which all members receive equal representation, and as such it is the main debating chamber of the UN. 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, as well as putting the thoughts of the world on record, they can be great motivators for action, particularly within the UN system: commissioning reports, finding funds and establishing 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 latest session, the 74th, began on 17 September. The sessions then run for almost a year. The 73rd session has just come to a close - its President H.E. Ms. María Fernanda Espinosa, [recently visited UNA-UK](#) to talk to NGOs and civil society.

However, the phrase UNGA is often used as a synecdoche for the “annual general debate” and sometimes the “high level plenary meeting” that take place in weeks 2 and 3 of the session. Week 2 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. One of the largest meetings of world leaders annually, UNGA week is an important part of the diplomatic calendar, providing ample opportunities for negotiations and discussions in the corridors of the UN headquarters.

This year's theme “Galvanizing multilateral efforts for poverty eradication, quality education, climate action and inclusion” was chosen by the new President of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Tijjani Muhammad Bande. The theme is often broad in order to avoid constraining leaders' speeches.

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?

1. Timetable and committees

The session starts on Tuesday 17 September. The start of the session includes a moment of silent reflection, and an address from the Secretary-General and new President of the General Assembly.

On Wednesday 18 September the General Assembly forms a General Committee 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 on Friday 20 September.

This programme of work divides up the tasks of the General Assembly between its main body and its six 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

The [report](#) of the Secretary-General outlines the draft programme of work of the General assembly.

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 issues, such as UN membership, require a 2/3rds majority.

2. What can we expect in the first few weeks?

Outline of UNGA 2019 key dates:

Date:	Event:
23/9	UNSG Climate Action Summit
	High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage

24/9	<p>Opening of General Debate</p> <p>High Level Political Forum on sustainable development</p>
25/9	<p>General Debate</p> <p>Continued: High Level Political Forum on sustainable development</p> <p>High level commemorative event on Convention on the Right of the Child</p>
26/9	<p>General Debate</p> <p>High level dialogue on financing for development hosted by the General Assembly</p> <p>High level meeting to commemorate and promote International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons</p>
27/9	<p>General Debate</p> <p>High level meeting to assess progress made in addressing the priorities of small island developing states</p>

See [here](#) for key debates relating to UN Global Compact during Leaders' Week.

- [The Climate Action Summit](#), to be convened by the Secretary-General, will be held on Monday 23 September 2019. Pre-summit events will take place during the preceding weekend, on 21 and 22 September.
- [The High-level meeting on universal health coverage](#) will be held on Monday, 23 September.
- [The High-level political forum on sustainable development](#) under the auspices of the General Assembly, will be held on Tuesday 24 September and Wednesday 25 September.
- On Wednesday 25 September there will also be a high-level commemorative event to mark the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Right of the Child.
- The 26 September will see a [high-level dialogue on financing for development](#) held by the General Assembly.
- The high-level meeting to commemorate and promote the [International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons](#) will also be held on Thursday 26 September.
- On Friday 27 September, the [high-level meeting to review progress made in addressing the priorities of small island developing states \(SIDS\)](#) through the implementation of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA).
- The general debate of the 74th session will be held from Tuesday 24 September to Saturday 28 September, and on Monday 30 September 2019.

This year, alongside high-level week there will be a record five leader level summits, details of which are listed below and further information is provided in “Five things that will be discussed in New York”.

By tradition Brazil goes first (Brazil’s delegates were very effective in the very first General Assembly sessions in getting to the podium first, and the tradition stuck!). Then, as host, the US goes second. After that, speaker order is by negotiation, but Heads of State (Presidents and Kings) 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. In the event of disagreement over speaker order between officials of equivalent rank, the official who has been in post for longest takes precedence.

Provisional timings EDT are [here](#). Highlights include:

- Tuesday 1045 Jair Bolsonaro
- Tuesday 1100 Donald Trump
- Tuesday 1115 Abdel Fattah el-Sisi
- Tuesday 1130 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- Tuesday 1400 Emanuel Macron
- Tuesday 2045 Boris Johnson
- Wednesday 1030 Hassan Rouhani (Visa pending)
- Thursday 1400 Mahmoud Abbas
- Friday 1030 Narendra Modi

Notable absences (so far):

Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Justin Trudeau, Mohammed Bin Salman and Angela Merkel (TBC)

Jair Bolsonaro - first time he will be addressing the UN since the horrific fires that swept through the Amazon, in the aftermath of which he rejected, then accepted, \$22 million in aid from G7 leaders. The Brazilian President clashed with the international community, doubling down on the narrative of national sovereignty regarding the Amazon Basin.

President Trump - will be speaking just a few weeks after firing his special adviser John Bolton, a hawkish sceptic of the United Nation. Observers are keenly watching what tone the US President will take with regards to UN budgeting and Iran. It is confirmed he will not be attending the Secretary-General’s Climate Summit.

After that UNGA resumes its normal work. As UNGAs 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
- 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
- The new UN annual budgeting system will come into effect in January 2020, it will be debated in December 2019

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 here](#). Information for the media, including accreditation (although the deadline has passed), is available [here](#) and in this press guide. 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 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>.

Five things that will be discussed in New York

1. Climate Change

Secretary-General António Guterres will be convening the Climate Action Summit on Monday 23 September. This will be one of the most high profile climate conferences in recent times, and in the wake of devastating Hurricane Dorian and the recent fires that raged through the Amazon Basin, it seems the Summit has arrived not a moment too soon. Despite the commitments made

in the [Paris Agreement](#) three years ago to restrict the rise in global temperature to below two degrees celsius, [July 2019 saw carbon levels matched and record temperatures broken](#).

The Summit is expected to attract many world leaders. In July, UNSG Guterres wrote to world leaders asking them “to come to the Summit ready to announce the plans that they will set next year to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for 2030 and to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.”

Although unconfirmed, the UN blog [Passblue reported](#) that Germany’s Angela Merkel may make an appearance in New York specifically in order to attend the Summit and other high profile meetings. Notably, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison will not attend, [the Guardian reports](#), despite being in the US that week to visit President Trump.

The list of attendees and speakers is not yet released, but is understood to be populated by those nations intending to outline plans for new emissions reductions targets or commitments to the [UN Green Climate Fund](#). It promises to be a moment when the most meaningful and ambitious strategies to combat climate change will be presented.

Another high profile attendee, Swedish activist Greta Thurnberg, will be attending the Summit on the 23, as well as the Youth Climate Summit on 21 September. The first of these coming a day after the planned international climate strike taking place on 20 September. Preceding this, on 18-19 September there will be a “people’s summit” on climate rights and human survival hosted by Amnesty International.

For more on climate issues at the UN, read UNA-UK’s publication [Climate 2020](#).

2. Universal Health Coverage

“Universal health coverage: moving together to build a healthier world”. Opening statements will be given by the President of the General Assembly, UN Secretary General, Director General of World Health Organisation, and the President of the World Bank Group.

The meeting will be the last opportunity before 2023, the midpoint of the SDGs, “to mobilise the highest political support to package the entire health agenda under the umbrella of UHC”. In order to achieve this the meeting will aim to identify how a political declaration can encourage the establishment of milestones towards achieving Universal Health Coverage by 2030.

A report: “The Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All: Strengthening collaboration among multilateral organizations to accelerate country progress on the health-related Sustainable Development Goals” [will be presented](#) by 12 global health, development and humanitarian agencies: [Gavi](#), [Global Financing Facility](#), the [Global Fund](#), UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, Unicef, Unitaid, UNWOMEN, World Bank Group, World Food Programme, WHO.

An important process in the preparation of this UNGA event was a multi-stakeholder meeting convened in April 2019 by the outgoing President of the General Assembly. You can find the key recommendations that this produced, [here](#).

3. Sustainable Development Goals

The [two day](#) event on the Sustainable Development Goals will comprehensively examine implementation and progress towards achieving the 2030 agenda. It is the first UN summit on the SDGs since their adoption in September 2015. Its theme is: “Setting the scene and taking stock of the situation regarding the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals: progress, challenges and the way forward”.

The Summit will see [a series of 6](#) “Leaders Dialogues” over the two-days, each based on a theme inspired by the [Global Sustainable Development Report](#). The report *The Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*, is the first Global Sustainable Development Report prepared by the Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General. It summarises that the current model of development is unsustainable and that drastic change is needed to avoid reversing the progress of the last two years. Concluding that “understanding the interconnections between the individual SDGs and the concrete systems that define society today will be essential to devise policies that manage difficult trade-offs.”

In a [press release](#) from the 12 September, responding to the report the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs ([DESA](#)) warned “a new relationship between people and nature is needed as climate change a biodiversity loss threaten progress.” DESA highlighted the report’s assessment that the 2030 agenda can still be achieved but only by a “change in the relationship between people and nature, and a significant reduction in social and gender inequalities between and inside countries”.

It is important to note, that despite the report’s conclusion on the need for dramatic reform of development policies, the Summit is reserved for state actors alone, with civil society and business leaders excluded to side events. A [civil society side event](#), “Systemic Analysis, Proposed Pathways and Institutional Reforms to Advance the 2030 Agenda” will take place on Tuesday 24, while an [SDG business forum](#), “The SDGs...Turning Promises into Reality” on the Wednesday 25.

In June, UNA-UK released its [latest report](#) on the SDGs, “Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Our World”. The sixth report in a series of publications by UNA-UK on the 2030 agenda, this edition looks at how the goals can be made to work for all and who is at risk of being left behind.

4. Nuclear Weapons

This high-level event will see the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear weapons commemorated and the cause of disarmament promoted.

Last week Turkey’s President Erdogan made the [unprecedented announcement](#) of his desire for Turkey to obtain nuclear weapons, despite their obligations as a signatory of the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#). Erdogan’s statement is the latest in a line that suggest next year’s

conference may spell the collapse of the NPT, the cornerstone of multilateral attempts to regulate nuclear weapons, established over 40 years ago.

Non-nuclear states are increasingly expressing their frustration as the N5 (The five nuclear armed states - China, France, Russia, UK and the US - as recognised under the NPT) continue to fall short of their obligations under Article 6 of the Treaty, which requires them to make good faith attempts to negotiate for disarmament. As a result, many non-nuclear armed states continue to push for the full ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Adopted in 2017, the TPNW is seen as a complementary agreement to the NPT, indeed a necessary one, in the face of faltering progress on disarmament. To date, 70 States have signed it, 26 States have [ratified the TPNW](#) and it will enter into force after the 50th ratification.

While the agenda for this high level event has not been confirmed, it is likely that it will be used as an opportunity to encourage States to ratify the TPNW and discuss ways to improve the chances of success of the approaching NPT Review Conference, scheduled for Spring 2020. UNA-UK has been campaigning for the UK Government to [step down its harsh criticism of TPNW](#), as their animosity towards the treaty aggravates non-nuclear states and so poses a significant [threat to the NPT](#).

5. Small island states

On 27 September 2019, the General Assembly will convene a one-day high-level meeting to review progress made in addressing the priorities of small island developing states (SIDS) through the implementation of the [SAMOA Pathway](#). The high-level review will also result in a concise action oriented and inter-governmentally agreed political declaration.

The meeting will assess progress, challenges and gaps in implementing the SAMOA pathway. It will bring together SIDS representatives and development partners with a days of multi-stakeholder roundtables.

This is a crucial example of an indispensable relevance of the United Nations, in which small developing states are elevated in a way that would not be seen in other international decision-making arenas. Smaller developing States are disproportionately affected by climate change, and this landmark conference allows for them to hold the floor and be at the fore of the development policies for their future.

Things that should be discussed

1. UN75/Multilateralism

The risks we face from climate change to nuclear weapons, pandemics to terrorism, are worse than ever and skepticism about the purpose and value of a global system of government is at an all-time high. Multilateral approaches to peace and security are needed now more than ever, and the UN's 75th anniversary in 2020 must be the starting point of a global governance

transformation. A leaders' Summit scheduled for UNGA 2020 provides the opportunity for a year of targeted advocacy for many organisations.

UNA-UK, as part of [Together First](#) - a growing movement of global citizens, coordinated by a network of over 100 experts, practitioners, civil society activists and business leaders from all regions of the world - is campaigning for multi-stakeholder involvement in the summit to mark this occasion. The goal: to discuss, adopt and initiate the reforms we urgently need, and to unite around a shared vision for the future.

Over the next year the campaign is working to produce a “to-do list” for world leaders and push for the inclusion of civil society at the decision-making table of global governance. Humanity faces challenges that threaten our very survival and rising to those challenges requires the world to work together.

However, global coordination of work to mitigate major threats like climate change and cyber warfare remains overwhelmingly dominated by states, despite it being undeniably apparent that, to be successful, a host of other actors need to be part of the decision-making process.

It is vital that this year, at UNGA74, states continue the important work of the [73rd session](#) to create a “UN for All”. We hope that Member States will show their commitment to the multilateral rules-based order, and endorse the practice that global shared problems must be faced together.

There will be opportunities for it to do so on 26 September. States will have the opportunity to join the [Alliance for Multilateralism](#) - an initiative spearheaded by the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany - which is an informal alliance of countries committed to upholding the rules-based multilateral order.

The launch is co-hosted by France, Germany, Mexico, Chile and Canada and we were encouraged to see that civil-society are being giving a seat at the table with ministers. During the event, concrete initiatives around the following theme will be presented and potentially endorsed:

- Respect for international humanitarian law and principled humanitarian action
- Responsible state behaviour in cyberspace
- Information and democracy: freedom of expression and opinion
- Climate related security risks
- Arms control: lethal autonomous weapons

However, coalitions of like-minded states - while a vital tool for championing crucial reforms - can only go so far. The core strength of the UN is in its universality; there is a risk that a reform process that does not reach out to all parties will create a “two speed” world order, deepen the divisions that threaten our global system and increase the alienation of those who feel that the current international order doesn't work for them. This is why a comprehensive approach to

reforming our global system, open to all states, non-state actors, and the public, is vital to securing our shared future.

2. Escalating tensions in the Middle East

High-level week can bring out the pageantry and performativity of international affairs. The pulpit of the General Assembly has in the past turned into a stage for [iconic moments](#) of bravado and insult.

Nonetheless UNGA serves a vital role by bringing leaders and ministers together in one place, and so creates a space to diffuse tension and resolve conflict through dialogue. The sidelines of the GA allow for face-to-face conversations around some of the world's most incendiary political issues, without the scrutiny or high stakes of a dedicated bilateral trip.

This mechanism is needed more than ever in the face of escalating tensions in the Middle East, in particular the:

- Ongoing conflict in Yemen
- Attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities
- Continued deterioration of the JCPOA agreement or "Iran Nuclear deal"
- Continued tensions in the Strait of Hormuz
- The threat by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex part of the West Bank

While each of these issues are separate, what links them is a ratcheting up of regional tensions between key actors to a point where a significant escalation in violence appears possible. All parties who are invested in the region must be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the General Assembly to deescalate tensions and pursue diplomatic and political solutions.

Attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities

Any prospect of US and Iranian leaders meeting at UNGA appears to be off the table after the Aramco refinery was targeted by apparent drone bombings. Tensions between The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran has already had devastating consequences: the world's worst humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and the untold suffering in Syria.

Further escalation deepens this crisis, embolden hardliners and militarists - stifling reformists on both sides, and runs the risk of spiralling to all-out regional war. A diplomatic and political de-escalation of tensions must be pursued fervently during the opening of the new session of the GA. It is a vital moment to reopen lines of communication.

Over the last few years UNA-UK has consistently added its voice to those of the House of Lords International Relations Committee, [respected experts](#) like former US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, and others in saying that responsible international powers such as the UK should not be

taking sides in this confrontation, and should instead work to open up space for compromise and [negotiations towards a more peaceful coexistence](#).

Continued deterioration of the JCPOA agreement

Tensions between the US and Iran have been escalating since President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in [May 2018](#). This coupled with the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions on Iranian oil and currency - despite the strong opposition of other parties to the agreement and the confirmation of Iranian adherence to the agreement by IAEA inspectors, has led to Iran threatening to abandon the deal.

We would like to see diplomatic efforts led by the EU continued and extended in pursuit of reviving the JCPOA agreement and providing Iran with political and economic incentives to remain compliant.

Strait of Hormuz tensions

The news that Iran seized another tanker on Monday was yet another event in a summer of heightened tension over the key oil shipping lanes around the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman.

A vital channel for the international oil trade, parties should be inclined to avoid further incidents that could lead to deteriorating political relations.

Ongoing conflict in Yemen

The deadly war in Yemen has led to the [world's worst humanitarian crisis](#).

The UK maintains it is not a party to the conflict, but supports members of the Saudi-led coalition politically, materially (through arms sales) as well as militarily through training and intelligence sharing. [We have urged](#) the UK Government to take a more neutral stance and campaigned for weapons transfers which might be used in Yemen to be halted, [in line](#) with the Arms Trade Treaty.

Recently the UK Court of Appeal ruled that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia which might be used in Yemen were unlawful, and instructed the UK to desist from granting any relevant new licences. The Court also told the Government to retake past decisions to authorise licences for exports to Saudi Arabia, this time taking into account the evidence of civilian harm which during Court proceedings the Government was found to have overlooked. In response the Government announced intention to appeal the ruling.

The Government's implementation of the Court ruling is now under the spotlight following an admission from the UK's Secretary of State for International Trade that the Government "inadvertently" granted licences for several hundred-thousand-pounds worth of equipment in

breach of the Court ruling. This [calls into doubt](#) the UK's oft repeated claim to operate "one of the most robust export control regimes in the world."

Netanyahu's promise to annex West Bank

Israel's second election of 2019 looks likely to lead to lengthy coalition talks as the results from early counts have been inconclusive. As of the 18 September, it is still unclear who is Prime Minister.

In the context of the election, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated his intention to annex parts of the West Bank in the event of his reelection. Any such action would be both a clear violation of International Humanitarian Law and the roadmap to a peaceful solution. The statements have been [condemned](#) by UN officials.

Israel is an emotive and symbolic issue in the Middle East. While UN focus on Israel is often disproportionate and [sometimes unfair](#), it is also the case that the UN stands for a global system based on rules, and violating those rules as Israel has done and threatens to do again, weakens the system and threatens peace.

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 at 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 12 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.