Committees, System of

ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity” (UN Press Release SG/SM/11203, 3 October 2007).

With regard to the concept of collective security, the United Nations has reacted to the developments and challenges of the last decades, and has brought forward new and useful concepts for its interpretation, which need to be further discussed to be put into practice in a broadest possible consensus of the international community.

Irene Weinz


Committees, System of

All communal principal organs of the United Nations, that is, the → General Assembly, the → Security Council, the Economic and Social Council (→ ECOSOC), and the Trusteeship Council (→ Principal Organs, Subsidiary Organs, Treaty Bodies), have established committees. Article 7 (2) of the UN Charter authorizes them to do so, in enabling them to establish “such subsidiary organs as may be found necessary in accordance with the present Charter.” Articles 22 and 29 repeat this general principle in particular relation to the General Assembly and the Security Council, respectively. Article 68 authorizes ECOSOC to “set up commissions”.

These committees have been established to relieve the principal organs from the time-consuming expert detail work and the organizational and financial planning, and to prepare for debates on reports, draft resolutions or other items on the agenda of the principal organs, which is generally quite voluminous, as the agenda of the General Assembly comprises usually more than 150 items. In this way the principal organs save time for the discussion of principles, and for taking important decisions.

As the principal organs of the United Nations have used these provisions of the Charter for the establishment of “subsidiary organs” not only to establish the usual network of main and procedural committees for the organization of their work, but also to establish a multi-
tude of thematic committees and commissions, which have often consolidated themselves in the course of the time and have become “special organs”, “programmes” or “funds” of the principal organs, this article deals only with those committees which have a direct relation to the work of the principal organs. Information about the other kinds of “subsidiary organs” can be found in the articles on the → UN system, → coordination in the UN system and in the articles on the principal organs.

In general it is difficult to make any clear distinction and to give a precise functional description because of the extreme complexity of the UN system, and the interdependence of organizational and political aspects which play an important role in the establishment of organs within the framework of international organizations.

I. Committees of the General Assembly

The Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly (→ Rules of Procedure) provided originally for seven main committees (Rule 98) and two procedural committees (Rules 155-160). At its 47th regular session the General Assembly decided to merge two of the main committees, so that there have been since then six main committees.

Committees of the General Assembly meet in principle in open session. The right to exclude the public is limited according to Rule 60 of the Rules of Procedure to situations in which, in the opinion of the committee, the exclusion is called for by exceptional circumstances.

The committees are to discuss their specific topics in a smaller circle, to review individual proposals and to work out draft resolution texts for the General Assembly. The committees of the General Assembly can be divided into four groups: the main committees, the procedural committees, the standing committees and the ad hoc committees or ad hoc working groups.

I. Main Committees

Every member state has the right to be represented on each main committee (“committee of the whole”). The main committees deal with most of the items of the agenda, from the first discussion to the preparation of the draft resolutions which are later submitted to the plenary of the General Assembly for voting. Those items on the agenda not allocated to one of the main committees are dealt with in the plenary sessions of the assembly. Since the main committees convene parallel to the plenary, assess the various standpoints and find out if there are sufficient majorities for the projects discussed, they exercise a selective function. Although decisions in the main committees are taken according to the majority principle, which is also valid for the decision to submit a draft resolution, etc. to the plenary, it has become accepted usage that only those motions are put to vote in the main committee for which the two-thirds majority is already assured, since here decisions are taken in the General Assembly with a two-thirds majority (Rule 83 of the Rules of Procedure). Only very seldom are there significant changes in the voting behavior between main committees and plenary.

Until 1993 the committee structure of the main committees was as follows: First Committee (Political and Security, including the Regulation of Armaments), Special Political Committee, Second Committee (Economic and Financial), Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural), Fourth Committee (Trusteeship, including Non-Self-Governing Territories), Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary), and Sixth Committee (Legal). The Special Political Committee dealt with selected political issues assigned by the General Assembly, inter alia in particular with respect to the Palestine conflict, and apartheid.

With Resolution 47/233 of 17 August 1993, the General Assembly decided to amend Rule 98 of the Rules of Procedure so that the main committees were