



The Crisis in Ukraine: A brief UN overview

March 4, 2022

Background:

Following weeks of speculation and intelligence reports, the Russian government initiated new military operations in Ukraine, which remain ongoing. This military attack has had immediate far-reaching impacts, sparked a massive humanitarian crisis and raised serious concern about potential ecological disasters. On the global stage, a range of actions have been taken in response, including measures within the United Nations (UN). This document provides brief details on the response by specific UN bodies thus far and does not include information on all actions taken by UN entities or individual Member States. At the time of writing, the UN Security Council (UNSC) was meeting in another emergency session.

Recent UN developments and analysis:

On Monday, February 21, the UN Security Council [met](#) during an emergency session in response to the Russian Federation's recognition of the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Subsequent meetings have since taken place at the UN, both in the UNSC and in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). These meetings culminated in a further [emergency session](#) of the UNSC held on Friday, February 25. At this meeting, the representatives of the United States and Albania introduced a resolution that "*deplored the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine in violation of the UN Charter*". When brought to a vote, 11 out of 15 UNSC members voted in favor, three abstained (China, India, United Arab Emirates), and the Russian Federation vetoed. This UNSC meeting featured briefings by UN humanitarian and refugee agencies that shared the scale of expected needs in the coming weeks as well as the humanitarian resources that were immediately deployed.

Following increased violence and continuation of military operations, UNSC members convened on Sunday, February 27 and made the unusual move of calling on the [UNGA to take action on Ukraine](#). This move unfolded under the auspices of the "[Uniting for Peace](#)" resolution that was adopted in 1950. It allows a two thirds majority of the UNSC to refer a situation to the UNGA when the five veto-wielding members of the UNSC (China, France, Russia, United States, United Kingdom) are not able to come to unity. Only 10 such emergency sessions have taken place since 1950. The last time this procedure was attempted was in 2003 in response to the United States invasion of Iraq. At the time, the United States applied pressure on UN Member States to discourage them from supporting such an initiative. As a result, the UNGA was not able to convene, and the 2003 effort was thwarted.

On Monday, February 28, a group of over 90 Member State co-sponsors successfully came together to introduce a "Uniting for Peace" [resolution](#) in the UNGA. The resolution was brought to a [vote](#), with 141 Member States in favour and only five voting against (35 abstained). As a result, the resolution passed, making a powerful political statement.



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While events unfolded in the UNSC and UNGA in New York, diplomatic efforts were also taking place in Geneva. On February 24, Ukraine requested an Urgent Debate of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). An Urgent Debate is an extraordinary meeting held when the HRC is already in session. This request was approved on Monday, February 28, by roll call vote of the 47 States who are members of the HRC (29 votes in favour, five against and 13 abstentions). The Urgent Debate began on March 3, following the High-Level Segment of the HRC, in which many of the Heads of State, Foreign Ministers and other senior government officials who spoke used their statements to comment on the unfolding conflict. The HRC Urgent Debate concluded on March 4 with the adoption of a resolution titled [*Situation of human rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression*](#). Adopted by 32 votes in favour, two against and 13 abstentions (no State has a veto in the HRC and resolutions can pass by simple majority). This resolution establishes a Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights violations, violations of humanitarian law and other related crimes.

The active engagement by diplomats in Geneva and New York has provided a space for different UN Member States to denounce the use of violence and military force, and to raise concerns about the plight of civilians under attack and those seeking refuge across borders, including discrimination faced by people of colour. The urgent issues raised may be of interest to Friends:

- Countries in Africa and Asia highlighted concerns regarding the treatment of their citizens as they tried to flee Ukraine.
- Numerous countries from the Global South noted the dire consequences that this conflict represents as poor, developing countries will find themselves under significant pressure to align with one side or another. This is a matter of grave concern in a context where many are still struggling to have access to COVID-19 vaccines and to sustain their economies in the wake of the pandemic.
- Speakers noted that powerful countries are able to ignore the principles of the UN and manipulate others so that UN rules are not applied equally in conflict situations.
- The threat of nuclear warfare was raised as posing a grave threat to all, and as an unacceptable and unconscionable option.
- Member States also raised the protection provided by the Charter for their territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the implications of the Russian Federation's aggression for all small countries.

It is key to note that the crisis in Ukraine and voting processes of the UNSC also raise the question of Security Council reform in light of paralysis caused by the veto. This has been an ongoing issue within the United Nations, and many have called for the UNSC to be a more equitable and inclusive body. As part of the [UN 75 Declaration](#) adopted in 2020, Member States tasked the UN Secretary-General with identifying possible strategies to address this repeated situation of deadlock. The outcome of this effort was the UN Secretary-General's report [*Our Common Agenda*](#), released in September 2021. The report outlines a broad range of initiatives aimed to remake the UN so that it is "fit for purpose" in our 21st century world. QUNO is currently working with a range of diplomats, UN staff, and civil society in Geneva and New York to engage around the proposals included in the report.

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