



For the 66th session of the General Assembly, 193 states will gather to discuss questions within the UN mandate. In 1946 when the first UN General Assembly met in London, the member states only numbered 51. Over the years membership has grown, and this year South Sudan became the 193rd member of the United Nations and the General Assembly. The latest successful applications since then were those of Montenegro in 2006 and Switzerland and Timor-Leste in 2002. InFocus explains to you how states become a member of the UN, and how the General Assembly makes sure that membership is continued by recognised governments.

To become a part of the UN, a state needs to first be recognized as a state. Only other states can extend recognition to a state, the United Nations itself cannot perform this function. What constitutes 'recognition' of a state is a difficult and contested question. However, because a membership application to the UN requires the consent of two thirds of the member states, including the five permanent members of the Security Council, all UN member states can be said to have universal or near-universal recognition as state, and UN membership itself is an important indicator of whether a state is internationally recognized. All universally recognized states except for the Vatican City are at present members of the UN.

To become a member of the UN, a state must follow a certain procedure. First, the state that wants to become a member of the United Nations must declare that it will adhere to the UN Charter. This is done by submitting a formal letter to the Secretary-General of the UN (currently Ban Ki-moon) stating that it will honour the Charter. Then the Security Council will consider the application. The five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America) can veto an application at this stage. The application is only successful if 9 of the 15 members of the Security Council vote for the application. The application will then be brought to the General Assembly itself, where a two-thirds majority is necessary for the application to be successful.

A government, upon becoming a member of the UN, is expected to establish a Permanent Representation at UN Headquarters in New York, headed by a Permanent Representative. In a resolution adopted in 1948, the General Assembly has recommended that the credentials of newly appointed Permanent Representatives should be issued either by the Head of State, Head of Government or the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the country. Such credentials, very similar to those exchanged between states when appointing ambassadors, guarantees that the delegations present in New York really represent the proper governments of the member states. The addresses and contact details of all Permanent Representations to the UN is compiled in the "Blue Book" by the Protocol and Liaison Service.

However, even when a state is a member of the UN, questions can arise over whether the government representing that state is really the proper one. At every session of the General Assembly, the member states can decide to consider whether the government presently representing a country is in fact the true government of that country. Such questions may arise if there has been a civil war or an unconstitutional change of government through for example a coup d'état. However a normal constitutional change of government, such as through a democratic election, would not warrant the scrutiny of the General Assembly. The President of the General Assembly proposes a 9-member Credentials Committee at the start of every session, which the General Assembly accepts by a majority vote. This committee will examine the credentials of the representatives at the General Assembly, and they will also consider any concerns of the UN member states. After being informed by this committee, the General Assembly makes decisions on the credentials by majority voting. For the last session, the Credentials Committee consisted of Bahamas, China, Finland, Gabon, Guatemala, Kenya, Russian Federation, Singapore and the United States of America.

Sources:

http://www.un.int/protocol/1_2.html

http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/UN_membership.shtml