United Nations General Assembly
Background Guide

Written by: Mei Ling Wilson, George Washington University
Tim Sprunt, Case Western Reserve University

First convened in 1946, the United Nations General Assembly (GA) is one of six main organs of the United Nations, dealing with issues covered by the Charter of the United Nations, including development, peace and security, international law, and social issues.¹ All United Nations member states are represented in the General Assembly, allowing for multilateral discussion of a full spectrum of international issues. It is the main deliberative policy making and representative organ of the UN and plays a significant role in setting standards for the international community.

I. Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Related Forms of Intolerance: From the United States to Around the World

Statement of the Issue:

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 by a Minneapolis police officer has been one of many examples in the long history of police misconduct that sparked national outrage in the United States over systemic racism and police brutality. The protests that began in Minneapolis in the summer of 2020 quickly swept the United States’ major cities and even led to protests in cities around the world, as millions took to the streets to demand police accountability and justice within the broader context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

In reaction to the wave of protests, many corporations and marketers have examined the legacies of racism present in their organizations. From professional sports teams to food manufacturers, former logos have been abandoned and statements released in order to signal a departure from deep-seated racism, as well as a commitment to upholding values of equality and justice moving forward. The United Nations released its own statement urging U.S. authorities to take measures to address systemic racism and to conduct independent and fair
investigations into police’s excessive uses of force, noting and acknowledging the origin of policing that is based in ‘slave patrols and social control.’ UNHRC Commissioner also called on country leaders to publicly condemn racism.

Racial inequality must be addressed in a number of ways, including through an examination of the roles of authority that individuals hold within existing power structures around the globe. A number of the protesters in the U.S. have called for police reform or complete defunding of community police departments. Many proponents of police divestment would like to see money reallocated into community development programs that would include things such as education, mental health services, and hospitals. As these voices are amplified, the U.S. will need to continue to grapple with finding solutions to power inequality and social unrest, as well as the role we allow authority figures such as police officers. Similar issues are present around the world in both systemic racism and issues of the police forces being corrupt or over-funded.

As videos of police brutality and destruction from weeks of protests spread over the globe, people of many nationalities voiced their support of the BLM movement. Contrary to some of the commonly held perceptions of America as the “land of the free,” the unrest has exposed flaws within America’s society and culture and ways in which racism is a continuous issue. Examples of the global protests and solidarity include people in Kenya kneeling outside the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, bringing awareness to the police abuses in their own country. Many citizens of different African nations share negative experiences of law enforcement, including abuse of power and lack of accountability, which can be traced back to the police structures that were inherited from the colonial era. Movements were also seen across Europe, as citizens both stood with victims of police brutality in the U.S., and stood against systems in their own countries that they believe to be problematic and in need of reform. The protests in the U.S. have resonated with people around the world for the attention they bring to examining legacies of the past.

History:

Following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the first United Nations treaty specifically addressing racism was adopted and opened for signature and ratification by the General Assembly in December of 1965 and entered into force in 1969. Titled “The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,” it defined racial discrimination and stated that all human beings are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law against any discrimination and against any incitement of discrimination.
Over time, the United Nations has held multiple conferences dedicated to this topic. The first World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance was held in Geneva in 1978 and a follow up conference was held five years later. In 1993, the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed through mandate a Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism to serve as an independent human rights expert. This mandate was created to intensify international efforts to combat these violations of basic human rights. In addition to undertaking fact-finding country visits and submitting reports to the UN Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur’s role is to transmit urgent appeals and communications to States regarding alleged violations of international human rights law.

A third world conference was held in 2001 in South Africa and was thought to serve as a landmark event in the struggle to eradicate all forms of racism “requiring a strong follow-up mechanism to examine whether governments have delivered on their promises made,” according to the High Commissioner. At the end of the conference, and in light of intense deliberation, delegates created a final declaration of principles and an action plan. A total of 160 states agreed with the final declaration which stated that “slavery and the slave trade are crimes against humanity,” as well as urging all governments to find appropriate ways to restore the dignity of the victims of racial discrimination. It is important to note that the declaration did not call on former colonial powers to pay reparations. Although a step in the right direction, the declaration and work of the international community in that summit did not go nearly far enough in working against existing forms of systemic and institutionalized racism.

Following widespread unrest after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, countries around the world have publicly condemned the ongoing racial discrimination in the United States and have offered up legislation aimed at changing the current environment. The French government announced that police will no longer be allowed to use chokeholds when making arrests. In the U.K., London Mayor Sadiq Khan announced a review of the capital’s landmarks and pledged to increase representation of black and ethnic minorities in the public realm. In Lebanon, even though official legislation has not been adopted, an NGO compiled a document titled “From Beirut to Minneapolis: A Protest Guide in Solidarity,” as a way to track state abuses.

Analysis:
While racism has manifested in protests throughout American history, the most recent protests in response to the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others have
involved a shift in attention to the role that individuals play in upholding a racist system. Much of the previous legislation around race equality has focused on addressing and eliminating overt forms of racism. The civil rights movement of the mid-20th century addressed the many forms of legalized subjugation and made important strides in equality, with U.S. Supreme Court cases such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* making strides in dismantling legal racism within the U.S.\(^\text{10}\) In the 21st century, the fight for racial equality continues with a greater focus on covert racism and barriers to social and economic advancement. Major racial disparities still endure in educational opportunities, housing, unemployment, and wealth accumulation.\(^\text{11}\)

These enduring forms of structural racism clearly contradict the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” in the preamble. The United States has continued to deny this right to all its people, as issues such as police brutality and drug prohibition disproportionately impact minority groups and uphold the racial status quo. The resistance to racial oppression has manifested in different forms throughout history. The recent Floyd protests entailed property destruction and looting in many cases; many protestors and supporters of the BLM movement were divided on the use of violence and destruction in protests.\(^\text{12}\) Until the U.S. can guarantee equality of education, equal treatment before the law, and equal opportunity for social advancement, individuals will likely continue the civil rights movement.

The structural inequalities in education and employment opportunities, among many others, prevents every individual from realizing their full potential as a member of society. According to a 2016 study published by the U.S. Department of Education, the 2013 total college enrollment rate for white 18-24 year olds was 42%, while the rate for black and Hispanic students was 34% each.\(^\text{13}\) Educational opportunities impact outcomes in employment and wealth. The U.S. should invest in and realize the importance of building human capital by creating more opportunities for individuals from all walks of life. Creating opportunities for individuals to meet their full potential would also create a strong economy and civil society. The U.S. story of race relations can be observed by the international community, in order to understand and eliminate barriers to opportunity.

**Conclusion:**

The George Floyd protests are the latest high-profile show of activism in the modern civil rights movement. The fight against inequality has progressed from a focus on dismantling legalized forms of racism to one centered around the institutionalized racism that has been embedded in the foundation of the United States and countless other countries. The United
Nations has brought the pervasive issue of racism and inequality to the attention of the international community many times. While progress has been made toward legal equality around the world, it would be impossible to undo the impact that years of colonization and subjugation have had on populations around the world. As the international community watches the U.S. grapple with racial unrest, it will be important for members to address their own hierarchies of power and privilege to understand the reason for the divisiveness that has resulted in calls for radical change. Furthermore, as America sets an example for the process of social change in the 21st century, there is the potential for other nations to follow suit in making progress toward guarantee of equality for all persons. As a whole, the international community should work towards creating a more equal reality for minorities around the world in as many ways as it can.

Questions:
1. How can societies best address enduring legacies of racism?
2. How can the United Nations and the General Assembly take actual proactive steps to work towards a more just and equitable society?
3. What role can authority (if any) play in ensuring peace and equality for all?
Resources
II. Sports Diplomacy: Promoting Peace through the Olympics

Statement of the Issue:

The United Nations’ General Assembly (GA) recognizes the value of sports as a tool for international cooperation and development. A diplomatic bridge to peace can be created through healthy competition and a place for healing political and cultural rifts among communities. The Secretary-General cited the importance of initiatives that focus on the intersection of mainstream sport into social policies. Encouraging athletes to speak out against discrimination or raising awareness about anti-poverty programs through football matches are just a few of the numerous ways that athletes can use their platform to be an instrument for positive social change around the world.

Countries ranging from India and Australia to Tunisia and Ethiopia have all publicly shown their support for the United Nations’ recognition of sport as a fundamental human right moving forward. Australia has cited that sport has the power to reduce health problems and obesity, while Tunisia stated the importance of ethics and how these values can be taught to young people in schools and through associations and social organizations to ensure that xenophobia has no place in sports arenas.¹

Prior to the delay of the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, the GA urged United Nations Member States to observe the Olympic Truce, the ancient Greek tradition calling for cessation of hostilities, before, during, and after the Games. The 193-Member Assembly underlined the importance of “cooperating with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee in their efforts to use sport as a tool to promote peace, dialogue, and reconciliation in areas of conflict during and beyond.”²

History:

The Olympic Truce was established in the eighth century B.C. and has served as a fundamental principle of the Olympic Games. The truce called for all conflicts to cease during the period of the truce to ensure that all involved in the games could return to their home countries safely and without fear of persecution.³ In 1993, the UN GA approved a resolution that explicitly demonstrated support of and cooperation with the IOC following disagreements in the early 1980s regarding the boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. The resolution to revive the truce, entitled “Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal,” called upon Member States to observe the Olympic Truce and cooperate with the IOC.⁴
In 2001, the UN Office on Sport and Development for Peace (UNOSDP) was introduced by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The establishment of the UNOSDP demonstrated the United Nations’ newfound attempt to utilize sport as a means to achieve their objectives, particularly the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000. A Special Advisor was appointed to encourage the use of sport as a means to attain health, education, development, and peace objectives.

2002 marked the first year that the United Nations’ GA would adopt a resolution annually on sport. The resolution took into account the inclusion in the United Nations Millennium Declaration of an appeal for the observance of the Olympic Truce for the present and future, as well as the support for the IOC. The valuable contribution that the Olympic Truce could make towards advancing the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations was also officially recognized.

The resolution in 2010 is of particular importance because the GA recognized the potential of sport to help attain the MDGs by 2015 and foster an atmosphere of tolerance. The Assembly especially saw opportunities for development and social cohesion because the 2010 International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) World Cup was hosted in South Africa— the first time the game had been played on African soil and in a developed country. The GA saw this as an important moment for Africa and developing nations to make real progress in their attempt of achieving the Millennium Goals in 2015.

The GA’s resolution in 2015 was primarily focused on urging Member States to observe the Olympic Truce prior to the commencement of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The President of the IOC, Thomas Bach, said that the body’s Olympic Agenda 2020 was fully aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Goal 16 which focuses on holding institutions accountable.

Analysis:

Sports have been used around the world for purposes of public diplomacy, to influence social, diplomatic, and political relationships. The Olympics are generally the most high-profile display of diplomacy seen on the international stage, meant to boost a country’s reputation and showcase development achievements. Whether countries that have hosted Olympic games have reaped long-term positive benefits in terms of soft power is debatable, however, preparation to host a major sporting event often invigorates the given city with investment in housing projects, infrastructure, and public transportation.
Sports diplomacy has also been accompanied with a number of downfalls. In regards to infrastructure development, rapid investment can have a negative impact in future years. For instance, many of Beijing’s sports venues are rarely used today and the public transportation built in Rio de Janeiro mainly services upper class inhabitants. The uglier face of sports diplomacy can also be seen in the nationalistic rivalries that play out. This dynamic was evident in the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Union Olympic men’s basketball final. Several inbounds and a clock controversy led to the U.S. team protesting the results and refusing to accept medals. This situation is one example of the way in which real-world rivalries also play out in sports, showing that sports diplomacy is not always able to transcend political issues as assumed.

Several games have been recognized for being instrumental in breakthroughs in diplomatic relations. “Ping Pong diplomacy,” in which Americans competed against Chinese in a number of table tennis games, marked an important thaw in Sino-U.S. relations during the Cold War. Similarly, North Korea’s participation in the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics was seen by some as a symbolic gesture toward improved relations on the Korean peninsula. Furthermore, the two countries have requested that the International Olympic Committee allow some teams from both of the countries to join together as one team in the 2020 Tokyo games. With the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Games being postponed until 2021, the international community will need to wait to see whether the benefits of sports diplomacy -- bolstering the host country’s public image, encouraging dialogue -- can result in lasting benefits.

**Conclusion:**

The United Nations and the international community should continue to recognize the value of sport and the positive effect it can have on peace worldwide. With the delaying of the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, global protests and unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever that sport continues in a safe manner to help lift people up, promote peace, and give athletes a platform to use their voices effectively. However, it is important to note that sports diplomacy has been a source of conflict in the past. Moving forward, it will be crucial for the international community to conduct and host sporting events in a way that does not promote class divide or display political rivalries on a worldwide stage. Now is the time for the international community to come together and unify through healthy athletic competition.
Questions:
1. What can the international community do to limit the negative externalities associated with sport on nation's economies and societies?
2. How can the value of sport on global relations continue following the pandemic?
3. How important is it for athletes to have a platform to use their voice for social change?
Resources


