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The United Nations and Disarmament amid COVID-19

Adaptation and Continuity

By Tsutomu Kono



**United
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OFFICE FOR DISARMAMENT AFFAIRS
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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak posed an unprecedented challenge to intergovernmental disarmament institutions and processes. In 2020, New York City's pandemic restrictions forced the United Nations—the centrepiece of multilateral diplomacy since its creation in 1945—to shut down its Headquarters, prompting the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Secretariat to cancel or postpone numerous mandated meetings and events on disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. As COVID-19 swept across the world, diplomatic centres in Geneva, Vienna and elsewhere also closed their doors.

The impact on multilateral disarmament was immediate. In Geneva, the Conference on Disarmament, the negotiating body of multilateral disarmament machinery, suspended its plenary meetings from March to June 2020. In New York, the United Nations Disarmament Commission, a specialized deliberative body established by the General Assembly, postponed and effectively cancelled its three-week annual session in April 2020. The States parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons also delayed their tenth review conference, prolonging what is normally a five-year cyclical review of the Treaty's implementation.¹

Of course, the pandemic's impact was not limited to disarmament bodies and meetings: every United Nations organ and international body was affected. After the Governor of the State of New York declared a state of emergency on 7 March 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres closed the United Nations premises, cancelling all events at Headquarters and mandating staff to work from home unless their physical presence was essential.

The United Nations and other international organizations were suddenly in limbo, their functions brought to a standstill. Simply put, if the United Nations Headquarters in New York and its other offices in Geneva and Vienna are closed, disarmament bodies and processes cannot convene mandated meetings and events.²

Yet even as international organizations scrambled to mitigate the pandemic's risks, they began to explore innovative working methods. The General Assembly, the Security Council and the Secretariat—the primary United Nations organs whose decisions have direct bearing on the work of other multilateral disarmament bodies and processes—adopted written procedures for making decisions and holding meetings virtually via video conferencing platforms. The Security Council developed a written procedure for adopting resolutions by vote

as well as guidelines for holding remote open meetings and closed-door consultations, enabling it to carry out most of its activities without holding in-person meetings.

The General Assembly also adopted a “silence procedure” that enabled it to take formal decisions without having to convene in person. By that means, it postponed both the 2020 substantive session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the seventh Biennial Meeting of States to consider the implementation of the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects. Furthermore, the silence procedure of the General Assembly offered a template for other intergovernmental bodies and processes—including the Conference on Disarmament and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty States parties—to adopt necessary procedural decisions to cancel or postpone their mandated meetings. However, the General Assembly’s failure to agree on proposals for written or online voting procedures foreclosed the possibility of taking non-consensual decisions.

Meanwhile, the General Assembly held no plenary meetings for nearly six months, as Member States could not reach agreement to hold such meetings without in-person participation. It nonetheless succeeded in adopting a procedure to hold elections by secret ballot without plenary meetings, enabling the body in June 2020 to elect new members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, as well as a new President of the General Assembly.

As the initial threat from the pandemic receded in New York, Geneva and Vienna in the summer of 2020, the United Nations reopened its conference rooms to formal,

in-person meetings of Member State delegates. The reopening was limited in scope, however, with continued public health restrictions forcing the primary United Nations organs and disarmament bodies to maintain adjustments to their working methods. In Geneva, the Conference on Disarmament resumed its plenary meetings in the early summer, completing its 2020 session in a “hybrid” format incorporating both in-person and virtual participation.

The General Assembly held its general debate in September 2020 without the presence of dignitaries, instead allowing high-level national officials to deliver their statements in pre-recorded videos. Restrictions on physical access remained in effect after the debate concluded: social distancing requirements made only two venues—the General Assembly Hall and a combined space of three large conference rooms—available for full-membership meetings, forcing the Assembly’s six Main Committees to hold their annual sessions in an abridged format. The Committees thus adapted their working modalities, shifting to hybrid or virtual modes while also allowing Member States to submit their statements in writing.

The First Committee, also known as the Disarmament and International Security Committee, convened its seventy-fifth session in person in October and November 2020. As the main legislative body of the disarmament machinery, the Committee held its session in an abridged format with modified working modalities, forgoing its thematic debate, with the exception of virtual briefings, and accepting statements submitted either in writing or in pre-recorded videos. Despite such challenges, the First Committee was able to complete the programme of work adopted at its

previous session in 2019, thus fulfilling its mandate for 2020.

Even as in-person meetings at the United Nations began to resume, the pandemic continued to pose a serious threat to the safety and health of delegates and Secretariat staff. The Security Council, which resumed in-person meetings with limited physical presence in the summer of 2020, reverted to virtual mode after COVID-19 cases spiked in November. In 2021, the threat of the pandemic waxed and waned: the Delta variant caused a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the summer, as did the Omicron variant later in the year. In response, the United Nations continued to significantly restrict physical access at its facilities until April 2022, when the organization finally lifted most pandemic-related restrictions at its Headquarters. In the meantime, intergovernmental bodies continued to confront difficult challenges in fulfilling their mandates, forcing them to balance a growing demand for in-person meetings and events against the ongoing need to mitigate risks from the pandemic. Their efforts in that regard were focused on conference management, in particular how to devise safe working modalities and adapt programmes of work in ways acceptable to their memberships.

Throughout 2021 and early 2022, different disarmament bodies responded to the challenges in different manners, with different results. In 2021, the First Committee convened its seventy-sixth session in an abridged format, holding more in-person meetings than the previous year and resuming its thematic debate. Meanwhile, the Conference on Disarmament was able to meet in person for most of its annual session. The United Nations Disarmament Commission cancelled its

2021 session due not to the pandemic, but to an organizational issue.

As the physical restrictions were further eased, a number of scheduled and previously postponed meetings were held in-person with limited physical presence and/or truncated programmes of work. However, with pandemic-related travel and physical restrictions still in place, holding large in-person meetings was simply not possible for an extended period of time. As a result, the tenth Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference was repeatedly postponed until it could finally take place in August 2022, more than two years after it was originally scheduled.

The pandemic provided a rare opportunity to question the necessity of some disarmament bodies and processes. By postponing mandated conferences and other events over the first two years of the pandemic, such forums raised serious questions about the relevance and validity of their mandates and, in some cases, the bodies themselves.

The disarmament machinery and related bodies largely returned to their pre-pandemic working methods after April 2022. Can we wholeheartedly welcome this return to “business as usual”? Or could reflecting on the collective experience and efforts of the disarmament community during the pandemic yield insights for its future work?

To answer those questions, this Occasional Paper offers an extensive review of relevant developments at the United Nations, particularly in the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as in the disarmament machinery and other disarmament bodies and processes, during the two-year period of the pandemic. It also compares their varying responses to the

COVID-19 outbreak with a focus on how they adapted their working methods.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of how the pandemic affected the United Nations from its onset to the organization's reopening in the so-called "Next Normal". It provides a brief account of how the Secretary-General and his staff at the Secretariat responded to the outbreak, including through the lockdown of the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It also discusses how the Secretary-General developed a strategic plan for reopening the United Nations while safeguarding the health and well-being of delegates and Secretariat staff.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine how the two primary United Nations organs—namely, the General Assembly and the Security Council—managed to adapt their working methods and continued to fulfil their mandates following the initial closure of the United Nations premises. They shed light on how they developed alternative working methods, such as written procedures for taking decisions, and compare the two organs' responses, identifying dynamics that produced different outcomes during the lockdown. These chapters also recount how the two organs subsequently adjusted their working modalities as the United Nations partially reopened its facilities in summer 2020.

Furthermore, Chapter 2 explains how the General Assembly elected its next President, as well as new members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, when it could not agree on procedures for voting or convening plenary meetings remotely. Meanwhile, Chapter 3 examined how the Security Council agreed upon a written procedure for adopting resolutions by vote and developed the

modalities for convening its meetings and consultations remotely by embracing videoconferencing technologies, thereby succeeding in conducting its work fully online.

Chapter 4 examines the pandemic's impact on the disarmament machinery's three main components: the First Committee of the General Assembly, the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament. It sheds light on United Nations processes during the pandemic from two important perspectives—namely, that of two subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly and an independent body established thereby, as well as that of the United Nations disarmament machinery. The chapter recounts how these bodies adapted their working methods to accommodate social distancing obligations and the limited availability of conference facilities, which caused a significant drop in the number of the meetings held during the annual session and, in the case of the Disarmament Commission, its cancellation in 2020 and 2021.

Chapter 5 provides an account of how the pandemic affected the work of other disarmament bodies and processes established by the General Assembly and the Security Council, such as Open-ended Working Groups and Groups of Governmental Experts, as well as review processes established by multilateral treaties, particularly the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The chapter also briefly discusses other disarmament-related bodies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Chapter 6 presents the author's preliminary conclusions, based on the analysis presented in earlier chapters,

of how effectively the primary organs of the United Nations and the disarmament machinery responded to the pandemic and to what extent they fulfilled their mandates. Did COVID-19 hinder or curtail their substantive work in 2020 and 2021, or was their progress simply postponed? Such questions require extensive, in-depth examinations of their work under COVID restrictions, and the preliminary reflections in this chapter may highlight directions for further study.

The final chapter also addresses whether the pandemic should serve as a catalyst for rethinking and changing multilateral working methods or rules of

procedure. Have any of the changes induced by COVID-19 provided impetus to the long-running effort to revitalize the work and processes of primary United Nations organs, the disarmament machinery and other disarmament processes? Will any of the ad hoc COVID measures survive the pandemic? In particular, will technological innovations introduced during the pandemic become a permanent feature of the work of the United Nations and the disarmament machinery? In closing, the author offers personal observations on the long-term impact of the pandemic on the work of the United Nations and multilateral disarmament.

1

Overview

On 12 December 2019, a cluster of patients in the city of Wuhan, China, began to experience the symptoms of an atypical pneumonia-like illness. On 31 December, the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China was alerted to several such cases across Wuhan, with symptoms that included shortness of breath and fever. On 1 January 2020, the city's Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was permanently closed amid worries in China about a reprise of the 2002–2004 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-1) outbreak. Then, on 2 January, WHO activated its Incident Management Support Team across its three organizational levels: Country Office, Regional Office and Headquarters.

The next day, China informed WHO that it had identified over 40 cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology. On 5 January, as the disease spread through the city, Chinese public health officials shared the genetic sequence of the atypical pneumonia virus, dubbed “Wuhan-Hu-1”, with the rest of the world through an online database.

On 31 January, WHO declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a “public health emergency of international concern”, and the United States declared a nationwide public health emergency.¹ Subsequently, authorities in the State of

New York began to document cases of travel-related and community contact transmission.

As the outbreak grew with breathtaking speed, its impacts were soon felt at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The President of the General Assembly, Mr. Tijjani al-Muhammad-Bande of Nigeria, designated a focal point on the outbreak and, in early March, established a task force for related matters. He also received a briefing from Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, on the spread of COVID-19 around the world and its impact on public health. In ongoing consultation with the United Nations Secretariat, the President convened an informal meeting of the General Assembly's General Committee to discuss the issue. He also discussed the matter with the Presidents of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Security Council.

Lockdown

On Sunday, 8 March, one day after the Governor of the State of New York declared a state of emergency,² United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres acted to mitigate the risks of the pandemic. He announced the closure of the United Nations Headquarters and other offices while

underscoring that the Secretariat would continue to provide necessary technical and organizational support to Member States in the radically transformed environment. Furthermore, in a letter addressed to all United Nations staff members, the Secretary-General offered assurances that their health and safety was his utmost priority and urged them to step up their efforts to contain the disease.³

Additionally, in view of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Governor of New York State, the Secretary-General issued measures aimed at limiting the presence of staff on the United Nations premises and, likewise, limiting large, in-person meetings. On 8 March, the Crisis Operations Group on COVID-19 met at the Secretariat building in New York to review the organization's response on a broad range of issues and to prepare administrative guidance, particularly regarding working arrangements. Acknowledging the need to scale up telecommuting, the Group discussed the practical implications thereof. On 9 March, the Secretariat instituted arrangements for staff to telecommute up to three days per week (or five days per week for high-risk individuals) to reduce the population density in the building.⁴ It was also announced that the United Nations complex would be closed to visitors and the general public.⁵ Only one day later, all United Nations staff in New York Headquarters were authorized and strongly encouraged to undertake full-time telecommuting, commencing immediately.

On 10 March, the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council held a joint informal meeting where they heard from the Secretariat on measures to strengthen preparedness and ensure business continuity in light of the evolving situation of COVID-19's spread

around the world and its influence on United Nations meetings. Those measures included the development of a "risk assessment matrix" for intergovernmental bodies to take decisions on convening planned meetings in line with contingency measures responding to the outbreak.

The President of the General Assembly circulated the risk assessment matrix in a letter to Member States dated 11 March,⁶ the day that the World Health Organization officially characterized the spread of the novel coronavirus as a pandemic. In the letter, the President strongly recommended (a) scaling down the number of people at gatherings within the United Nations premises;⁷ (b) holding meetings in large conference rooms, when possible, to allow for adequate space among participants; (c) refraining from inviting non-New York-area residents to serve as panellists, speakers and participants at meetings; (d) refraining from inviting visitors into the United Nations Headquarters; (e) cancelling side events; and (f) postponing or scaling down National Days (events).⁸

On 12 March, the President convened the co-facilitators and co-chairs of General Assembly-mandated processes and advised them accordingly, highlighting the importance of assessing the need for in-person meetings and exploring alternative ways to conduct their business. Following up on that meeting, the President informed Member States, in a letter dated 13 March 2020, that his office was now working with the Secretariat to research what information and communications technology (ICT) tools could enable Member States to hold virtual meetings. In the same letter, he conveyed his decision to recommend that various meetings be cancelled or postponed, including a meeting of the Fifth Committee (Administrative

and Budgetary Committee) and the 2020 session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission. He also foreshadowed further cancellations and postponements of events scheduled to take place in March and April.⁹ At the same time, referring to the possibility that the General Assembly would not be able to convene a formal meeting at the United Nations Headquarters, he expressed an intention to present proposals that would allow Member States to take essential decisions under such circumstances and facilitate further meeting postponements.¹⁰

As the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council cancelled their plenary meetings on 13 March,¹¹ the Secretary-General decided that all staff in New York would be required to work remotely from 16 March to 12 April 2020 unless their physical presence was needed to carry out essential work.¹² He also decided to cancel all side events of the United Nations system planned at Headquarters from 16 March until the end of April, simultaneously urging all Member States to consider cancelling side events that they were sponsoring. No official meetings took place at United Nations Headquarters in person the following week, from 16 to 20 March.

On 20 March, New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo signed the “New York State on PAUSE” executive order, a 10-point policy to assure uniform safety for everyone.¹³ The General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council cancelled all meetings scheduled for the following three weeks, with two notable exceptions: the Fifth Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, which held informal consultations and meetings remotely.

On 17 March, the President of the General Assembly informed Member States that due to guidance severely limiting the number of persons attending in-person meetings as a result of the continuing evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, he had decided to (a) postpone five meetings scheduled to be held from 23 March to 16 April; (b) cancel all in-person meetings of the General Assembly-mandated processes scheduled to be held between 17 March and 17 April; and (c) circulate draft decisions to postpone the upcoming substantive sessions of the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the International Law Commission, as those postponements required the Assembly’s concurrence.¹⁴ Noting that his Office had transitioned to virtual meetings, the President said he looked forward to convening remotely with Member States at 1 p.m. the following day to engage on issues concerning the technical aspects of business continuity and meetings management. The President also mentioned that the Fifth Committee had successfully started conducting informal meetings via the United Nations’ Video Conference Tool, referring to that Committee’s ongoing discussions of other mandated events scheduled to take place after 17 April 2020.

In another letter, dated 3 April, the President of the General Assembly further informed Member States of the decision to postpone three Assembly-mandated meetings scheduled for April and May 2020. He also announced the cancellation of all in-person meetings of General Assembly-mandated processes that were scheduled to be held between 17 April 2020 and the end of the following month.¹⁵

Thus, the three primary organs of the United Nations—the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council—did not meet in person

for four to six months.¹⁶ However, the Presidents of the bodies consulted with their respective members to explore alternative working methods to fulfil their mandates. In particular, they considered new mechanisms for adopting resolutions and making other essential decisions, as well as for holding informal consultations by videoconference. Ultimately, each body managed to fulfil its mandates by introducing new digital technologies while continuing to adhere to its rules of procedure.

On 27 March, the President of the General Assembly; the President of the Economic and Social Council, Ambassador Mona Juul of Norway; the President of the Security Council, Ambassador Zhang Jun of China; and the Secretary-General of the United Nations held a virtual joint briefing with Member States. During the meeting, they informed the wider United Nations membership that the three primary organs were actively exploring new working methods to ensure that their work would continue uninterrupted.

Within two weeks of the shutdown of the United Nations premises, the Security Council had adopted a written procedure for adopting resolutions that enabled it to continue its essential work.¹⁷ During China's Presidency in March 2020, the Council passed four resolutions through those "temporary, extraordinary and provisional" measures. In the following months, the Security Council developed modalities for video teleconferencing that enabled it to convene public meetings and closed consultations virtually.

In parallel, the General Assembly adopted a procedural decision on 27 March that would allow it to take decisions through a silence procedure without holding in-person meetings.¹⁸ From 31 March to

3 September, that procedure allowed the Assembly to adopt a total of 30 resolutions and 40 decisions by consensus, thereby postponing or cancelling mandated meetings, holding uncontested elections and adopting substantive resolutions that included two measures on COVID-19. Importantly, it also enabled the General Assembly to achieve consensus on the final draft of the Declaration for the Commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations in July.¹⁹ Furthermore, the silence procedure allowed the General Assembly to maintain business continuity in the field of disarmament by postponing or cancelling mandated meetings—in particular, the 2020 session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the seventh Biennial Meeting of States on the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.

The Economic and Social Council followed suit shortly thereafter. On 2 April, its President, Ambassador Mona Juul, circulated a proposal to allow the Council to adopt decisions during the pandemic, taking into the account the silence procedure adopted by the General Assembly several days earlier. The Council adopted decision 2020/205, entitled "Procedure for taking decisions of the Economic and Social Council during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic", through the same procedure on 3 April.

Similarly, the closure of other United Nations facilities had direct impacts on disarmament-related meetings and processes in Geneva and Vienna. The Conference on Disarmament, the multilateral negotiating body, was unable to convene plenary meetings from 10 March to 29 June as a result of physical restrictions imposed

on delegations and Secretariat staff at the United Nations Office in Geneva. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) also suspended in-person meetings and consultations, as the Vienna International Centre had closed to delegates and United Nations staff members. Each developed alternative working methods and continued their work through video conferencing.

In the meantime, the United Nations Secretariat promulgated a set of safety and health measures centred around the new risk assessment matrix developed with WHO guidelines. In an urgent review of every mandated and non-mandated meeting for which they provided substantive support, the heads of Secretariat departments and offices requested the office-holders and secretaries of intergovernmental bodies to assess and report back on the feasibility of holding their respective meetings as planned or of scaling down, postponing or cancelling them. The Office of the Medical Director and the Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOSH) monitored the situation and advised senior management, taking on a critical role in evaluating the safety of delegates and staff.

Shortly after the closure of the United Nations Headquarters, the Secretariat began to hold regular online information briefings for Member States on the technical aspects of business continuity and meeting management in response to the evolving situation following the onset of the pandemic.²⁰ The weekly briefings became an important means of updating the United Nations community as the primary organs scrambled to adapt their working methods.

As the COVID-19 restrictions imposed in New York State remained in force in April and May 2020, the Secretary-General extended the limitation on large in-person meetings at the United Nations Headquarters until 31 May. The physical restrictions in the United Nations buildings were further extended through June in light of guidance from the United Nations Medical Director, Dr. Gillian Farmer. In a letter dated 29 April 2020 and addressed to the chef de cabinet of the Office of the President of the General Assembly, Farmer recommended maintaining the current arrangements until 30 June, which would provide a measure of stability during a period of great uncertainty.²¹

Under the restrictive circumstances, the General Assembly could not convene plenary meetings with the participation of representatives from all 193 Member States, a prerequisite for holding elections scheduled to take place at the United Nations Headquarters in June. Based on a non-paper prepared by the Department of the General Assembly and Conference Management, the President of the General Assembly proposed a procedure to elect new members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council by secret ballot without convening a plenary meeting. The plan envisaged the Assembly holding the elections simultaneously by staggering the casting of ballots at a specific venue announced prior to the election; the Assembly would then take note of the results at its next plenary meeting held in person.

Acting through its silence procedure, the General Assembly adopted a draft decision containing the proposal on 29 May 2020.²² As long as there was only one candidate and no other contender, the Assembly would be able to elect its

new President and the incoming chairs, vice-chairs and rapporteurs of its Main Committees for its seventy-fifth session through the silence procedure approved on 27 March and extended subsequently.

On 12 June, the General Assembly elected the Chairs of its Main Committees and most other office-holders by that process. A secret ballot was requested and granted for the sole candidate for President of the Assembly, Mr. Volkan Bozkir of Turkey, who was subsequently elected without a plenary meeting on 17 June. On the same day, the Assembly elected the new members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council in accordance with its decision of 29 May.

Reopening

As New York City gradually eased its physical restrictions in June and July, the United Nations Headquarters followed suit, partially opening its premises in July and August 2020. On 22 May, United Nations staff members in New York were informed that the Senior Emergency Policy Team had endorsed a plan for the gradual, phased return of personnel to the United Nations campus in New York, entitled “Our Workplace: Next Steps @UNHQ.” It envisaged four phases for reopening the United Nations campus in New York:

“Preparation” phase (Phase Zero)

Focus on preparing building services (e.g., cleaning of premises, workspace reviewed for physical distancing) to accept personnel back in the building (beyond those currently going in) while communicating with them the process to be followed. This phase is aimed to keep occupancy at the Headquarters complex **below 200 people**.

“Required on-site” phase (Phase One)

Focus on selected activities by various entities and Member States that can only be undertaken on site. Emphasis is strictly on those tasks that must be performed on site, although many, indeed most, mandate-critical and important tasks will continue to be done remotely. This phase will include a limited number of personnel of **up to 400 people** a day at the HQ complex and around 10% of normal occupancy for annex buildings.^{23, 24}

“Expansion” phase (Phase Two)

Focus on UN personnel returning to the workplace based on their work units’ priorities and their personal circumstances. Maximum flexibility will continue to be the norm, taking into account the limitation resulting from the maximum building occupancy. During this phase, building occupancy would gradually increase to a maximum limit of **1,100 personnel** a day at the HQ complex (about 40% occupancy), and 40% to 50% occupancy for other buildings depending on the layouts of those buildings and the operational requirements of the Organization there.²⁵

“New Normal” phase (Phase Three)

In line with a significant reduction in risks, this phase will involve a reimagining of what the “new normal” will be as compared to pre-COVID work practices.

The Plan was developed based on the following principles: (a) the safety and health of UN personnel and delegates is the number one priority; (b) the physical return of personnel to the workplace

will be in accordance with and will follow, not get ahead of, the loosening of restrictions by New York City/State; and (c) a conservative interpretation of the on-site presence required will be adopted. Transitions between phases would follow the recommendations of New York City and State, which had adopted clear criteria to justify any shift in precautions taken.²⁶

The situation in New York City gradually improved as the summer of 2020 approached, with declines in numbers of transmissions, hospital admissions and deaths. On 22 June, New York entered a new phase of its own reopening plan, allowing a limited scope of economic and social activities (phase 2),²⁷ but the United Nations Headquarters would remain in “Phase Zero” for another month. On 12 June, after consulting on the COVID-19 situation with his senior management team and the United Nations medical services, the Secretary-General decided to extend the telecommuting arrangements at the Headquarters complex through 31 July. He informed UN Staff in New York of his decision in a letter addressed to them, stressing that he was actively preparing for a phased return though a date for moving into Phase One had not yet been set.²⁸

On 6 July, New York City began allowing even more economic and social activities with appropriate precautions (phase 3). The restrictions on physical presence at the United Nations Headquarters were eased accordingly, creating the possibility of convening in-person meetings for delegates.

The Secretary-General informed his New York staff on 8 July that with preparations for a phased return to be completed soon, the United Nations Headquarters would transition into Phase One on 20 July 2020. By then, he noted, all

buildings would have undergone a deep cleaning and been outfitted with signage to guide staff in physical distancing. He stressed that such distancing would be strictly enforced for common spaces; face-to-face meetings within offices would not be allowed without an individual risk assessment; masks would have to be worn outside designated workspaces; and no catering services would be provided. The Secretary-General added that the Crisis Operations Group, in close collaboration with focal points from each Secretariat entity and from the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, had concluded an assessment of which functions would be performed on site after the transition.²⁹ In advance of moving into Phase One, and later into Phase Two, the Secretary-General promised detailed guidelines for staff asked to return to the workplace, as well as further town hall meetings to address their questions and concerns. On 20 July, the Office of Human Resources released its guidelines entitled, “Return to the workplace: Human Resources Policy Guidance for Headquarters”.

With New York City expected to reopen further in July 2020, the members of the Security Council agreed to again convene in-person meetings, deeming that the decision to do so lay with the Council. The Security Council thus held in-person meetings in the Economic and Social Council Chamber on 14 and 28 July, and continued to hold in-person meetings there occasionally over the summer. In October, under the Russian presidency, it returned to the Security Council Chamber in a bid to resume its normal functioning, but the resurgence of COVID-19 cases in November forced the Council to revert to conducting its work in virtual mode.³⁰

On 20 July 2020, as New York City took another step in its reopening (phase 4), the

United Nations Headquarters entered its Phase One, permitting up to 400 people in the complex on a given day. With the city continuing to meet public health milestones for its gradual reopening, the Secretary-General informed his staff 11 days later that the United Nations Headquarters in New York would transition to Phase Two on 24 August. He noted that Phase Two allowed for a gradual increase in personnel and delegates on site, from the 10 per cent maximum in Phase One to 40 per cent maximum.³¹ During Phase Two, staff members performing functions that could be more efficiently or effectively conducted on site would be permitted to return to the office, as long as the maximum occupancy level of 40 per cent was not exceeded.³² The Secretary-General nonetheless stressed the need for utmost caution and care, referring specifically to the requirements for entering the United Nations Headquarters³³ and noting that the majority of personnel would continue to work remotely under the current alternative work arrangements.

Pandemic-related physical restrictions were also eased in Geneva, allowing the Conference on Disarmament to convene plenary meetings in a “hybrid” format with delegates participating both in person and remotely. It held the first such meeting with the support of teleconferencing systems on 30 June, toward the end of the second part of its 2020 session. The Conference held four additional hybrid meetings in August and September, enabling the body to complete its mandate for the year. Although the use of hybrid and virtual formats did not create a precedent for future meetings of the Conference on Disarmament, it provided a tool that enabled the Conference to continue its work amid the pandemic.

In New York, the transition to Phase Two at the United Nations Headquarters

enabled the General Assembly to resume the convening of plenary meetings in September, shortly in advance of the body’s seventy-fifth session. However, physical presence on the premises continued to be restricted, with only two venues available for meetings attended by all Member States—namely, the General Assembly Hall and three combined, basement-level Conference Rooms. The partial reopening was nonetheless fortunate: thanks to the improved COVID situation, Member States were able to convene in-person meetings, and, despite an abbreviated schedule, complete their mandated work in the main part of the Assembly’s seventy-fifth session.³⁴

The ongoing restrictions still posed an unprecedented challenge to the United Nations in organizing the so-called “high-level week” of the General Assembly.³⁵ As early as June, the President of the Assembly recognized the need to hold the general debate and other high-level meetings scheduled for September 2020 in an altered format. He thus proposed necessary measures to limit the occupancy of the United Nations building in compliance with social distancing requirements, allowing only one delegate from each delegation to attend meetings at the venue. As a result, the annual high-level segment of the General Assembly took place without the presence of Heads of State or Government, who instead delivered their statements in pre-recorded videos. After the general debate, the Main Committees convened with a significantly reduced number of formal meetings; through a newly adopted hybrid mode, in-person meetings were combined or substituted with informal virtual meetings. Most informal consultations were also held online.

As health authorities eased restrictions on in-person contact in New York, Geneva and Vienna in the summer of 2020, some disarmament-related and other intergovernmental bodies resumed in-person meetings at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and other United Nations offices. Taking into account the need to ensure the safety of delegates and staff who attended and supported such meetings, those bodies adapted their working modalities to the extent allowed within their respective rules of procedure, holding certain meetings and consultations in virtual or hybrid mode with the support of new digital technologies.

For multilateral disarmament, it was particularly important that the First Committee of the General Assembly, also known as the Disarmament and International Security Committee, was able to hold its substantive session in person. Yet, due to the limited conference space available at the United Nations Headquarters, the Committee had to modify its programme of work by reducing the number of formal meetings from 27 to 15. In doing so, the First Committee forwent its thematic debate in favour of holding three informal virtual meetings and allowing thematic statements to be submitted in writing. The Committee was thus able to fulfil its mandate, despite the pandemic's severe impact, by adopting recurring and new resolutions and decisions at the formal meetings of its annual substantive session.

As cases spiked again in New York City, however, the Governor of the State of New York again imposed additional restrictions on public and private activities on 13 November 2020.

Toward normalcy

Although physical restrictions remained in place at the United Nations Headquarters throughout 2021, the public health situation improved over the course of the year: delegates were receiving newly available vaccinations, and many delegations expressed a desire to "return to normal". Despite concerns about the pandemic's possible resurgence, large-scale conferences and meetings began to be held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and elsewhere. In the fall of 2021, the General Assembly held the high-level segment of its seventy-sixth session in a hybrid format, with a large number of leaders attending in the General Assembly Hall and others sending pre-recorded statements.

Under ongoing COVID restrictions, the international community nonetheless achieved further progress in the field of disarmament in 2021. The First Committee again convened in an abridged mode but restored its thematic debate, allowing Member States to make statements within two combined thematic clusters rather than the body's traditional seven clusters.³⁶ It was clear that delegations had a strong desire to return to pre-pandemic working modalities, with more in-person meetings, greater physical presence and further interaction. In Geneva, the Conference on Disarmament was likewise able to convene hybrid and virtual plenary meetings in its six working languages by making use of remote simultaneous interpretation platforms.

Several major disarmament meetings postponed in 2020 were held in person or in hybrid mode in 2021. Among them were the Open-ended Working Group on Development in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security; the seventh Biennial Meeting of States on the UN Programme of

Action on small arms and light weapons; and the Group of Governmental Experts on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security; and the Group of Governmental Experts on Problems Arising from the Accumulation of Conventional Ammunition Stockpiles in Surplus.

At the end of 2021, as COVID cases increased sharply in New York due to the Omicron variant, the Secretariat's Occupational Safety and Health Committee decided to suspend the existing human resources guidance on flexible work arrangements from 20 December to 7 February to allow all New York-based staff to exceptionally telecommute five days a week from the duty station work. The majority of meetings at the United Nations Headquarters were held remotely without physical presence during January 2021, but the Security Council continued its meetings in person and the General Assembly held a small number of plenary meetings on site. Thereafter, the COVID situation continued to improve in New York. In light of a reduction in workplace risk to pre-epidemic levels and the removal of specific COVID-19 related restrictions by New York City and State, on 4 April 2022, the United Nations Headquarters transitioned from Phase Two to Three, the so-called "New Normal", bringing activities on the United Nations campus back to normalcy.³⁷

Therefore, as the United Nations reinstated its pre-pandemic working modalities in spring 2022, major United Nations disarmament bodies began to hold their mandated meetings fully in person. In January, the Conference on Disarmament began its 2022 session in an in-person format that complied with relevant social distancing measures. Then, in April, the United Nations Disarmament Commission

convened its annual substantive session after a hiatus of three years.

As the pandemic situation continued to stabilize from June to August, many disarmament conferences and meetings were held in person. In Vienna, States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons held their first meeting from 21 to 23 June, adopting the Vienna Action Plan and the Vienna Declaration. In Geneva, as the Conference on Disarmament began the third and last part of its annual session, States parties of various disarmament conventions convened their annual meetings or review conferences in fully in-person or hybrid format.³⁸ Meanwhile, in New York, the eighth Biennial Meeting of States on the United Nations Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons was held fully in person in June, adopting its final document by consensus. The Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies 2021–2015 held its second and third sessions, successfully adopting its annual progress report on 29 July 2022. After multiple postponements over two and a half years, the tenth Review Conference of States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was finally held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in August 2022, although it was not able to adopt a final document.

As part of its return to its pre-pandemic working modalities, the General Assembly discontinued certain COVID-19 measures at its seventy-seventh session, particularly the submission of pre-recorded video statements by Heads of State and Government and other dignitaries at its general debate. This change gave rise to concern among many Member States that the leader of a sovereign State, a Member of the United Nations, could not participate

in the meeting of the General Assembly for reasons beyond their control due to foreign invasions or aggression that did not allow safe departure from or return to his country. Therefore, a draft decision was submitted that would allow Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to participate in the general debate via a pre-recorded video statement on an exceptional basis.³⁹ Amid the return to pre-pandemic normalcy, the decision highlighted the temporary and exceptional nature of various measures adopted during the pandemic to ensure business continuity.

Normalcy also returned to the work of the Main Committees of the General Assembly. Resuming its pre-pandemic working methods, the First Committee proceeded with its traditional programme of work without social distancing. Liberated from COVID-19 restrictions, Member States in fact demonstrated greater interest and deeper engagement in multilateral disarmament: the Committee had to add four additional meetings to its original schedule to accommodate much larger numbers of speakers and a record number of draft resolutions and decisions. Heightened interest was also apparent in other intergovernmental bodies and processes related to disarmament or separate issue

areas, suggesting that engagement in such forums was reinvigorated by the reversion to traditional multilateral diplomacy and direct interaction.

Yet, as the United Nations and the disarmament machinery return to normalcy, their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have begun to fade. This trend is evident with regard to written procedures for making decisions remotely, virtual meetings via video-conference platforms, and pre-recorded video statements.

Even after the pandemic's acute phase, however, measures involving the use of written procedures and digital technologies have great potential to support multilateral diplomacy by facilitating broader participation and creating more space for consultations, thereby complimenting and reinforcing in-person negotiations and deliberations. Therefore, it is of value and merit to study how international organizations and intergovernmental processes have coped with challenges from the pandemic, examine the measures they employed to fulfil their mandates, and appraise ways in which lessons learned from the pandemic could be beneficial going forward.

2

General Assembly

From the pandemic's outset in early 2020, the President of the General Assembly emerged as the central figure who consulted with all Member States on how to continue the Assembly's work. In that capacity, Mr. Tijjani Muhammad-Bande of Nigeria did not just cancel or postpone a number of mandated meetings and other events scheduled to take place in the immediate future; he also facilitated agreement on a temporary "silence procedure" for the General Assembly to adopt formal consensus decisions without meeting in person.

Not all Member States supported the adoption of fully online working methods, however, and there was no agreement on procedures for the General Assembly to hold formal meetings remotely or in writing. More importantly, the Assembly did not agree to conduct votes electronically, seriously impeding its ability to adopt resolutions and decisions.

As a consequence, the General Assembly held no formal plenary meetings from the closure of the United Nations Headquarters in March 2020 to its partial reopening six months later. Because the Assembly could not take a formal decision when an objection was raised through the silence procedure, it could only adopt resolutions and decisions by consensus.

As the restrictions on physical presence were eased slightly in the summer of 2020, the General Assembly resumed some in-person activities at the United Nations Headquarters. In June, by staggering the casting of in-person secret ballots in the General Assembly Hall, the body was able to elect its incoming President as well as members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

This chapter explains how the General Assembly adopted and implemented ad hoc measures that enabled it to continue its mandated work during the pandemic. It also explores the Assembly's unsuccessful negotiations on so-called "e-voting", which would have allowed the body to adopt resolutions by voting remotely.

Silence procedure

Facing severe restrictions in March 2020 on holding in-person meetings at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the President of the General Assembly explored, with the General Committee,¹ alternative ways to ensure business continuity. In particular, they considered options for adopting key decisions without holding in-person meetings of the Assembly.

On 24 March, the President proposed that the Assembly adopt a silence

procedure for taking essential decisions. The proposal envisaged that the President, following consultations with the General Committee, would circulate draft decisions and resolutions of the Assembly to all Member States. If no Member State raised an objection to a given measure within 72 hours of its tabling, the General Assembly would consider it adopted and take note at its next formal, in-person meeting.

The President placed a draft decision containing the proposal under a silence procedure on 24 March.² As no objection was raised, the Assembly on 27 March adopted the draft as decision [74/544](#), entitled “Procedure for taking decisions of the General Assembly during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)”. The President subsequently circulated a document outlining the step-by-step process for considering draft decisions and resolutions in accordance with the decision.³

The procedural decision was originally scheduled to expire at the end of May 2020, but the General Assembly extended it slightly by decision [74/555](#) of 15 May 2020.⁴ The body subsequently extended it twice more, until the end of August 2020, by its decisions [74/558](#) of 18 June⁵ and [74/561](#) of 21 July.⁶ During that period, the President used the procedure to make necessary decisions before the Assembly could hold its first in-person meeting of the pandemic, on 3 September 2020. At that meeting, the General Assembly formally took note of all decisions adopted through the silence procedure in accordance with its decision [74/544](#).⁷

From 31 March, decision [74/544](#) and its successors allowed the General Assembly to adopt a total of 30 resolutions and 40 decisions before the body resumed in-person meetings on 3 September. Through the

procedure described in the decision, the Assembly was able to postpone or cancel mandated meetings and conduct elections with a clean slate. Notably, the General Assembly approved two resolutions on COVID-19—namely, resolution [74/270](#) of 2 April, entitled “Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)”,⁸ and resolution [74/274](#) of 20 April, entitled “International cooperation to ensure global access to medicines, vaccines and medical equipment to face COVID-19”.⁹

Before proposing the silence procedure as a method for the General Assembly to take decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, as envisaged by decision [74/544](#), the President relied on the General Committee of the General Assembly to consider possible ways forward on various issues. On 26 March 2020, the President informed the Committee’s members that he would convene them in a virtual informal meeting the following day, stating that “in light of the evolving situation of the global spread of COVID-19 and its impact on holding meetings in the United Nations Headquarters, this virtual informal meeting is part of the measures adopted to ensure business continuity of the General Assembly in this period of crisis.” Although some Member States did not welcome the General Committee’s new role, arguing that it was not in line with the body’s main functions as stipulated in the Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly, the President nonetheless continued to look to the Committee as a sounding board.¹⁰

E-voting

The silence procedure adopted by decision [74/544](#) did not permit the General Assembly to take decisions when the silence was broken or a vote was requested, preventing the body from adopting draft

resolutions or decisions on which there was no consensus among Member States. The consequences extended to the body's emergency response to the pandemic: a draft resolution ([A/74/L.51/Rev.1](#)) entitled "Declaration of solidarity of the United Nations in the face of the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)" was not adopted, as objections were raised after the President placed it under silence procedure on 17 April.¹¹

Under those circumstances, several Member States requested that the General Assembly explore ways of taking decisions by a vote. On 23 April 2020, the President informed Member States that he had appointed Ambassador Courtenay Rattray, Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the United Nations, to facilitate discussions on the matter. He also transmitted to Member States two documents prepared by the Secretariat: a non-paper entitled "Decision-making of the General Assembly by a vote (except elections) without a plenary meeting during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic"; and a presentation on the "e-Recorded Vote system".¹²

Subsequently, the facilitator held intensive consultations with Member States through a series of virtual meetings in May and June with a view to achieving consensus on a draft decision.¹³ As the negotiations progressed, the President of the General Assembly circulated to Member States a "zero draft" prepared by the facilitator on 14 May;¹⁴ the comments on and proposals for the zero draft made by Member States on 20 May;¹⁵ and a revised draft on 27 May, in advance of subsequent consultations.¹⁶ As it became clear that further negotiations were needed to reach agreement on the revised draft resolution on e-voting arrangements, the facilitator circulated a further revised draft to Member States on 1 June¹⁷ and held

another round of virtual consultations on 4 June.¹⁸

After convening five meetings and presenting three drafts, Ambassador Rattray provided the President of the General Assembly with the final draft of the proposed decision on electronic voting on 10 June, requesting his office to circulate it under silence procedure as soon as possible.¹⁹ On 15 June, after consulting with the General Committee and Member States, the President tabled a draft decision entitled "Procedure for taking decisions of the General Assembly, excluding elections, by a vote while a plenary meeting of the Assembly is not practicable owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic" ([A/74/L.71](#)).

The e-voting proposal drew one or more objections, breaking the silence needed for its adoption.²⁰ Therefore, despite a two-month collective endeavour by Member States led by Ambassador Rattray, the General Assembly could not forge consensus on an e-voting system that would have enabled the Assembly to adopt resolutions and decisions by voting remotely. That absence of consensus had serious implications for the work of the General Assembly: until the body resumed its plenary in person on 3 September, it adopted resolutions and decisions only by consensus.

However, the General Assembly revisited the matter after returning to in-person meetings. On 13 November 2020, it approved the e-voting system by adopting decision [75/510](#), entitled "Procedure for decision-making in the General Assembly when an in-person meeting is not possible".²¹ As of this writing, the Assembly has not put the procedure to use.

Elections

The restrictions on physical presence at the United Nations Headquarters would also pose a serious logistical challenge to holding elections scheduled in June for the next President of the General Assembly, as well as for new members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. In a letter dated 27 January 2020, the President of the Assembly's seventy-fourth session had informed Member States that the election of the President of the seventy-fifth session would be held on 12 June 2020; the election of the non-permanent members of the Security Council on 17 June; and the election of members of the Economic and Social Council on 18 June.²²

After the United Nations Medical Director recommended on 29 April that the organization maintain restrictions on in-person meetings through June, the President recognized the need to explore alternative mechanisms to hold the June elections without plenary meetings. On 30 April, Mr. Muhammad-Bande consulted virtually with the chairs of the regional groups of Member States, outlining the Assembly's options in a non-paper.²³ In light of a request for the elections to use secret ballots, the non-paper proposed the options of either (a) staggering the casting of ballots at a specific venue announced prior to the election; or (b) casting votes by electronic means.²⁴

On 8 May 2020, the President convened Member State delegates in a virtual town hall meeting for a presentation of his non-paper and consultations as to how the Assembly could hold the elections. Taking into account the views expressed, the President circulated a draft decision by which the General Assembly would hold the elections simultaneously, without a plenary meeting, and take note of the results when

it next formally convened in person.²⁵ Based on comments received from Member States, the President revised the draft decision and, on 20 May, circulated an updated text to all Member States for comments.²⁶ Two days later, he placed under silence procedure the draft decision entitled "Procedure for holding elections by secret ballot without a plenary meeting during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic" (A/74/L.67).²⁷ In the absence of any objection, the General Assembly adopted the draft decision as 74/557 on 29 May 2020.²⁸

In the meantime, the Assembly had extended its use of the silence procedure for taking decisions until the end of June.²⁹ Accordingly, as long as there was only one candidate for each position—that is, as long as regional groups agreed on their candidates by consensus—and no objection was raised, the General Assembly was in a position to elect its new President and the incoming chairs, vice-chairs and rapporteurs of its Main Committees through the silence procedure.

As consultations were underway on alternative mechanisms to hold elections without a plenary meeting, the President of the General Assembly proceeded to organize an informal interactive dialogue with a candidate for the post of President, pursuant to resolution 71/323, entitled "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly".³⁰ In February 2020, the Chair of the Group of Western European and Other States for that month had informed the Secretariat that the Group endorsed the candidacy of Mr. Volkan Bozkir of Turkey for the position of President of the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session.³¹ The current President, Mr. Muhammad-Bande, therefore invited Mr. Bozkir to present his vision statement on 15 May 2020 using a virtual platform. The President placed under silence procedure a

draft decision to elect that sole candidate;³² however, the draft was not adopted, as a vote via secret ballot was requested. Therefore, the President proceeded with the election of his successor via secret ballot without a plenary meeting in accordance with decision 74/557 of 29 May.³³

On 2 June, in accordance with General Assembly decision 74/557 and the arrangements set out in its annexes, the President informed Member States that voting for the next President of the General Assembly, for non-permanent Security Council members and for Economic and Social Council members would be held simultaneously on 17 June 2020 in the General Assembly Hall.³⁴ In a letter sent to Member States in preparation for the secret balloting, the President provided annexes containing information on the number of vacant seats and on the practical arrangements for the elections. In reference to his request to hold the election of his successor, the President explained that 74/557 applied *mutatis mutandis* to other elections of the General Assembly during the seventy-fourth session. He also requested each Member State to provide the Secretariat with the name of the representative who would cast the ballot of the Member State, as well as an alternate.³⁵

On 9 June, the President circulated the specific time slots in which voters were invited to visit the General Assembly Hall to cast the ballot of their respective Member States on the day of the election.³⁶ To reduce occupancy at the designated venue, eight consecutive 30-minute slots were set up, beginning at 9:00 a.m., to which Member States were assigned in the order of the English alphabet. The President also made available an additional time slot, from 1:00 to 1:30 p.m., to any voters unable to visit the venue during their assigned time slots.

On 15 June, the President conveyed to Member States the names of candidates communicated to the Secretariat at least 48 hours prior to the election, pursuant to Assembly resolution 71/323, as well as the names of State representatives who would act as tellers.³⁷

On 17 June, the General Assembly successfully held the elections pursuant to the arrangements set out in the annex to its decision 74/557. The President informed Member States of the results that same day, announcing that Mr. Volkan Bozkir of Turkey had been elected President of the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session; India, Ireland, Mexico and Norway had been elected members of the Security Council for a two-year term beginning on 1 January 2021, with one seat remaining to be filled among the African and Asia-Pacific States; and 18 States had been elected members of the Economic and Social Council for a three-year term beginning on 1 January 2021.³⁸ On 18 June, the General Assembly held a second election for the remaining Security Council seat pursuant to the same decision and the same arrangements set out in its annex.³⁹ As a result, the President announced that Kenya had been elected for a two-year term, from 2021 to 2022.

Using the silence procedure, Member States also succeeded in electing a number of other office holders. On 12 June, the President informed Member States of the election of the Chairs of the Main Committees—and, accordingly, the members of the General Committee—for its seventy-fifth session.⁴⁰ On 29 June, the Assembly adopted decision 74/420, electing 16 candidates⁴¹ to serve as Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly alongside the five representatives of the permanent members of the Security Council.⁴² The President

circulated the outcome in a letter dated the same day.⁴³

Arrangements for high-level meetings

As COVID-19's grip on New York City began to be eased in the early summer of 2020, Member States and the Secretariat turned their focus to the General Assembly's forthcoming seventy-fifth session. Anticipating that improved conditions in the pandemic would allow in-person gatherings to resume, the organizers devoted particular attention to the high-level meetings mandated to take place in September.

On 9 June, in view of the continuing limitations both on international travel and on large in-person meetings at the United Nations Headquarters, the President of the General Assembly circulated a paper outlining a series of "elements for consideration" ahead of the high-level week of the Assembly's seventy-fifth session in September 2020.⁴⁴ In sharing those elements, the President initiated consultations with Member States on how to organize the session's general debate and mandated high-level meetings, including to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations. In an accompanying letter, the President stressed that "the Assembly should consider holding the General Debate and the high-level meetings scheduled for September 2020, in a different format". Accordingly, he proposed several measures to limit the footprint and number of people in the United Nations building, including the following:

- Heads of State and Government or Ministers representing Member States would address the General Debate via pre-recorded video statements (Alternatively, the Permanent Representative could deliver a

statement in the General Assembly Hall);

- Physical presence in the General Assembly Hall for the General Debate would be limited to one or, if the situation allows, two delegates per delegation based in New York;
- Similar arrangements would be made for the high-level meeting of the Assembly to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations scheduled on 21 September 2020, as well as other high-level meetings;
- Taking into account the limitations to hold parallel meetings, Member States would consider revisiting the schedule for high-level meetings—namely 1) the Summit on Biodiversity; 2) the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women; and 3) the high-level meeting to commemorate and promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons—and hold them after the conclusion of the General Debate;
- Member States will be encouraged to move all side events to virtual platforms to limit the footprint and number of people in the United Nations building; and
- The United Nations Webcast Unit would provide live and on-demand streaming coverage of all the mandated high-level meetings, including the General Debate.

In addition to agreeing on the above elements, the President noted in his paper, the General Assembly must address certain procedural matters by adopting formal decisions through the silence procedure.

He thus invited Member States to a virtual meeting on 12 June to discuss the elements, hoping that his paper would become the basis for those discussions. He also solicited written comments from Member States to facilitate further reflection on the paper.⁴⁵

On 7 July, as the Secretary-General announced plans to begin reopening the United Nations Headquarters that month, the President of the General Assembly informed all Member States that consensus had been achieved on the text of the final draft Declaration for the Commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations.⁴⁶ The President subsequently transmitted the final draft to his successor, the President of the seventy-fifth session, to prepare it for adoption at the high-level meeting of the Assembly to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, scheduled for 21 September 2020.

While acknowledging the positive developments, Mr. Muhammad-Bande reiterated his observation, based upon consultations, that the limitations on international travel and large in-person meetings held at the United Nations premises might, in varying degrees, still be in effect in September 2020. To prepare, in a letter to Member States dated 9 July, the President presented a short draft decision containing three of the key elements foreshadowed in his paper circulated on 9 June—namely, (a) to authorize, without setting a precedent, the admissibility of pre-recorded video statements to the General Debate and the other high-level meetings; (b) to revise the schedule for the three mandated high-level meetings;⁴⁷ and (c) to limit the application of those procedures to the General Debate and meetings of the high-level week. At the same time, he assured Member States that the Assembly would maintain established practices such

as the establishment of a provisional list of speakers, the observance of a time limit for statements, respect for multilingualism, arrangements for statements delivered in a language other than the official languages of the United Nations, and the availability of live and on-demand streaming coverage, as well as preparation by the Secretariat of an information note containing details for delegations on the arrangements for the high-level meetings of the upcoming session. Although not part of the draft decision, the President encouraged Member States to move all side events to virtual platforms to limit the footprint and number of people in the United Nations building.⁴⁸

On 16 July, the President of the General Assembly placed under silence procedure, until 22 July, a draft decision entitled “High-level meetings of the General Assembly in September 2020” ([A/74/L.75](#)). In addition to the three elements in the earlier draft decision circulated on 9 July, draft decision [L.75](#) contained an additional element: circulating, as a document of the Assembly, a compilation of the statements delivered by Heads of State or other dignitaries by means of pre-recorded statements during the general debate and the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations.⁴⁹ On 22 July, the President informed Member States that the silence procedure placed on draft decision [L.75](#) had concluded without objection and, accordingly, it was considered adopted by the General Assembly as decision 74/562.⁵⁰ By the same decision, the General Assembly decided, *inter alia*, “without setting a precedent for future general debates and mandated high-level meetings planned for future high-level weeks”, that:

- 1) each Member State, observer State and the European Union can submit a prerecorded statement of its Head of

State, Vice-President, Crown Prince or Princess, Head of Government, Minister or Vice-Minister, which will be played in the General Assembly Hall during the general debate of the Assembly at its seventy-fifth session, the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations and the three high-level meetings referred to in the decision, after introduction by their representative who is physically present in the Assembly Hall;

2) in addition to the verbatim records of the General Debate and the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, as per the practice established in the Security Council, the President of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly will circulate as a document of the Assembly a compilation document of the statements delivered by Heads of State or other dignitaries by means of pre-recorded statements during the General Debate and the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations and submitted to the President no later than the day on which the pre-recorded statement is played in the Assembly Hall.

Subsequently, the Secretariat circulated a Note Verbale providing instructions regarding the list of speakers for the General Debate. Additionally, pursuant to decision 74/562, the President communicated to Member States instructions regarding the lists of speakers for the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations on 18 August.⁵¹ In accordance with the usual practice, the Secretariat also circulated an information note for delegations on the

arrangements for the high-level meetings and the General Debate of the seventy-fifth session. On 25 August, the President circulated to Member States a document entitled "Pre-recorded Statements Audio Video Guidelines for the High-level meetings of the General Assembly in September 2020".⁵² Furthermore, in line with the General Assembly's decision, the General Committee recommended in its report that the Assembly decide, without setting a precedent, that, where physical presence was not practicable, a pre-recorded statement might be submitted by those who were invited to make opening statements at the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary.⁵³

Preparations for the high-level meetings were delayed, however, due to divergent views on how to adapt the rules of procedure to administrative arrangements for a hybrid format. After lengthy negotiations, Member States agreed on temporary arrangements for the modalities, particularly on the use of a speakers' list and pre-recorded video messages, the scope of verbatim records, and a protocol for introducing speakers. Although pre-recorded video messages could not be included in the verbatim records, an innovative solution was found by way of issuance of compilations of pre-recorded statements as a document of the General Assembly.⁵⁴

In the context of the first high-level week of the pandemic, the General Assembly's most significant achievement was in holding every high-level meeting of its seventy-fifth session, including the high-level meeting to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations,⁵⁵ without triggering any significant COVID surge and while successfully safeguarding the safety and health of participants. It was an enormous logistical

accomplishment in the face of the myriad of challenges resulting from the pandemic.

A return to “business as usual”?

One year later, amid ongoing risks from the pandemic, the Assembly applied the same special procedures for convening, in hybrid mode, its general debate and other high-level meetings at the start of its seventy-sixth session.⁵⁶ Most delegates were vaccinated and COVID restrictions had been somewhat eased, allowing a significant number of leaders could address the General Assembly in person in the General Assembly Hall. Concerns about the pandemic persisted, however, and physical restrictions remained in place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and elsewhere. Many other dignitaries again submitted pre-recorded statements.⁵⁷

Following the transition to the so-called New Normal at the United Nations Headquarters in April 2022, the General Assembly discontinued its

COVID-induced hybrid meeting procedures, including the delivery of statements by pre-recorded video. In fact, the Assembly had to adopt a special decision to allow President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine to participate in the General Debate via a pre-recorded video statement during its high-level week in September 2022 on an exceptional basis.⁵⁸

Shortly before that decision, the General Assembly had taken note of all of the information and approved all the recommendations of the General Committee contained in section II (Organization of the session) of its first report, which contained no reference to COVID-related measures, such as submission of pre-recorded statements.⁵⁹ The absence of such measures indicated a return to pre-pandemic working methods; as they had been considered temporary and exceptional steps to ensure business continuity during the pandemic, they were ultimately discontinued.

3

Security Council

The lockdown at the United Nations premises posed an immediate challenge to the Security Council, which was forced to suspend its work in March 2020 with peacekeeping and other mandates due to expire. After the shutdown of the United Nations Headquarters in March 2020, the Council promptly adjusted its programme of work, scaling down its schedule of meetings, postponing some events, developing a video-teleconference network for all Council members and holding certain meetings virtually with technical support from the Secretariat. Within two months, the Council had recreated most of its meeting formats and developed a written procedure for voting, which allowed for the adoption of resolutions and presidential statements.

After cancelling the Council's upcoming in-person meetings in March, China, which held the Security Council presidency for the month, convened virtual consultations where members agreed on a written procedure for adopting resolutions, which was circulated in a letter from the President dated 27 March ([S/2020/253](#)). Using the new written procedure, the Council successfully renewed the mandates for United Nations peacekeeping operations and other activities that would have expired that month. It

adopted four resolutions, thereby extending the mandates of two peace operations—in Somalia and Darfur—and of the panel of experts for the 1718 Committee on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The fourth resolution was aimed at enhancing the safety and security of peacekeepers.

In April and May 2020, the Security Council also developed and refined the modalities for video teleconference (VTC) meetings, which enabled it to conduct its entire work, both open meetings and closed-door consultations, in virtual mode. As the restrictions on physical presence were eased slightly in the summer of 2020, the Security Council took its first step to return to normalcy by holding its first in-person meeting at the Economic and Social Council Chamber in July 2020. Thereafter, the Council continued its activities either virtually or in person as the pandemic's threat waxed and waned.

This chapter provides an overview of the Council's development of its written voting procedure, its modalities for holding open and closed-door meetings by video teleconference, and its transition to holding in-person meetings under physical access restrictions resulting from the pandemic.

Written procedure for adopting resolutions

In its capacity as President of the Security Council for March 2020, China took the initiative of setting forth the procedure to ensure the continuity of its work under the extraordinary circumstances, holding intensive consultations on its working methods virtually, with the participation of all its members and representatives of the Secretary-General and the Security Council Affairs Division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. On 27 March, in a letter addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council, the President, Ambassador Zhang Jun of China, spelled out the following procedure for adopting resolutions:¹

1. Following a request from a Security Council member(s) presenting a draft resolution in blue,² the President will circulate a letter to Council members announcing that the draft resolution (annexed to the letter) will be put to a vote and requesting Council members to provide their votes in writing within a non-extendable period of 24 hours.³
2. Within the 24-hour period, every delegation will send the Secretariat (Director of the Security Council Affairs Division) a letter indicating its vote (in favour, against or abstention) on the draft resolution and, if applicable, an explanation of vote.⁴
3. The Secretariat will acknowledge receipt, keep votes confidential during that period and communicate the result to the President of the Security Council upon the expiry of the 24-hour voting period.
4. Within 12 hours of the conclusion of the voting period, the President

will convene a videoconference of the Security Council to announce the outcome of the vote.

5. Within three hours of the conclusion of the voting period, the President will circulate a letter, listing every delegation's vote and the outcome of the vote, to all Security Council members, the Member States concerned and the Secretariat.⁵
6. There will be a six-hour period for members to make an explanation of their vote in written form, if they so wish, upon receiving the President's letter on the voting outcome. The Member States concerned will also be able to make a written statement, with the agreement of the Council, in line with Rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure ([S/96/Rev.7](#)). The voting result and all the letters will be sent to the Secretariat for its records and published on the Council website.

The members of the Security Council decided that resolutions adopted through the above written procedure would have the same legal status as those voted on in the Security Council Chamber, which was also stipulated in the President's letter dated 27 March ([S/2020/253](#)).

They also agreed on additional measures to ensure the transparency of the Council's work, deciding that:

1. During the same period, the President of the Security Council will announce to the public and Member States, 24 hours in advance, the intention to schedule videoconferences of members of the Council;
2. In the absence of objections from any Council members, the President may invite Member States that are not

members of the Council to participate in a videoconference of members of the Council, when the interests of that Member are specially affected; and

3. The President will, within 48 hours, circulate as a document of the Council a compilation document containing the interventions of the briefers and of all those Council members who request the inclusion of their statements in the document.⁶

According to the President's letter dated 27 March (S/2020/253), the "temporary, extraordinary and provisional" measures (emphasis added by the author) would be in place for the duration of the restrictions on movement in New York owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and would not be considered a precedent in the future. The President further noted that implementation of those measures would be assessed at the end of April and they might be renewed, adjusted or discontinued, subject to agreement among all Council members.⁷

Following the Security Council's agreement on a written procedure for adopting resolutions, the body adopted four resolutions during China's March 2020 presidency.⁸ In its capacity as President of the Council, China announced the results of the votes during a videoconference meeting.⁹

Thus, despite the closure of the United Nations Headquarters, the Security Council was able to extend the mandates for two important peace operations, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), ensuring their continuing work in those volatile parts of the world. The Council also was able to extend the mandate of the

Panel of Experts for the 1718 Committee (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea sanctions committee), in addition to adopting various measures to improve the safety and security of peacekeepers.

Although the Security Council stressed the temporary and extraordinary nature of its measures for adopting resolutions during the pandemic, the Council's successful development and adoption of a remote voting procedure enabled the body to adopt resolutions without convening in-person meetings, thus discharging its mandate. The members of the Council agreed that this procedure would remain in place for the duration of the restrictions on movement in New York owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Until it began to resume in-person meetings in July 2020, the Council continued to adopt resolutions solely through the written procedure outlined in the President's letter dated 27 March (S/2020/253).

In addition, at the beginning of the presidency of the Dominican Republic in April, the Security Council agreed on a written procedure for adopting presidential statements. Its members reached agreement that in the absence of objections, presidential statements that had been electronically agreed upon by consensus following a non-objection (silence) procedure of no less than 48 hours would be read out by the President during an open video teleconference. They also agreed that such statements would have the same status as those adopted in the Security Council Chamber and would be published as official documents of the Council.¹¹ This procedure was set forth in the annex of the President's letter dated 2 April 2020 (S/2020/273).¹²

Modalities for videoconferences

In addition to establishing a written procedure for adopting resolutions and presidential statements, the Security Council further developed its working methods during the pandemic by refining modalities for holding videoconferences.

Following the lockdown at the UN premises, the Security Council immediately suspended its work by cancelling a meeting of its working group on children and armed conflict on 13 March and held no meeting thereafter for nearly two weeks in March. On 24 March, however, the members of the Council held their first videoconference meeting, on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). Two days later, they held another videoconference meeting, on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). Although both were closed meetings, the President issued press statements posted on the website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Subsequently, on 30 March, the Security Council held two open videoconference meetings, on Syria and the Middle East, in addition to a series of videoconference meetings to announce the adoption of four resolutions through the silence procedure. On 31 March, the body held both open and closed videoconference meetings on Afghanistan.¹³

In a bid to continue the Council's work to the greatest extent possible, the Dominican Republic, upon assuming the presidency for the month of April 2020, informed all Council members that it would conduct the body's work according to guidelines agreed upon by its members after consultations therewith and with the Secretariat.¹⁴ The guidelines, which were contained in a paper entitled "Working methods of the Security Council during the

presidency of the Dominican Republic, April 2022", annexed to the letter of the President of the Security Council dated 2 April 2020 (A/2020/273), provided detailed modalities for convening Council meetings and consultations virtually, including new nomenclature for the virtual discussions—namely, "open video teleconference" for public meetings and "closed video teleconference" for consultations.¹⁵

The guidelines were developed in keeping with the provisional rules of procedure of the Council, ensuring that relevant rules—including on the adoption of an agenda (rule 9) and representation by appropriately credentialed delegates (rule 13)—would be observed as a matter of practice.¹⁶ The President of the Council would be able to invite non-Council Member States, members of the Secretariat or individuals who were not members of the Council to participate in a video teleconference pursuant to rules 37 and 39 in the absence of objections from Council members, but that arrangement would not apply to closed video teleconferences. The virtual discussions would be conducted in English, as features for interpretation were not yet available through the videoconferencing platform used for the Council's virtual discussions.¹⁷

The guidelines also detailed other modalities of holding virtual discussions, ranging from the announcement of video conferences to their records. While the latter were to be provided through the circulation of compilation documents containing interventions during the meetings,¹⁸ the verbatim records would not be published due to a lack of agreement as to whether the virtual discussions should be considered formal meetings. Likewise, there would be no announcement of video teleconferences in the *Journal of the United Nations*, in which

announcements of all formal meetings and consultations of the Security Council, if held in person, are duly included. Furthermore, compilation documents for closed video teleconferences would not be circulated, in line with the practice and rules of procedure of the Security Council.

In order to ensure transparency, the guidelines also included the measures agreed upon during consultations in March 2020 and contained in the President's letter dated 27 March 2020 ([S/2020/253](#))—namely, the presidency would (a) announce any video conference of the Council one day before the event in an email message from the President to the wider United Nations membership; and (b) circulate within 48 hours, as a document of the Security Council, a compilation document containing interventions by briefers and statements of the members and non-members of the Council.

The Dominican Republic's guidelines went further in promoting transparency in the Council's work by calling for a public live feed of briefers to be streamed on UN Web TV,¹⁹ providing the international community with access pursuant to the established practice for open briefings held in the Security Council Chamber. To that end, the guidelines envisaged the open video teleconferences being divided into two parts: the first part, in which the relevant briefings would be livestreamed on UN Web TV; and the second part, in which the President, upon the conclusion of presentations by briefers, would invite the Council to hold an open or a closed video teleconference which would not be webcast.²⁰ The guidelines also foreshadowed a full webcast of an open video teleconference when it became technically feasible.²¹

In a further effort to enhance the transparency of the Council's work, the presidency of the Dominican Republic announced that, to the extent possible, and in agreement with Council members, the President of the Council would facilitate the negotiations of a press statement and elements for the press after every Council discussion. Thereafter, the President would orally deliver any agreed elements for the press through UN Web TV. This arrangement was confirmed as the Council's agreement at the beginning of the presidency of Estonia in May.²²

The new guidelines developed in April also addressed technical problems that might arise due to the instability of internet connections. In order to minimize the need to suspend the event due to lost connections, the presidency of the Dominican Republic requested that both principal and alternate delegates be logged in at the same time, thereby ensuring that should a principal's connection be interrupted, an alternate could take his or her place. Moreover, it was recommended that all participants, including briefers, test their microphones and video equipment 30 minutes before the beginning of a video teleconference.

In accordance with the informal plan and guidelines contained in the President's letter dated 2 April, the Security Council held 24 video teleconference meetings under the April 2020 presidency of the Dominican Republic. They included 13 open video teleconferences, which were livestreamed and archived by UN Web TV, and 11 closed video teleconferences. Although the Council did not adopt a resolution during the month, on 28 April, the body adopted its first presidential statement since suspending its in-person activities in mid-March.²³ The Security Council also held its first open briefing through video teleconference on

14 April, hearing two briefers²⁴ whose remarks were webcast in full and archived on UN Web TV. On 9 April, the Council also held a closed video teleconference on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and received the [Secretary-General's remarks](#).²⁵ It was unable to take action in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, however, as the relationship between China and the United States had deteriorated due to (a) their differences over the origin of the coronavirus and (b) the latter's criticism of the World Health Organization.

Building on the guidelines for video teleconferences adopted in April, the Security Council continued to develop its working methods over the following months. Upon assuming the presidency of the Council in May 2020, Estonia stated its intention to conduct the activities of the Council mostly through video teleconferencing meetings and through the written procedure for the adoption of resolutions and presidential statements.²⁶ Key elements of the modalities for video teleconferences remained largely unchanged, ranging from their nomenclature to the observance of the Council's provisional rules of procedure in their spirit.²⁷ Open video teleconferences continued to be webcast in full, not limited to briefings as in April. In addition, the President invited non-Council members to submit written statements to be included in the compilation documents for two open video teleconference meetings—the first on the Council's working methods on 15 May and the second on the protection of civilians in armed conflict on 27 May.²⁸ Furthermore, the duration of the non-objection procedure for electronically agreeing upon presidential statements was halved to 24 hours from 48 hours. Under the revised modalities, the President could announce a presidential statement negotiated electronically by the

Council after a 24-hour period in which Council members raised no objections.²⁹

During the presidency of Estonia in May, the Security Council held 26 video teleconference meetings, including 13 open video teleconference meetings. In addition, the Council adopted 5 resolutions, three on the Sudan and South Sudan, one on Somalia and another on the situation between Iraq and Kuwait. Although there were certain unresolved technical issues concerning the language of meetings and participation by the wider United Nations membership in open video teleconferences, the working methods of the Security Council for holding video teleconferences during Estonia's presidency³⁰ became the body's standard practice going forward when in-person meetings were not possible.

When France assumed the presidency of the Security Council in June 2020, the restrictions imposed by the Governor of New York State due to the COVID-19 pandemic were still in force, and the measures issued by the Secretary-General aimed at limiting the presence of staff within the United Nations premises were to remain in place until 30 June. In that context, the French presidency informed all Council members that it would continue to implement the guidelines agreed on under previous presidencies, which were set out in the letter dated 7 May from the President of the Council ([S/2020/372](#)).³¹

In June, the Security Council moved closer to its normal operation, with videoconference meetings replicating all its regular formats. Under the French presidency, the Council held 30 open videoconference meetings and 18 closed videoconference meetings, adopting eight resolutions. Its members made significant progress in negotiating the Council's first

resolution on COVID-19, which was finally adopted as resolution 2532 (2020) on 1 July.³² The following day, the body held its first open videoconference debate on the implications of COVID-19 for international peace and security.³³

In an early step towards normalcy, in July 2020, the Security Council held a small number of in-person meetings under the presidency of Germany in the Economic and Social Council Chamber, adopting resolutions in person for the first time since the start of the pandemic. The Security Council still held the vast majority of its activities by video teleconference, but as COVID-19 restrictions in New York City were eased, the body began a phased shift back to its normal working methods, taking into account the value of in-person diplomacy while continuing to take necessary mitigation measures against the pandemic.

However, the Security Council remained cautious about fully reverting to conducting meetings in the traditional format foreseen by the Charter of the United Nations and the Council's provisional rules of procedure. In their respective communications to Council members upon assuming their presidencies in August and September, Indonesia noted that virtual meetings remained the recommended and preferred option,³⁴ while Niger mentioned that virtual meetings would continue to be the rule and in-person meetings the exception, in strict compliance with appropriate precautionary and distancing measures.³⁵ Both presidencies informed the Council's members that they would continue to discuss and decide collectively (Indonesia) or by consensus (Niger) on the possibility of convening in-person meetings at the United Nations Headquarters in August or September 2020.

In-person meetings under COVID-19 restrictions

As the infection rate of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City fell in the summer of 2020, the Security Council undertook a gradual and phased shift toward in-person meetings. New York City entered "phase 2" of its own reopening on 22 June and "phase 3" on 6 July, allowing for more economic and social activities. Although the United Nations Headquarters remained in its "Phase Zero" until 20 July, severely limiting the presence of staff, the General Assembly held elections for the President of the General Assembly and new members of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council at the Headquarters complex on 17 and 18 June.

Against that background, Germany assumed the presidency of the Security Council on 1 July and proposed modalities for holding in-person meetings that month. In a letter to all members dated 1 July ([S/2020/639](#)), Germany pointed out their consensus that the decision on convening in-person meetings of the Security Council at the United Nations Headquarters lay with the Council itself. Germany added that guidelines for reopening would be supplemented, as appropriate, by the modalities for holding in-person meetings of the Council, as proposed under its presidency in an annex to the letter. In the proposed modalities, the presidency expressed its readiness to consult with Council members upon receiving a request to convene a meeting at the United Nations Headquarters.

These modalities envisaged conducting Security Council meetings in the Economic and Social Council Chamber while complying with appropriate social distancing measures.³⁶ In the interest of the health, safety and well-being of all delegates

and staff, the modalities emphasized that people not feeling well should not come to Headquarters. They also spelled out other health and safety measures, such as requiring all persons physically present inside the conference rooms to wear a face covering and everyone to wear masks at all times in common areas of Headquarters. To address fears of the virus being spread on surfaces, no documents would be distributed in the meeting rooms, and delegations were asked to refrain from distributing any materials or documents not only in and outside the meeting rooms but also elsewhere at Headquarters. Furthermore, security officers would register each participant entering the Economic and Social Council Chamber for the purpose of contact-tracing.

It was stressed that social distancing must be maintained at all times. To that end, various risk mitigation measures were incorporated in the proposed modalities, including: (a) assigning seats to all members of the Council; (b) limiting access to the meeting room to two persons per delegation ("1 plus 1") and approximately 38 Secretariat staff; (c) requesting participants to circulate clockwise only within the conference room and to respect the required physical distance of two meters at all times; (d) keeping two seats unoccupied between delegates; and (e) requesting participants to limit the time they are physically present at Headquarters to the strict minimum. Additionally, it was decided that movement into and out of the Economic and Social Council Chamber would be adapted to allow no-touch entry. Furthermore, different doors would be designated for entering and exiting the chamber, ensuring one-way traffic among participants.

Those temporary measures were set out in response to the extraordinary

circumstances in which certain restrictions remained in place owing to the pandemic, particularly the severe limitations still imposed on the presence of staff at Headquarters. However, the President confirmed that even under the exceptional circumstances, the Security Council's provisional rules of procedure would apply once the body decided to convene an in-person meeting. It was further stipulated that the meetings would be made public only via live broadcasting on UN Web TV.

Following the guidelines contained in the President's letter dated 1 July 2020 ([S/2020/639](#)), the German presidency held a total of eight in-person meetings in the Economic and Social Council Chamber on 14 and 28 July, convening four meetings on each day.³⁷ During the eight meetings, the Council adopted four resolutions, one presidential statement and the Report of the Security Council to the General Assembly.³⁸ Meanwhile, New York City further reopened on 20 July 2020 and the United Nations Headquarters entered "Phase One" of its reopening, allowing up to 400 people in the complex.

Indonesia, as President of the Security Council in the month of August, also pursued the possibility of convening in-person meetings at Headquarters by extending and implementing the working methods and modalities of the previous presidencies, particularly the Estonian and German presidencies in May and July 2020. The Council held two formal meetings in the Economic and Social Council Chamber on 10 and 20 August.

Niger, which assumed the presidency of the Council in September, also encouraged the resumption of in-person meetings at the Economic and Social Council Chamber and presided over a total of seven such

meetings on 10, 15 and 25 September. Promoting multilingualism, the Nigerian presidency conducted business and delivered national statements in its national language, French, and encouraged use of the Council's interpretation platform to allow other members to speak in their official languages. In addition, the Security Council held an open videoconference meeting on the impact of COVID-19 on 9 September, hearing briefings on the implementation of resolution 2532 (2020) of 1 July 2020.³⁹

As the Russian Federation assumed the presidency of the Security Council on 1 October, the body returned to in-person meetings in the Security Council Chamber for the first time since the pandemic began. Keen to ensure that the Council would resume its pre-pandemic functioning to the extent feasible, the Russian presidency planned to conduct meetings in the traditional format foreseen by the Charter of the United Nations and the provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council. Building on the modalities of in-person meetings set out during the German presidency in July 2020 ([S/2020/639](#)), the Russian presidency conducted briefings and informal consultations in the Security Council Chamber while complying with appropriate social distancing and health measures, limiting physical presence in the chamber, and instituting preventive measures to mitigate the risk of infection.⁴⁰ The Council held 10 in-person meetings in the Security Council Chamber and adopted three resolutions and two presidential statements in October 2020.

Acknowledging the move to return to the Security Council Chamber during the Russian presidency, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which assumed the presidency in November, approached the issue of in-person meetings with agility,

flexibility and responsiveness. In extending and implementing the modalities of virtual and in-person meetings annexed to the letters of the May and October presidencies, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines laid the groundwork for the Council to hold six in-person meetings and adopt four resolutions in November.

The number of COVID-19 cases in New York was spiking again, however, and the State Governor imposed new restrictions on public and private activities on 13 November. Accordingly, the Security Council reverted to adopting its resolutions and presidential statements through the written procedure set out in the President's letters dated 27 March 2020 ([S/2020/253](#)) and 2 April 2020 ([S/2020/273](#)). After the reimposition of COVID-19 restrictions, the Council held one brief in-person meeting on 17 November ([S/PV.1877](#)) and adopted no resolution for the remainder of the month. In December, the South African presidency approached the issue of in-person meetings of the Security Council with caution, holding only one such meeting on 7 December.⁴¹ In assuming the presidency of the Council in January 2021, Tunisia followed a similarly cautious approach holding no in-person gatherings.⁴² With COVID-19 restrictions still ongoing in the State and City of New York, the United Kingdom also held discussions of the Security Council in February 2021 virtually by using videoconferencing to implement the working methods set out in the President's letter dated 7 May 2020 ([S/2020/372](#)).⁴³

During the presidencies of Tunisia and the United Kingdom, the Security Council continued to debate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international peace and security. On 25 January, it held an open videoconference meeting to follow up on the implementation of resolution 2532

(2020), receiving briefings by four senior UN officials.⁴⁴ At an open videoconference meeting held on 26 February, the President of the Council announced the unanimous adoption of [resolution 2565](#) (2021), by which it called for global cooperation to facilitate equitable and affordable access to COVID-19 vaccines in conflict areas.⁴⁵

In March 2021, the United States held Council discussions entirely virtually.⁴⁶ With COVID restrictions still in place, Vietnam, holding the presidency of the Council in April, likewise held the Council's discussions in a virtual format.⁴⁷ In May, China also conducted most of the Council's work remotely.⁴⁸ Thus, in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Security Council adhered, in the first five months of 2021, to the working methods and protocols developed in 2020, meeting virtually and adopting outcomes through written procedure.⁴⁹

As COVID-19 restrictions began to be eased again in the early summer of 2021, however, succeeding presidencies held Council discussions increasingly in person. Beginning in late May 2021, the Security Council gradually reverted to more normal functioning, moving back to the Security Council Chamber and the Consultations Room over the second half of the year. On 25 May, under the presidency of China, the Council held its 8779th meeting, the first in-person meeting since 11 December 2020, to receive a briefing on the situation in Somalia. Two days later, the body passed a resolution in person for the first time since 12 November 2020, adopting [resolution 2576](#) (2021), thereby extending the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI).⁵⁰

Thereafter, the Security Council adopted its resolutions and presidential statements at in-person meetings

with a few notable exceptions.⁵¹ But it continued to hold open videoconferences, particularly for special meetings with high-level participants, and issued, as official documents of the Council, compilations of briefings and written statements submitted in connection therewith in accordance with the procedure set out in the President's letter dated 7 May 2020 ([S/2020/372](#)).

Although the majority of the Security Council's meetings were held in person in June, the body continued the same practice of issuing compilations of briefings and written submissions made in connection with the videoconferences held under the Estonian presidency.⁵² While the Council conducted its work fully in person during the French presidency in July, it convened an open videoconference debate on maritime security on 9 August 2021, in which a number of dignitaries, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation, participated, and issued, as an official document of the Security Council, a compilation of briefings and statements delivered at the meeting ([S/2021/722](#)).⁵³

From September through the end of 2021, the successive Presidents of the Security Council also followed suit, issuing, as official documents of the Council, compilations of written statements submitted by Member States at open debates, even when held in person, during the presidencies of Ireland,⁵⁴ Kenya,⁵⁵ Mexico⁵⁶ and Niger.⁵⁷ On 28 October, the Council also held an open videoconference debate on cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union, in which a number of political leaders delivered statements, a compilation of which was issued as document [S/2021/941](#).⁵⁸

When restrictions on international travel began to be eased, the Security Council travelled to Mali and Niger on a visiting mission in October 2021 for the first time in two years. However, as COVID-19 cases spiked in New York at the end of the year due to the Omicron variant, the Council briefly returned to the use of virtual meetings. Under the presidency of Niger, at the Security Council's last meeting of 2021, convened on 30 December, the Council held a videoconference to announce the adoption of resolution [2617 \(2021\)](#), whereby the Council extended the mandate of the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate in accordance with the voting procedure outlined in the letter of the President dated 27 March 2020 ([S/2020/253](#)).⁵⁹

In 2022, as the COVID situation in New York City improved, the Security Council was able to hold meetings in person. In January, the Norwegian presidency stated that “while alert to the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic situation in New York City, the presidency strives to continue to maintain, to the extent possible, the regular

conduct of business of the Security Council.” In the midst of the surge of COVID-cases due to the Omicron variant, it appeared to be a bold statement. Yet the Norwegian presidency also strongly encouraged (a) the wearing of masks at all times, including while delivering remarks; (b) delegations to limit their representation to one delegate and an alternate (1+1), with alternate delegates to be seated in a socially distanced manner; and (c) the vaccination of all delegates and Secretariat staff attending meetings in the Chamber.⁶⁰ Although the presidency warned of the possibility of reverting to COVID-induced working methods in the month of January 2022, with specific reference to those outlined in the President's letter dated 7 May 2020 ([S/2020/372](#)), that possibility did not materialize throughout the year. Certain restrictions on physical presence remained, as did the need to wear facial coverings. But the Security Council was able to conduct its business in 2022 in person, without interruptions.

4

Disarmament machinery

COVID-19 snarled the functioning of the multilateral disarmament machinery. As the pandemic erupted in early 2020, the General Assembly promptly postponed the annual session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission (UNDC), effectively cancelling it. Likewise, physical restrictions imposed at the United Nations Office at Geneva forced the Conference on Disarmament to suspend and subsequently limit its work, though the body still succeeded in taking forward its 2020 session. Timing appeared to favour the General Assembly's First Committee, whose annual session followed the reopening of the United Nations Headquarters in September 2020;¹ nevertheless, COVID restrictions required it to hold fewer formal meetings, to dispense with the thematic debate and to conduct many of its deliberations and consultations virtually. The Committee's session ultimately ran from 6 October to 10 November 2020 and included 15 in-person meetings, down from the 27 originally scheduled.²

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a significant impact on the disarmament machinery. The First Committee, again, held its substantive session in an abridged format with slightly improved working modalities, holding 18 in-person meetings and restoring the thematic debate. The Conference on

Disarmament also operated in a combination of in-person and virtual modes. Meanwhile, although COVID-19 restrictions were eased in the spring of 2021, the Disarmament Commission was unable to convene its annual session due to organizational issues unrelated to the pandemic.

This chapter will examine the initial COVID-19 response of each primary organ of the multilateral disarmament machinery: the First Committee, the Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament. It will also explore how each of the three bodies responded to changes in the pandemic over the following years.

1. First Committee of the General Assembly

Continued COVID restrictions on physical presence at the United Nations premises in the early summer of 2020 rendered it impossible for the Main Committees of the General Assembly to hold plenary meetings to elect their chairs and other Bureau members, namely vice-chairs and a rapporteur, of their seventy-fifth session. Fortunately, the General Assembly was able to elect their chairs and other Bureau members through the procedure for taking decisions of the General Assembly during the COVID-19 pandemic under its decision [74/544](#) (silence procedure), which

was extended until the end of June in a timely manner.³

On 12 June 2020, the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, informed Member States that Ambassador Agustín Santos Maraver, Permanent Representative of Spain to the United Nations, had been elected by silence procedure as Chair of the First Committee.⁴ Candidates from the Philippines and Romania were elected Vice-Chairs, and the candidate from Guatemala was elected Rapporteur.⁵

The new bureau quickly engaged with the Secretariat to begin preparing for the Committee's substantive session. In multiple virtual consultations, they explored ways of modifying the programme of work and adjusting the modalities of meetings while managing the risks of the pandemic. Amid significant restrictions on physical participation in the UN building, the Chair and other Bureau members played a crucial role in planning and designing the Committee's work in collaboration with the Secretariat.

At its organizational meeting,⁶ the Committee adopted a revised programme of work and timetable ([A/C.1/75/CRP.1/Rev.1](#)), whereby it agreed to reduce the total number of formal meetings from 27 to 17. The Committee also decided to forgo the regular thematic debate but hold three virtual informal meetings devoted to interactive discussions on specific subjects.⁷ Furthermore, the Committee adopted several other logistical and organizational decisions,⁸ allowing delegations to (a) deliver statements for the general debate either in person, in writing or through video messages; (b) exercise the right of reply in person or in writing; and (c) submit written thematic statements. The Committee also

decided to issue a compilation of written submissions as an official document of the General Assembly.⁹

The First Committee fulfilled its mandates for 2020 by approving a total of 71 draft resolutions and decisions, significantly more than in 2019.¹⁰ It adopted four procedural decisions to extend existing mandates whose implementation was affected by the pandemic.¹¹ In addition, the Committee established two new mandates in the area of outer space and cybersecurity.

With respect to the Committee's substantive discussions in 2020, Member States noted the pandemic's negative consequences for global security; potential threats of biological weapons; and malicious uses of information and communications technologies.¹² A number of States also expressed concerns about the world's growing military expenditure, with the pandemic prompting wide reflection on the potential benefits of reducing and diverting such spending towards socioeconomic aims, including effective responses to COVID-19.

The situation of the First Committee improved slightly in 2021, but the body was still unable to return to pre-COVID working methods. In a departure from the previous year, the Committee elected its Chair and other officers at a plenary meeting held in person.¹³ The body increased its number of in-person meetings from 15 to 18, and it revived the thematic debate in a truncated format. Meanwhile, the Committee continued with the temporary measure of accepting written submissions and issuing a compilation of statements on specific thematic clusters.¹⁴

The newly elected office holders began to prepare for the First Committee's 2021 session by holding a series of virtual consultations over the summer with the

Secretariat's support. Uncertainty related to the COVID-19 pandemic remained a primary concern in their preparations.¹⁵ The Secretary of the Committee laid out four options as responses to various scenarios during the pandemic: (a) a normal programme of work as adopted by the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session in December 2020; (b) the abridged working modalities adopted at the previous session in 2020 with no thematic debate; (c) a contingency scenario in which the bulk of Committee work would be held virtually with action being directly taken at plenary meetings of the General Assembly; or (d) an extreme contingency scenario that envisage a technical rollover en masse, by which all the outcomes of the seventy-fifth session would be considered at the seventy-seventh session.

The Bureau members sought feedback from their respective regional groups, and the response indicated a widespread desire among delegations to return to the First Committee's traditional three-stage structure of work. However, given the limited number of formal, in-person meetings allotted to the Committee during the General Assembly's seventy-sixth session, the body agreed that statements would be made in two combined thematic clusters rather than the traditional seven individual clusters.¹⁶ As in 2020, the Committee also agreed that statements could be presented in-person, via pre-recorded video, or in written form. Due to the limited availability of conference rooms and requests for supporting informal consultations, the Secretariat arranged to conduct such discussions virtually.

By the end of August 2021, it was clear that States preferred to build on rather than return to the experience of the previous year. Most delegates had been vaccinated since the previous session, and there was a

strong preference among Member States for holding more in-person meetings, allowing more than one representative per delegation into meeting rooms, and voting in a single conference room rather than across three of them.¹⁷

Between 30 August and the First Committee's organizational session on 30 September 2021, the Bureau held five virtual meetings to consider options for the Committee's programme of work. Those consultations led to the final decision, on 22 September, to include thematic discussions in the Committee's 2021 substantive session. The Committee decided against compromising on social distancing, however, when it chose to continue using the General Assembly Hall and three basement-level conference rooms as a combined venue for its meetings.¹⁸

The First Committee concluded its 2021 substantive session on 5 November after holding 18 in-person meetings, 6 for general debate, another 6 for thematic debates, and 5 more for action on resolutions and decisions, in addition to its organizational meeting. The thematic debate took place on a compressed schedule in which the seven thematic clusters were divided into two groups, with four meetings devoted to the first four clusters and two meetings to the remaining three clusters. During its final five in-person meetings, the Committee took action on all 61 draft resolutions and decisions introduced during the session, down from 74 the previous year, adopting 60 and rejecting one.¹⁹

While the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect its modalities in 2021, the First Committee again fulfilled its mandate. Furthermore, the Committee moved closer to normalcy by reverting to its traditional three-part programme of work. While

Member States clearly expressed the wish to return to the body's traditional working modalities, they again demonstrated flexibility in accommodating modifications and changes necessary to ensure the safety of delegations and Secretariat staff. As had been the case with the seventy-fifth session, the Committee adopted innovative COVID measures with the understanding that they would not constitute precedents—despite their potential to improve the effectiveness of the Committee's work if Member States decided to accept them as part of its established practice.

The First Committee returned fully to its pre-pandemic working methods in 2022, as most of the pandemic's physical restrictions had been lifted. The Committee convened for a total of 32 in-person meetings, including 8 meetings dedicated to the general debate, 13 meetings to the thematic debate and seven meetings to the action stage. The Committee reverted fully to its traditional format, proceeding with its work in accordance with the provisional programme of work and timetable for 2022 ([A/C.1/77/CRP.1](#)) that the General Assembly had adopted in December 2021.

As the General Assembly had discontinued COVID-related measures at the seventy-seventh session following the transition to the "New Normal" at the United Nations Headquarters in April 2022, the First Committee dispensed with the practice of accepting video and written statements in lieu of in-person delivery.²⁰ Furthermore, the Committee restored in-person briefings by and exchanges with disarmament officials and chairs of mandated bodies and expert groups, which had been all held virtually at the 2020 and 2021 sessions. Nevertheless, several briefers sent pre-recorded video statements or addressed the Committee remotely via videoconference

platform, which had already been an accepted practice before the pandemic but increasingly became part of the Committee's normal working method during the thematic debate.

Unshackled by COVID-19 restrictions and able to engage in full in-person diplomacy, Member States showed an extraordinarily high level of participation and engagement in 2022. At its seventy-seventh session, the First Committee heard 148 statements during the general debate and 365 interventions during the thematic debate. Consequently, the Committee had to add four more formal meetings to its schedule than originally envisaged in the provisional programme of work.

Yet even as the First Committee returned to procedural normalcy, its 2022 session turned out to be extremely contentious, marred by deep divisions, inflammatory rhetoric, acrimonious exchanges and competing proposals. Throughout the session, many States exchanged accusations over other States' policies and actions, particularly the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Delegations also expressed concerns over the deterioration of international security, especially around the growing threat of the use of nuclear weapons; increasing military expenditure; heightened tensions among powers, particularly China, the Russian Federation and the United States; intensifying regional conflicts; and a general lack of trust and confidence. Growing tensions and divisions were evident in States' statements, including those made in exercising the right of reply,²¹ and in negotiations on resolutions.

The First Committee finished its 2022 substantive session on 4 November having considered 75 draft resolutions and

decisions, adopting 74 and rejecting one. As the Rapporteur noted in presenting the reports of the First Committee to the General Assembly on 7 December 2022, the Committee had returned fully to its pre-COVID arrangements and seen the highest-ever number of delegations take the floor.²² The divisions among Member States were evident, however: only 27 draft proposals (36%) were adopted without a vote, with 85 separate paragraph votes requested.

2. United Nations Disarmament Commission

Originally established in 1952 as a negotiating body with a limited membership,²³ the United Nations Disarmament Commission has provided a subsidiary forum for deliberations on disarmament issues since it was re-established²⁴ for that purpose in 1978, at the first special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament.

As a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, the Commission is composed of all Member States. Its function is to consider and make recommendations on various problems in the field of disarmament and to follow up on the relevant decisions and recommendations of the 1978 special session.²⁵ The Commission is mandated to hold a substantive session in New York every year for a period of three weeks, usually in April, and to report annually to the General Assembly.

The 2020 session of the Disarmament Commission became one of the first General Assembly-mandated meetings to be cancelled after the COVID-19 outbreak. As part of his first response to the pandemic, the President of the General Assembly chose to cancel all in-person meetings of Assembly-mandated processes scheduled

to take place between 17 March and 17 April, including the Commission's 2020 substantive session.²⁶ He informed Member States of the move in a letter dated 17 March 2020; however, as it was the General Assembly that had decided to convene the Commission's 2020 session, postponing it required the Assembly's concurrence. The President therefore attached to his letter a draft decision to postpone the annual substantive session to a period in 2021 to be decided by the General Assembly at the seventy-fifth session.²⁷

On 30 March, the President proposed reopening agenda item 100 (b) under which this matter is addressed²⁸ and placed the draft decision (L.43) on the Disarmament Commission under silence procedure until 2 April, in accordance with General Assembly decision 74/544 of 27 March 2020.²⁹ As no objection was raised, the General Assembly adopted the draft decision (L.43) as decision 74/546, thereby postponing the 2020 session of the Disarmament Commission to a later date to be decided by the General Assembly during its seventy-fifth session.³⁰

Although the decision was to "postpone" the 2020 session, it actually amounted to a cancellation: the formal adoption of a decision on the deferred session by the General Assembly in early December left little time to convene it before the end of the year. Subsequently, the Disarmament Commission would convene no substantive session or formal plenary meeting at all until April 2022.

Other organizational obstacles

Although the pandemic was what prompted the postponement of the Disarmament Commission's 2020 substantive session, the deliberations

would likely still have been cancelled due to a complicated situation related to the non-issuance of a visa to the head of the Russian delegation—a matter that had also prevented the Commission from holding its organizational and substantive sessions in 2019. On 14 February 2019, as the Chair of the 2018 session of the Commission, Ambassador Gillian Bird (Australia), opened its 2019 organizational session, the Russian Federation objected to proceeding to adopt the agenda for that session, informing the Commission that the United States was actively hindering the arrival of the head of the Russian delegation in New York to participate in its substantive session. The Commission therefore decided to postpone the organizational session.³¹ When the outgoing Chair attempted to resume the session on 2 April to deal with organizational matters, including the election of its Chair and other officers for 2019, the Russian Federation, again, objected to proceeding with the adoption of the organizational session's agenda.³² Thus, the organizational meeting was postponed indefinitely, which ultimately resulted in cancellation of the 2019 substantive session.³³

The non-issuance of visas emerged that year as a highly contentious issue within the First Committee, when Member States had to consider the organization of the Commission's 2020 session through competing draft proposals put forward by Australia and Hungary on one hand and the Russian Federation on the other.³⁴ On 8 November 2019, the First Committee adopted the revised draft decision tabled by Australia and Hungary as 74/511 without a vote, while defeating both proposals by the Russian Federation.³⁵ Although many States concurred with the Russian Federation on the importance of unimpeded access to United Nations Headquarters and called

for an early resolution of the issue of visas, they did not necessarily agree with Russia's insistence that the issue be discussed by the First Committee or that the Committee and the Disarmament Commission be held in Geneva or Vienna rather than New York.³⁶ At the plenary meeting of the General Assembly on 12 December 2019, the Russian Federation again introduced those proposals without success.³⁷

When the Disarmament Commission held the organizational meeting for its 2020 substantive session on 18 February 2020, pursuant to General Assembly decision 74/511, it was unable to address either the controversy over visas or other organizational issues, such as the election of its chair and vice-chairs, necessary to hold the substantive session in April.³⁸ On 28 February, the acting chair resumed the organizational session and attempted to proceed with the election of two vice chairs nominated by the Asia-Pacific group, but the Russian Federation reiterated its request to postpone the organizational session until a visa to the head of the Russian delegation was issued. After a lengthy debate, the Commission was still unable to overcome the deadlock. The acting chair ruled that the Disarmament Commission would be suspended to a later date either on or prior to 6 April, when its substantive session was scheduled to begin.³⁹ However, the pandemic and the shutdown of United Nations Headquarters in New York instead led the General Assembly to indefinitely postpone the Commission's 2020 session. The pandemic thus emerged as the overriding reason for the 2020 session's postponement while the visa issue remained unresolved, indicating that the body would not have been able to convene even if the pandemic had not prompted the General Assembly to defer its annual session.

During the First Committee's seventy-fifth session, in late 2020, the issue of visas again injected controversy into the decision to convene the following year's session of the Disarmament Commission. Despite the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19, nothing appeared to have changed with regard to this agenda item, which mirrored the discussions on the Commission held the previous year. Australia, in its capacity as the last elected chair of the Commission, introduced a draft decision entitled "Disarmament Commission" (L.49). But the Russian Federation introduced a competing draft decision (L.48) and a draft amendment to the Australian draft decision (L.49), both focusing on the issue of visas. On 10 November, the Committee adopted the Australian draft decision without a vote, whereby it decided that the Disarmament Commission shall hold a substantive session for a period not exceeding three weeks during 2021, namely from 5 to 23 April. The Committee adopted neither the draft decision nor the draft amendment submitted by the Russian Federation. On 7 December, the General Assembly formally adopted the Australian proposal as decision 75/519 entitled "Disarmament Commission" without a vote.⁴⁰

The Disarmament Commission could not convene its organizational or substantive session in 2021, as stipulated by General Assembly decision 75/519, due not to COVID-19-related restrictions but instead to unresolved organizational issues, including non-issuance of visas. In the absence of nominations of the chair and other Bureau members, the acting chair informed the President of the General Assembly that members of the Commission had decided to postpone its 2021 substantive session.⁴¹ In a letter addressed to all Member States dated 24 March, the President informed them

that the General Assembly would consider formally postponing the Commission's 2021 session at a plenary meeting on 25 March and circulated a draft decision to that effect (A/75/L.71), which was attached to the letter.⁴² At its fifty-eighth plenary meeting, held in person the following day, the General Assembly, recalling its decision 75/519 of 7 December 2020, formally adopted the draft decision as A/75/519 B,⁴³ and the 2021 substantive session of the Disarmament Commission was postponed to a later period to be decided by the Assembly.⁴⁴

It is noteworthy that the reason for the General Assembly's decision to postpone the 2021 session of the Disarmament Commission was not the pandemic but unresolved organizational issues, particularly the absence of nomination of the chair of the Commission and the issue of non-issuance of visas. Unlike in 2020, had necessary organizational issues been addressed before the Disarmament Commission's 2021 session was scheduled, the session could have taken place.⁴⁵ Following the 25 March decision to postpone the 2021 session, there was no active consultation on rescheduling the session.

2022 session

As the First Committee convened its seventy-sixth session in the fall of 2021, the decision on the 2022 session of the Disarmament Commission was not contentious as it had been the previous two years, as there were indications that the issue of visas between the Russian Federation and the United States had been resolved bilaterally. Australia, in its capacity as the last formally elected chair of the Disarmament Commission, submitted a draft decision (L.33) by which the General Assembly would decide to convene a substantive session of the Disarmament

Commission in April 2022. It was adopted by the Committee without a vote on 3 November and by the General Assembly without a vote on 6 December as 76/518.⁴⁶

In line with that decision, after a hiatus of three years, the Disarmament Commission held a substantive session from 4 to 21 April 2022. The beginning of the 2022 session coincided with the transition from to the New Normal at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, which allowed the Commission to hold all meetings in person, including those of its two working groups.

On 16 February, the Secretariat informed Member States that the Group of African States had endorsed the candidature of Ambassador Xolisa Mabhongo, Deputy Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations, to chair the Disarmament Commission at its 2022 substantive session. On 9 March, the acting chair opened a virtual informal meeting of the Commission and proposed that the Chair-nominee preside over its consultations on organizational issues. As no objection was raised, the Commission allowed Ambassador Mabhongo to take over the acting chair's role of undertaking consultations on key organizational matters, including the rotation of the chairpersonship.

On 17 March, the Chair-nominee convened another informal virtual meeting of the Disarmament Commission in advance of the organizational session.⁴⁷ He informed the participants that Member States had expressed broad support for and flexibility on the Chair's proposal for three organizational issues,⁴⁸ and, after discussions thereon, confirmed that (a) the Commission would proceed with the same agenda; (b) 2022 would be approached as the second year of the body's three-year cycle; and (c) the issue

of rotation would be decided later, thereby paving the way for formal decisions thereon at the organizational session. Although the Russian Federation again raised the issue of visas and requested postponement of the organizational meeting, it subsequently informed the Secretariat that all applicants on its delegation had received their visas.⁴⁹

On 4 April, at its organizational session, the Commission elected Ambassador Mabhongo Chair of its 2022 session with the understanding that the chair of its 2023 session would be from the Eastern European Group. It swiftly adopted the decisions necessary to resume its substantive work, pursuant to the agreement reached during the informal consultations held virtually on 9 and 17 March 2022: the Commission would continue to consider the same agenda items as those adopted at the beginning of the 2018–2020 cycle; and 2022 be considered the second year of its triennial cycle.⁵⁰

The Commission began its substantive session immediately thereafter, electing chairs for its two working groups⁵¹ and holding four plenary meetings on 4 and 5 April for the general exchange of views. Next, the body's two working groups began work on their respective agenda items.

During the plenary meetings, a total of 67 statements were delivered by States and regional groups. As scarcely six weeks had passed since Russian forces invaded Ukraine, a significant number of States condemned the Russian military action, urging it to cease its hostilities and withdraw its troops.⁵² In reply, the Russian Federation reiterated that it was conducting special military operations against military infrastructure and calling upon other States not to politicize the Commission's work.⁵³ Ukraine, for its part, accused Russia of waging a war of aggression against Ukraine

and destroying civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, as well as attacking and seizing Ukrainian nuclear power plants. It demanded that the Russian Federation immediately cease its aggression against Ukraine and unconditionally withdraw all its forces from Ukraine's entire territory, within its internationally recognized borders.⁵⁴

Despite acrimonious exchanges over Ukraine during the general debate, both working groups were able to hold in-depth discussions on substantive issues related to their agenda items in a constructive atmosphere and held extensive deliberations on the basis of multiple versions of non-papers submitted by the chairs.⁵⁵ As 2022 was the second year of the three-year cycle, neither Working Group submitted recommendations to the General Assembly, but both groups agreed to continue their discussion on the respective chair's paper at the 2023 session of the Commission.⁵⁶

Since the Disarmament Commission did not hold its substantive sessions in 2020 and 2021, it did not have a chance to consider modifying its working methods or adopting COVID-19-related measures to continue its work. However, during the intersessional periods, Member States actively engaged in informal virtual consultations on organizational and procedural issues. Those informal meetings, aimed at sounding out the views of Member States on key organizational issues, proved instrumental in facilitating agreement thereon, as attested to, for example, by two rounds of virtual consultations by the chair-nominee, Ambassador Mabhongo, in March 2022.

The Disarmament Commission's successful resumption of substantive work provided new impetus in revitalizing the disarmament machinery amid the

deterioration of the international security environment, particularly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. The high level of engagement and focused deliberations during its 2022 session reflected the collective desire of the United Nations membership to re-engage with multilateral disarmament processes in person. Furthermore, despite the cancellation of the Commission's substantive sessions in 2021 and 2022, the body's experience demonstrated how digital technologies could be used to sustain and enhance intergovernmental processes and multilateral diplomacy by lowering barriers to participation in informal consultations and dialogue.⁵⁷ Member States' strong engagement in virtual consultations in the intersessional periods during the pandemic underscored the potential of digital technologies to revitalize the work of the Disarmament Commission, since such technologies could help expand the scope of multilateral engagement and improve inclusiveness, including inclusion of civil society organizations and other non-governmental actors.

3. Conference on Disarmament

The Conference on Disarmament is one of the three pillars of the multilateral disarmament machinery, alongside the First Committee of the General Assembly and the United Nations Disarmament Commission. In 2020, COVID-19-related access restrictions at the United Nations Office at Geneva directly affected the Conference, as well as many other bodies that convene their multilateral negotiations at the Palais des Nations.⁵⁸

When the pandemic swept across the globe, newly imposed restrictions at the United Nations Office at Geneva prompted the Conference on Disarmament

to suspend the first part of its 2020 session and subsequently limit its work.⁵⁹ The Conference could convene no plenary meetings between 10 March and 29 June 2020; as a result, it had to severely reduce the number of plenary meetings during its annual session.

The first two presidencies of 2020, Algeria and Argentina, were able to hold regular plenary meetings in advance of the pandemic.⁶⁰ The third presidency of the Conference, Australia, was unable to convene any plenary meetings during its presidency from 16 March to 5 June, due to newly imposed restrictions. Australia thus used its presidency, which straddled the eight-week period between the first and second parts of the 2020 session, to undertake extensive bilateral virtual consultations with over 40 Conference members and observers on how to move forward.⁶¹

With the introduction of new videoconferencing systems, the Conference on Disarmament became the first forum in the disarmament machinery to resume its work during the pandemic. Local COVID-19 infection rates declined in the early summer of 2020, which allowed the fourth presidency, Austria, to hold two plenary meetings on 30 June.⁶² Taking into account the remaining restrictions, the presidency adopted a “hybrid” format, with delegates participating both in person and remotely.⁶³ Under the fifth and sixth presidencies of Bangladesh and Belarus, the Conference was able to hold additional plenary meetings in hybrid format on 13 and 27 August and on 8 and 16 September.⁶⁴ Moreover, the Conference held its final plenary meeting of the 2020 session in person under the Belarusian presidency on 18 September and adopted its annual report to the General Assembly.⁶⁵

The Conference on Disarmament was thus able to complete its 2020 session despite the significant disruption of the pandemic. In holding 25 formal meetings and four informal plenary meetings and adopting its annual report to the General Assembly, the body fulfilled its mandate pursuant to General Assembly resolution [74/74](#).⁶⁶ Notably, those meetings included seven hybrid plenary meetings and one in-person plenary meeting held during the pandemic; the others were virtual. Although the Conference agreed that the use of hybrid and virtual formats did not establish a precedent for its future meetings, such formats allowed the Conference to continue its work in the context of the pandemic. It is also noteworthy that the proceedings of those virtual and hybrid meetings, including video statements, were recorded in verbatim records and issued as official documents.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the pandemic resulted in a significant reduction of plenary meetings held in the 2020 session. The Conference convened for 25 formal plenary meetings and 4 informal plenary meetings in 2020, down from 48 formal plenary meetings and 16 informal plenary meetings in 2019.⁶⁸ Despite concerted efforts and extensive consultations by the six Presidents of the 2020 session, the Conference, again, could not reach a consensus on a programme of work, failing to commence mandated negotiations on a multilateral disarmament treaty. The COVID-19 crisis did not help delegations with their negotiations; it considerably slowed their activities, rendered in-person dialogue challenging, if not impossible, and forced them to postpone or even cancel their meetings.

As the Conference's presidency and secretariat explored ways to continue its work during the initial stage of the pandemic in 2020, platforms for videoconferencing

and remote simultaneous interpretation proved pivotal in enabling the body to resume its meetings and consultations. However, the new technologies gave rise to practical issues and concerns. The platforms had various technical limitations, for example, and their cost had important financial implications for managing the Conference.⁶⁹ No less important, the new technologies brought political considerations for which no clear guidance was provided in the body's rules of procedure as members of the Conference raised concerns about certain aspects of their use. In particular, there was sensitivity among members about taking important decisions at virtual or hybrid meetings. Finally, with limitations in global internet connectivity, there was the issue of access by members, observers and the public.

Many of those challenges persisted in 2021. Yet even as the work of the Conference on Disarmament continued to be affected by the pandemic, the use of hybrid and virtual formats allowed the Conference to continue its work. In the document providing preliminary information for participants of the 2021 session, the Conference secretariat noted that in light of the sanitary situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was possible that only hybrid or fully virtual formats would be available to the body.⁷⁰

As the Conference began the 2021 session under the Belgian Presidency on 19 January, it was unable to meet in person at the Palais des Nations and was thus obliged to adopt a virtual format.⁷¹ Under the second and third presidencies, Brazil and Bulgaria, the Conference continued making use of remote simultaneous interpretation platforms to convene plenary meetings in virtual format in the six working languages of the Conference, in line with its rules of

procedure, but without creating a precedent for its future meetings.

As the COVID-19 restrictions on physical presence at the United Nations Office at Geneva were eased in 2021, the Conference on Disarmament was able to resume in-person meetings for the second half of its annual session. At the request of the Group of 21,⁷² the Conference discussed the resumption of in-person meetings on 18 June, at the final plenary meeting of the Cameroonian presidency.⁷³ As Canada assumed its presidency, the Conference held its first plenary meeting in hybrid format on 22 June, allowing delegates to return to the Council Chamber at the Palais des Nations, while continuing to permit online participation. Under the session's sixth and final presidency, Chile, the Conference was able to successfully negotiate the annual report of its 2021 session and submit it to the General Assembly.⁷⁴

Thus, despite continued COVID-19 restrictions, the Conference on Disarmament was able to complete its 2021 session without major interruption. However, because the body remained in a long-standing deadlock over a programme of work, it was unable to start multilateral negotiations. In a bid to re-establish subsidiary bodies created in 2018 on the Conference's agenda items, the first three presidencies, Belgium, Brazil and Bulgaria, proposed decisions for the organization of work which would have created five subsidiary bodies for the substantive agenda items of the Conference, appointed the coordinators for those bodies and established timetables for their work. Unfortunately, the Conference did not reach a consensus on any of the proposals. In addition, the requests of five non-members⁷⁵ to be observer States were rejected.⁷⁶

However, in the second half of the 2021 session, the Conference on Disarmament held thematic discussions on each of the Conference's agenda items under its successive presidencies.⁷⁷ It also engaged in extensive discussions on the organizational and procedural aspects of its work. On 5 August, under the Canadian presidency, the Conference considered a proposed technical linguistic update of its rules of procedure to reflect the equality of men and women at the Conference,⁷⁸ although it did not reach an agreement to adopt the proposal.⁷⁹ The Conference also held a plenary meeting on 10 August to discuss the work and functioning of the Conference based on the summary of the consultations held during the Australian presidency in 2020, as contained in document [CD/2197](#).⁸⁰ Furthermore, under the Chilean presidency, the Conference held a debate on the participation and role of women in international security on 26 August.⁸¹

In the meantime, the virtual and hybrid formats enriched the work of the Conference on Disarmament during its 2021 session by facilitating high engagement and more diverse and inclusive participation by members and non-members of the Conference, as well as by experts and civil society representatives. During the Brazilian presidency, the Conference held the high-level segment of its annual session from 22 to 24 February. Although the Conference was unable to convene plenary meetings in person, the availability of remote simultaneous interpretation platforms facilitated the most participation by senior dignitaries in 25 years, with 53 speakers of ministerial rank making interventions over the course of the session.⁸² During the high-level segment, this technological innovation also allowed for the organization of thematic

events on youth and disarmament and on the role of women in international security.

At the beginning of 2022, the Conference on Disarmament secretariat notified its members and observers that the format of the Conference's meetings would be fully in-person, in line with relevant social distancing measures.⁸³ Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese presidency opened the 2022 session of the Conference on 24 January, holding its first plenary meeting in person.

However, the pandemic continued to cast a shadow over the work of the Conference. Although China made significant progress in negotiating a draft decision to re-establish five subsidiary bodies on the Conference's seven agenda items,⁸⁴ its adoption was delayed as the entire French delegation contracted COVID during the final week of the Chinese presidency. It was at a critical moment, as Conference members were at the cusp of reaching consensus on the draft decision. Although the President acceded to a French request to convene a hybrid plenary meeting, doing so on 18 February, the Russian Federation insisted that a decision on the document should only be made in person, objecting to decision-making in a hybrid setting. The Chinese presidency, nevertheless, succeeded in achieving consensus on the text of the draft decision at its final plenary meeting, paving the way for its adoption at the beginning of the succeeding presidency.⁸⁵ On 22 February, at the very beginning of the first meeting under the Colombian presidency, the Conference adopted, by consensus, decision [CD/2229](#), submitted by the Chinese presidency.⁸⁶

Even as the pandemic persisted, the Conference on Disarmament held its meetings in person throughout the 2022

session, with a few delegations participating remotely. On 3 May 2022, the majority of COVID-19 measures were lifted at the United Nations premises in Geneva, and its conference and meeting rooms reverted to their full capacity.

However, the Conference continued to benefit from a hybrid format that allowed delegates to participate with remote simultaneous interpretation and high-level officials to send pre-recorded statements. From from 28 February to 2 March 2022, the Conference held its high-level segment in hybrid format, which facilitated wider participation, with a total of 60 statements delivered, including those by 46 dignitaries.⁸⁷ Among them, 19 ministerial or deputy ministerial officials participated in person, while another 27 delivered their statements in pre-recorded videos.

Despite its return to nearly normal working modalities, the Conference on Disarmament ended its 2022 session in disarray. It was unable to agree on a substantive annual report, instead adopting a one-page report containing only the dates of the 2023 session. Moreover, the General Assembly had to resort to a vote to adopt its annual resolution on the report of the Conference on Disarmament, the first such vote since the Conference's inception in 1979.⁸⁸

However, it was not the pandemic but the Russian military action against Ukraine that precipitated such a consequence. The high-level segment was overshadowed by the situation in Ukraine as a large number of speakers condemned Russia's military action there, with Ukraine calling for a plenary session on Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine.⁸⁹ The positive atmosphere created by the adoption of the draft decision on the organization of work quickly turned

sour as members of Conference exchanged accusations during the general debate in plenary meetings. In particular, on 3 March, the Colombian presidency convened a plenary meeting without a specific topic over the Russian Federation's objection, which not only prompted the latter's walkout but also created deep divisions among members of the Conference.⁹⁰ Thus, the war in Ukraine reversed the positive trend of the Conference, and negatively affected its substantive work undertaken by the five subsidiary bodies, as well as its debate on gender.⁹¹

The 2022 session clearly indicated that politics is the primary driver that dictates the work of the Conference on Disarmament and its outcome. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed the body's work by preventing or limiting in-person meetings and consultations, but those hindrances were largely overcome by the creative working modalities supported by new communication technologies, such as videoconferencing and remote simultaneous interpretation. In fact, in 2022, the Conference on Disarmament held 47 plenary meetings and 9 informal meetings, which corresponded largely to the pre-pandemic level.

In the meantime, it became evident that the introduction of new technologies poses a contentious issue in the context of applying of the Conference's rules of procedure. For example, there is sensitivity over decision-making in virtual or hybrid settings; the Russian argument at the final plenary meeting during the Chinese presidency is a case in point. But there is no distinction between "hybrid" and "in-person" meetings in the Conference's rules of procedure. If it is a plenary meeting, it should be subject only to the relevant provisions stipulated in those rules. As the present rules of procedure are silent on the use of videoconference

platforms, it inevitably becomes contentious, as there is room for different interpretations.

Yet, in 2020 and 2021, the Conference on Disarmament took numerous decisions at virtual and hybrid meetings. Presumably, there was no other choice. The extraordinary situation compelled the Conference to take such a course of action, and “desperate times called for desperate measures”.

In 2022, however, the COVID crisis was not as dire as before. The Conference held its meetings mostly in person, which created room for the Conference to entertain a debate on the legality of decision-making at hybrid meetings. The actions taken under extraordinary circumstances, which had seemed appropriate to members of the Conference, were being re-examined.

This raises an important question on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Will the Conference on Disarmament be able to take advantage of the innovative working modalities and improve its working methods after the pandemic? Or will the Conference return

to its pre-pandemic practice, as the new modalities were adopted without creating a precedent for future meetings?

Technically speaking, videoconferencing and remote simultaneous interpretation platforms proved their feasibility as an integral part of the Conference's working methods, although there remain issues to be addressed in areas such as connectivity, capacity-building and cybersecurity. Logistically, it is a question of financial and human resources. Furthermore, as mentioned above, there are political considerations on technical and logistical aspects of digital technologies, not to mention different interpretations of the rules of procedure.

Therefore, it boils down to the question of how to forge agreement on whether or not to introduce videoconferencing and remote simultaneous interpretation technologies in the work of the Conference on Disarmament. Corollary to that question is whether to adapt the body's rules of procedure, and if so, how.

5

Other disarmament bodies and processes

The COVID-19 pandemic directly affected not only the three primary disarmament bodies that constitute the UN disarmament machinery, but also other disarmament bodies and processes, including those established by multilateral treaties.

In general, there are two different types of multilateral bodies and processes. The General Assembly or the Security Council established those in the first category, including the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution [1540 \(2004\)](#), and the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, as well as the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. In addition, the General Assembly regularly establishes ad hoc bodies and processes, such as open-ended working groups and groups of governmental experts, to address various topics.¹ When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in March 2020, one open-ended working group and two groups of governmental experts were carrying out disarmament-related mandates.

Bodies and processes in the second category were established by multilateral treaties such as the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),

the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminatory Effects (CCW), the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the last of which entered into force during the pandemic. Some of those multilateral treaties have a regional scope—notably, those establishing a nuclear-weapon-free or nuclear-free zone in specific geographic areas,² as well as those regulating small arms and light weapons.³ By each treaty, States established a review process with mandated meetings to monitor implementation. Furthermore, some treaties created large organizations dedicated to supporting their implementation, such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO),⁴ while other treaties rely on support by the United Nations Secretariat, as in the case of the NPT, the BWC, the CCW and the TPNW, or other dedicated secretariats supporting their review processes.⁵ But they all have mandated meetings and other activities.

Responses to the pandemic varied from one process to the next. Many of the meetings scheduled to take place in the early period of the pandemic were simply postponed to a later date through written procedure. As the physical restrictions were subsequently eased, some of the scheduled and postponed meetings were held in-person with limited physical presence and/or truncated programmes of work. Certain meetings were held in either a hybrid mode or a solely virtual format. There was even an agreement—the Arms Trade Treaty—whose review was conducted totally in writing without convening any in-person meetings.

Given the large number of mandated meetings for those disarmament bodies and processes, it is not possible to review and evaluate all relevant cases in this study. Still, it is useful to compare how the pandemic affected major meetings and processes in the field of disarmament, both to shed light on the spectrum of responses and to identify common patterns thereof. Across this spectrum, the responses from March 2020 to April 2022 comprised (a) postponements, (b) in-person meetings with limited physical presence, (c) a combination of virtual and hybrid meetings, (d) virtual meetings and (e) written procedures.

In 2022, particularly after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in New York, Geneva and Vienna, most disarmament bodies and processes reverted to their pre-COVID working modalities. However, the different responses to the pandemic give useful insight into multilateral decision-making processes and offer food for thought on how to better manage multilateral diplomacy.

A. Postponements

During the complete lockdown of the United Nations Headquarters following the onset of the pandemic, it was not possible to hold in-person meetings or consultations due to heightened concerns about the safety of delegates and staff in attendance. In particular, large conferences attended by hundreds of delegates were impossible to convene, leaving Member States and States parties without any choice but to postpone such gatherings to a later date when COVID-related physical restrictions were lifted or eased. Developing virtual platforms to host large meetings also required time, as such platforms were not available to all delegates in the immediate aftermath of the initial outbreak.

2020 NPT Review Conference

Although the COVID-19 pandemic derailed the ongoing review process of every major disarmament treaty, it most seriously disrupted the tenth Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), originally scheduled to take place in New York from 27 April to 22 May 2020.

The President-designate, Mr. Gustavo Zlauvinen (Argentina), announced on 27 March 2020 that the Review Conference would be postponed to a date no later than April 2021. Subsequently, the States parties decided to convene the tenth Conference from 4 to 29 January 2021. COVID-related travel and physical restrictions remained in place, however, and it was simply not possible in early 2021 to safeguard the health of hundreds of participants in a four-week, in-person meeting. Therefore, the States parties decided to again postpone the Review Conference, this time to August 2021. As the Delta variant caused a resurgence of COVID cases in the

summer of 2021, States parties rescheduled Conference a third time, to January 2022. But the spread of the Omicron variant again forced NPT States parties to defer the Review Conference, to August 2022.⁶

Finally, after a delay of more than two years, the tenth Review Conference was convened at the United Nations Headquarters fully in person from 1 to 26 August 2022, with the participation of 151 States parties. Those States were unable to adopt a much-anticipated substantive outcome document, as the Russian delegation objected to its final text, particularly paragraphs related to the situation in Ukraine. But the Conference took place in its regular format, with no interruption or deviation from its established working modalities and with States parties fully engaged in the work of its three Main Committees, their subsidiary bodies, and the Credential and Drafting Committees.

The timing of the outbreak of the pandemic proved unfortunate, as States parties had engaged in the three-year preparatory process in advance of the 2020 Review Conference. Rescheduling the Review Conference proved challenging, as it required multiple large conference rooms for parallel meetings over a period of four weeks.⁷ Until COVID restrictions were fully removed in April 2022 at the United Nations Headquarters, there were only two venues for accommodating hundreds of delegates while observing the social distancing requirements. Furthermore, over the course of virtual and written consultations held to identify new dates for the Review Conference, it became clear that States parties wished to convene the meeting in a fully in-person format. That insight prompted the President-designate to propose a succession of dates on the assumption that conference facilities and

operations would have returned to their pre-pandemic conditions, with no medical, safety-related and operational restrictions in place.⁸

The multiple postponements, however, did not mean an extended suspension of the Treaty's review process. In the intervening period, NPT States parties engaged in continuous, informal consultations held by the President-designate both virtually and in person, successfully addressing organizational and logistical challenges by building consensus on necessary decisions through silence procedure. In addition, there were various virtual and hybrid events at the global and regional levels to discuss the Treaty's implementation, including preparations for the Review Conference, with participation by experts and civil society organizations. In that respect, the use of videoconferencing platforms emerged as the mainstay of consultations and outreach activities, helping significantly to maintain the momentum of the NPT review process during the prolonged pandemic.

Second Comprehensive Review of Security Council resolution 1540 (2004)

The pandemic came at the worst possible time for the 1540 Committee,⁹ the subsidiary body of the Security Council established in 2004 to prevent terrorist groups from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. In 2020, the Committee was gearing up preparations for its comprehensive review the following year.¹⁰ In February, it adopted a programme of work setting out a wide range of activities to prepare for the 2021 review.

The pandemic derailed the Committee's activities shortly thereafter, severely affecting the implementation of the programme of work adopted just one month earlier. The lockdown of United Nations

Headquarters forced the 1540 Committee to postpone a number of planned meetings, including the open consultations of the second comprehensive review originally scheduled for June 2020. The Committee also suspended all of its other activities, such as country visits,¹¹ except for an ongoing revision of the Committee's matrices and other activities that could be undertaken in a virtual format.

On 27 August 2020, the Chair of the 1540 Committee informed the President of the Security Council about the decision of the Committee to postpone all activities related to the comprehensive review until 2021, due to delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic.¹² On 22 April 2021, the Security Council, noting the 1540 Committee's decision to postpone the comprehensive review,¹³ extended the mandate of the Committee and its group of experts until 28 February 2022,¹⁴ thereby requesting the Committee to continue to conduct and complete the comprehensive review on the status of implementation of resolution 1540 (2004) and submit to the Security Council a report on the conclusion of the review.¹⁵ In early 2022, as COVID-19 restrictions remained in place, the Council further extended, until 30 November 2022, the Committee's mandate by adopting resolution 2622 (2022) on 25 February 2022.

The repeated postponements of the comprehensive review reflected the preference of Council members, particularly its permanent members, to hold that review in person.¹⁶ From March 2020 to April 2022, however, the 1540 Committee continued its work via videoconference and in writing. In April and November 2020, the Chair of the Committee briefed the Security Council on the progress of the comprehensive review. In June 2020, he also requested international,

regional and subregional organizations to provide written submissions to the comprehensive review, resulting in 13 substantive submissions. In December 2020, the Committee published updated matrices on its website. In 2021 and early 2022, the Committee held meetings virtually and in person¹⁷ to discuss papers covering themes of its four Working Groups relating to implementation, assistance, cooperation, and outreach and transparency, as well on the Committee's support and administration. Following the renewal of its mandate under resolution 2622 (2022) in February, the Committee continued its work to promote the full and effective implementation of the resolution by assisting States, upon request, and participating in many virtual and in-person outreach events.

In 2022, the 1540 Committee successfully conducted the second comprehensive review in person. From 31 May to 2 June, the Committee held fully in-person, open consultations of the comprehensive review. On 30 November 2022, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2663 (2022), extending the mandate of the 1540 Committee and its group of experts for ten years, until 30 November 2032.

2020 Meeting of States Parties and Ninth Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the States parties of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (BWC) decided to postpone all meetings of the Convention for 2020. The 2020 Meeting of States Parties, originally scheduled to be held from 8 to 11 December 2020, was

instead convened at the Palais des Nations in Geneva from 22 to 25 November 2021, pursuant to the agreement reached by States parties through silence procedure.¹⁸ The Convention's Meetings of Experts, originally scheduled from 25 August to 3 September 2020, were also postponed until the following year;¹⁹ they ultimately were convened from 30 August to 8 September 2021.

At its eighth Review Conference in 2016, the States parties of the Convention decided that its ninth Review Conference shall be held in Geneva not later than 2021.²⁰ But the States parties decided that due to the repeated postponements of the 2020 meetings, the 2018–2020 intersessional programme could not be concluded as originally planned in 2020. In May 2021, States Parties therefore agreed, by written silence procedure, that several technical recommendations would be submitted for formal consideration by the appropriate upcoming BWC meetings. In that regard, they decided that the Preparatory Committee would be held in Geneva in an in-person format in accordance with the regular practice under the BWC on 20 December 2021 to consider the agenda items on the organizational aspects of the Review Conference.²¹ In November 2021, taking into account the extraordinary circumstances imposed by the pandemic, the Meeting of States Parties agreed, exceptionally and without setting a precedent, on technical adjustments whereby, *inter alia*, (a) the ninth Review Conference would be held in Geneva in an in-person format in accordance with the regular practice from 8 to 26 August 2022; and (b) the Preparatory Committee would resume its work in Geneva in an in-person format in accordance with the regular

practice under the BWC from 4 to 11 April 2022, subject to the availability of funds.²²

Thus, the Preparatory Committee held two meetings in Geneva on 20 December 2021 and then resumed its work from 4 to 11 April 2022. When objections were raised to the nomination of the President of the ninth Review Conference, the Preparatory Committee addressed the matter, including arrangements for the intersessional period, by holding two informal meetings in February and March 2022. In April, the Committee agreed to recommend to the ninth Review Conference that Mr. Leonardo Bencini (Italy) preside over the Conference on the understanding that the Group of the Non-Aligned Movement and other States Parties to the BWC decided to retain its rotational right to preside over the tenth Review Conference.²³

But the prolonged consultations on the election of the President also had ramifications for considering the dates of the ninth Review Conference: The Western Group, in presenting Mr. Bencini's nomination, specified that his capacity to fulfil that role was subject to a decision by the Preparatory Committee to reschedule the ninth Review Conference in order to ensure that he would have time to undertake the necessary preparations and consultations. The decision by the NPT States parties to convene its tenth Review Conference from 1 to 24 August also gave rise to a scheduling conflict for the ninth Review Conference, which was scheduled to take place from 8 to 26 August. In view of the extraordinary circumstances, the Preparatory Committee reconsidered the decision of the 2020 Meeting of States Parties and decided that the ninth Review Conference should take place in Geneva from 28 November to 16 December 2022.²⁴ In accordance with that decision, the

ninth Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention was held in person at the Palais des Nation on those dates.²⁵

First meeting of States of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Despite the prolonged pandemic, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, adopted in July 2017, entered into force on 22 January 2021, 90 days after the deposit of the fiftieth instrument of ratification or accession with the Secretary-General.²⁶ However, the first Meeting of States parties, scheduled to be held in January 2022, was postponed owing to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic. On 2 August 2021, the President-designate of the first Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty, Mr. Alexander Kmentt (Austria), circulated a draft decision regarding the postponement of the first Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty and placed it under silence procedure until 9 August 2021. Having received no objections to or comments on the proposed decision,²⁷ the President-designate informed the Secretary-General of the United Nations in a letter dated 10 August 2021 that the States parties had agreed that the unprecedented circumstances arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic had made it impossible to hold the Meeting within one year of the entry into force of the Treaty, and that the Secretary-General was no longer required to convene the first Meeting of States Parties by that date pursuant to its article 8 (2).²⁸ He also informed the Secretary-General of the decision of the States parties to hold the first Meeting of States Parties from 22 to 24 March 2022 at the United Nations Office at Vienna, and requested him to convene the first Meeting on those dates.

In 2022, the COVID pandemic continued to affect the conditions in Vienna,

resulting in the postponement of many meetings. In a letter dated 22 March 2022, the President-designate informed the Secretary-General that, in the light of the COVID-19-related restrictions currently in place at the United Nations Office in Vienna, and the evolving calendar of disarmament meetings, particularly the postponement of the tenth NPT Review Conference to August 2022, the States parties had decided to hold the first Meeting of States parties from 21 to 23 June 2022 at the Austria Center in Vienna. He requested the Secretary-General to convene the first Meeting at this venue on those dates, as well as to inform States parties and States not parties to the Treaty accordingly.²⁹

Thus, the first Meeting of States parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was held from 21 to 23 June 2022, with the participation of 49 States parties and 34 non-State parties as observers, as well as representatives of 85 non-governmental organizations.³⁰ The Meeting adopted, by consensus, the final document, including a declaration and an action plan. The Meeting took place fully in person, with necessary yet limited restrictions in place to ensure the health of all delegates and staff.³¹

Group of Governmental Experts on nuclear disarmament verification

In 2019, the General Assembly adopted resolution 74/50, thereby requesting the Secretary-General to establish a group of governmental experts, which would meet in Geneva for four sessions of one week, two each in 2021 and 2022, to further consider nuclear disarmament verification issues, including, inter alia, the concept of a Group of Scientific and Technical Experts, building on the report of the previous group of governmental experts.³² The resolution envisaged no meeting in 2020, but public

health risks from the prolonged pandemic also forced the two sessions of scheduled for 2021 to be postponed.

On 6 December 2021, the General Assembly adopted decision 76/515, by which it decided to request that the Secretary-General hold two additional sessions in 2023 in Geneva to compensate for the two planned but postponed 2021 sessions, for a total of two weeks in 2022 and two weeks in 2023. In 2022, the Group held its first session from 21 to 25 February and its second session from 26 to 30 September, both in Geneva. The Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to hold one additional informal intersessional consultative meeting in New York in 2023 to compensate for the planned 2021 meeting that also had to be postponed owing to COVID-19 travel restrictions, for a total of two meetings, one in 2022 and one in 2023.

Fourth Conference of States parties of the Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones

On 5 December 2018, the General Assembly decided, by adopting resolution [73/71](#), to convene the fourth Conference of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and Mongolia as a one-day conference at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 24 April 2020. On 13 April 2020, noting with concern the situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the General Assembly, in its decision 74/549, decided to postpone the fourth Conference to a period in 2021 to be decided by the Assembly at its seventy-fifth session.

The quinquennial conferences on nuclear-weapon-free zones had been convened since 2005 on the occasion of the NPT Review Conferences. Therefore, after NPT States parties decided to postpone its tenth Review Conference, the fourth

conference on nuclear-weapon-free zones was also deferred. As the tenth NPT Review Conference was postponed, again, on 29 July 2021, the General Assembly decided, by adopting decision 75/575, to further postpone the fourth Conference to a later date to be decided by the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session. But informal consultations among States parties to the treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones and Mongolia, on organizational and substantive preparations, did not yield agreement on necessary arrangements for convening the fourth Conference before the tenth NPT Review Conference was held in August 2022.

B. Hybrid meetings with limited physical presence

As in the case of the First Committee of the General Assembly, a number of other disarmament bodies held their formal meetings in an abridged in-person format. Once in-person meetings became possible in principle, the question was to what extent mandated meetings could be held in person. The main concern shifted to the scope and modalities of in-person meetings under ongoing physical restrictions, as well as necessary measures to mitigate the risks of the pandemic.

IAEA General Conference

In 2020, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) held its annual general conferences with limited physical presence by limiting both the number of delegates and the duration of statements. In advance of the sixty-fourth General Conference in September 2020, IAEA Member States agreed by silence procedure on arrangements providing the framework to hold the Conference under the circumstances of the pandemic. In

accordance with the Austrian requirements on COVID-19 related measures such as physical distancing, a maximum of only two delegates for each Member State were permitted to be physically present at any given time at any of the meetings of the General Conference. Member States were also requested to limit their respective statements delivered in the general debate to three minutes in order to reduce the overall duration of the Conference, taking into account health concerns. In addition, Member States were allowed to use the option of sending pre-recorded videos of their statements to the general debate, and all the proceedings of Plenary and the Committee of the Whole were livestreamed so that representatives of Member States could follow their deliberations.³³

In 2021, the physical restrictions during the General Conference were loosened: Attendance for each Member State was increased to four representatives in the Plenary Hall, while the time limit for their respective statements delivered in the general debate was increased to five minutes. The option of sending pre-recorded video statements was again made available to Member States. In addition, virtual participation was allowed through the Interprefy IT platform for each of the Plenary and the Committee of the Whole meetings, with three registered devices/electronic links provided per Member State. As in 2020, the proceedings of the Plenary were livestreamed in all official languages of the General Conference on its website.³⁴

International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

In 2013, the General Assembly adopted resolution [68/32](#), entitled “Follow-up to the 2013 high-level meeting of the General Assembly on nuclear disarmament”,

designating 26 September as the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. Adopting this resolution annually, the Assembly reiterated its request to its President to organize, on 26 September every year, a one-day high-level plenary meeting of the Assembly to commemorate and promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. On 22 July 2020, the General Assembly adopted decision 74/562, entitled “High-level meetings of the General Assembly in September 2020”, by which the Assembly, inter alia, decided to reschedule the high-level meeting for 2 October 2020 in order to avoid holding a parallel meeting with the General Debate of the General Assembly.³⁵ The high-level meeting was convened in accordance with the arrangements for the General Debate and other high-level meetings of the Assembly set out in the annex of decision 74/562, taking into account the safety and physical distancing measures, while permitting submission of pre-recorded video statements.

C. Combination of hybrid and virtual meetings

In so far as there was consensus among Member States, certain disarmament processes and meetings were held in a combination of virtual and hybrid formats. This option offers greater flexibility in managing conferences, allowing more time and greater participation while ensuring the safety of delegates. In particular, virtual platforms provide more inclusive and flexible informal space for negotiations, while hybrid meetings allow participants to perform formal functions such as adopting agendas and final reports, as well as electing conference officers, with physical presence of the chair, the secretary and delegates.

Seventh Biennial Meeting of States

In July 2001, Member States adopted the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects and thereby created an ongoing review process for its implementation, which consists of biennial meetings and a review conference.³⁶ In 2019, the General Assembly, by adopting resolution 74/60, decided to hold the seventh Biennial Meeting of States to consider the implementation of the Programme of Action (BMS7) from 15 to 19 June 2020. However, due to the outbreak of the pandemic, the General Assembly adopted decision 74/552 on 14 May 2020, thereby postponing the seventh Biennial Meeting to a period in 2021 to be decided by the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session.³⁷ On 31 December 2020, the General Assembly adopted resolution 74/241, by which it decided, pursuant to decision 74/552 of 14 May 2020, to convene a one-week biennial meeting of States from 26 to 30 July 2021.

Subsequently, the seventh Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the implementation of the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons was held in New York from 26 to 30 July 2021, under the chairmanship of Ambassador Martin Kimani of Kenya, as a combination of in-person and hybrid meetings. On 26 June, the Conference adopted a programme of work which consisted of five in-person meetings and five hybrid meetings to consider the full and effective implementation of the Programme of Action.³⁸ On 30 July, the Seventh Biennial Meeting was successfully concluded with the adoption of its outcome document.³⁹

Open-ended Working Group on cybersecurity

The Open-ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information

and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security, established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 73/27 of 5 December 2018, held its organizational and first and second substantive sessions in 2019 and 2020. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its third and final substantive session scheduled for 6 to 10 July 2020 was cancelled. On 31 December, the General Assembly adopted decision 75/550, by which it decided that the Open-ended Working Group shall convene its third and final substantive session from 8 to 12 March 2021, while continuing its current work pursuant to its mandate under resolution 73/27.

In order to continue its work during the pandemic, the Open-ended Working Group held informal virtual meetings on 15, 17 and 19 June and 2 July 2020; from 29 September to 1 October 2020; from 17 to 19 November 2020; from 1 to 3 December 2020; and on 18, 19 and 22 February 2021. In particular, the Chair of the Open-ended Working Group, Ambassador Jürg Lauber of Switzerland, decided to hold virtual informal meetings in February 2021 on the zero draft of the Group's substantive report, prior to the third and final substantive session in March 2021. Although it was to be held in person, the Chair proposed that the meetings of the final session be held in a combination of virtual and hybrid modes, taking into account the number and length of in-person meetings currently possible at the United Nations Headquarters and global travel restrictions that might pose a challenge to participants in the session.

Thus, the Open-ended Working Group conducted its work in virtual and hybrid mode during the final session, holding negotiations of its substantive report at virtual meetings.⁴⁰ On the last day of the session, the Group met virtually in the

morning and afternoon to allow Member States to make statements in preparation for the adoption of the Group's report.⁴¹ At 5 p.m., the Group met in a hybrid format to adopt the report; the Chair encouraged delegations to be present in the conference room. The Group's pragmatic and flexible approach contributed to the successful conclusion of its work, particularly the consensus adoption of its substantive report.

Following the successful conclusion of the work of the Open-ended Working Group, together with the consensus adoption of the report of the Group on Governmental Experts on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security established pursuant to General Assembly resolution [73/266](#) (see below), the General Assembly was able to re-establish a single intergovernmental process on the topic of cybersecurity by adopting, by consensus, resolution [75/240](#) in December 2021. By that resolution, the Assembly created a new five-year Open-ended Working Group on Security of and Use in Information and Communication Technologies 2021–2025, one of the most positive developments at its seventy-sixth session.⁴² Under the chairmanship of Ambassador Burhan Gafoor (Singapore), the new open-ended working group held three substantive sessions, in person, from 12 to 17 December 2021, 28 March to 1 April and from 25 to 29 July at the United Nations Headquarters, and successfully adopted, by consensus, its first annual progress report on 29 July.⁴³ The working group's Chair also held informal consultative discussions with interested stakeholders, including businesses, non-governmental organizations and academia, to hear views on the topics under consideration thereby in

December 2021 and March and July 2022, pursuant to resolution [75/240](#).

Group of Governmental Experts on ammunition

In December 2017, the General Assembly adopted resolution [72/55](#) and requested the Secretary-General to convene a group of governmental experts in 2020, on problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus. The Group held its first session at the United Nations Headquarters from 20 to 24 January 2020.

Due to the pandemic, members of the Group in a position to do so participated in informal, virtual discussions from 20 to 24 April 2020 via videoconferencing, in lieu of the formal, second session scheduled to be held in Geneva.⁴⁴ On 31 December 2020, acknowledging the pandemic's impact on the convening of meetings within United Nations premises and the ability of the Group to complete its work as scheduled in 2020, the General Assembly decided, in its decision [75/552](#), to request the Secretary-General to convene the Group of Governmental Experts for up to 10 working days in 2021 to enable the Group to complete its work.

Pursuant to that decision, the Group of Governmental Experts convened its second session in a hybrid format from 17 to 21 May 2021, with a limited physical presence in Geneva and most experts participating virtually. Subsequently, the Group held its final session in a hybrid format at United Nations Headquarters from 7 to 10 September. At its last meeting, the Group adopted by consensus a final report, which was submitted to the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session. In the report, the Group recommended that a set of political commitments should be negotiated as a

new global framework under the auspices of the General Assembly to address existing gaps in through-life ammunition management.⁴⁵ On 24 December, the Assembly welcomed the Group's report and decided, by resolution 76/233, to establish an open-ended working group to develop a set of political commitments as a new global framework that would address existing gaps in through-life ammunition management.⁴⁶

Group of governmental experts on emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS)

The 2020 Meeting of the High Contracting Parties of the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects on the work related to the Convention (CCW) did not take place, due to the extraordinary circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) held no official meeting and could not develop, much less agree upon, a substantive report in 2020 for consideration by the High Contracting Parties of the Convention. On 3 May 2021, the High Contracting Parties adopted technical decisions on CCW-related activities for 2021 through a silence procedure.⁴⁷

In 2020, however, the Group of Governmental Experts was able to continue its substantive work informally by holding meetings and consultations in hybrid and virtual formats, as well as through written submissions.⁴⁸ From 21 to 25 September, the Group met informally, despite the objection of one High Contracting Party, which maintained that there was no consensus

on the modalities of the meetings and that the topic required in-person participation by experts from capitals. In 2021, the Group of Governmental Experts was able to meet in person for 20 days, pursuant to the technical decisions of 3 May, and adopted a report by consensus.⁴⁹

D. Virtual meetings

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, various disarmament bodies and processes continued their work by adapting their working methods, particularly by introducing video-conferencing platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Cisco Webex and Interprefy. Although Member States and States parties adhered to in-person meetings for conducting formal activities, especially taking decisions, holding elections and adopting reports, virtual meetings and consultations emerged as a critical component in carrying out their mandates. As a result, fully virtual or hybrid meetings have become an integral part of intergovernmental processes as long as there is consensus among Member States and States parties.

Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters

The Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters⁵⁰ meets twice annually to advise the Secretary-General on matters related to arms limitations and disarmament.⁵¹ Before the onset of the pandemic, the Advisory Board convened its seventy-third session in January 2020 in Geneva, beginning a two-year programme of work through in-depth discussions about ongoing changes in the international security environment and their impact on current approaches to nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.⁵² Following the COVID-19 outbreak,

the Advisory Board conducted its work by holding four subsequent regular sessions via videoconferencing—namely, in June 2020, February and June 2021, and February 2022.⁵³ In June 2022, the Board held its seventy-eighth session in person at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Although the Advisory Board was unable to meet in person for two and a half years, its 15 members successfully completed their two-year work programme by engaging in thorough deliberations through videoconferencing and in writing. In particular, the Board presented key findings and recommendations as elements of an agenda for collaborative action by all Member States and civil society to reduce the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and, furthermore, revitalize pursuit of a world free of those weapons.⁵⁴ Board members also examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, describing it as “a wake-up call to improve preparedness, international cooperation and transparency, not only for future health-related crises, but also for other challenges and catastrophes.” Noting the direct and indirect costs of biosecurity and biosafety incidents, the Board underlined the critical importance of revitalizing activities within the framework of the Biological Weapons Convention and of strengthening its implementation.

Group of Governmental Experts on cybersecurity

The Secretary-General convened the first and second sessions of the Group of Governmental Experts on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security established pursuant to General Assembly resolution [73/266](#) of 22 December 2018. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, its third

session scheduled for 17 to 21 August 2020 could not take place.

Still, the Group continued its work through a series of intersessional informal consultations. On 31 December 2020, the General Assembly extended the Group's mandate by its decision 75/551, requesting the Secretary-General to convene the third session and the fourth and final session of the Group before the end of May 2021. Accordingly, the Group held its third and fourth sessions from 5 to 9 April 2021 and from 24 to 28 May 2021, both in a virtual format, and successfully adopted its report by consensus.⁵⁵

Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty meetings

Annual CTBT events were held in virtual mode in 2020 and 2021. The twelfth biennial Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (Article XIV Conference) was convened virtually on 23 and 24 September 2021, pursuant to article XIV of the Treaty. The biennial CTBT ministerial conference—typically held in New York in the years between the Article XIV Conferences—was not held in 2020, but foreign ministers of CTBT States parties particularly dedicated to achieving the Treaty's entry into force (Friends of the CTBT) issued a video message on 1 October 2020, instead of meeting in New York during the high-level week of the General Assembly in September.⁵⁶

International Day against Nuclear Tests

In 2009, the General Assembly declared 29 August the International Day against Nuclear Tests by adopting resolution [64/35](#) and invited Member States, the United Nations system, civil society,

academia, the mass media and individuals to commemorate the International Day.

On 26 August 2020, the President of the General Assembly convened a virtual meeting of the Assembly, pursuant to resolution 72/51 of 4 December 2017, whereby the General Assembly requested him to organize annually a high-level plenary meeting of the Assembly to commemorate and promote the International Day against Nuclear Tests. On 8 September 2021, the President of the General Assembly convened a high-level plenary meeting to commemorate and promote the International Day against Nuclear Tests at the General Assembly Hall.⁵⁷

E. Written procedure/cancellations

Immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic, essential work was conducted in writing, particularly when formal decisions needed to be made in intergovernmental processes. Even after videoconference platforms allowed disarmament bodies to undertake their discussions virtually, written procedures remained a crucial and often indispensable component of multilateral diplomacy. Conference officers continued to communicate with Member States and States parties and sought their inputs and feedback in writing, while relying on the silence procedure for taking important decisions. Although there is a strong preference among delegations for in-person meetings, written procedures emerged as the only technically feasible and politically acceptable means of communication and negotiation when strict physical restrictions were in place due to the pandemic. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the sixth Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty was held by written procedure from 17 to 21 August 2020. The seventh Conference of States Parties was

held in hybrid format from 30 August to 2 September 2021, as COVID restrictions no longer warranted extreme social distancing measures.

Certain meetings were cancelled due to disagreement on the modalities as a result of COVID restrictions. The 2020 meetings of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) did not take place, despite efforts to convene them. It is because one State insisted on in-person participation in meetings and refused to agree on holding scheduled meetings in virtual or hybrid formats. Written procedure, however, enabled the States parties to the Convention to adopt, through silence procedure, a set of technical decisions on CCW-related activities in 2021, including arrangements for the sixth Review Conference of the Convention and the group of governmental experts.⁵⁸

This chapter provides far from an exhaustive list of disarmament bodies and processes affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. There are other bodies that should be examined and included:

- The Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention postponed the second part of its twentieth-fifth session to 2021.
- The Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) held its regular session in an adapted modality to continue to promote the Convention's effective implementation.
- The Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)

reported an increase of meetings as they held most of the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies either virtually or in a hybrid format in 2020.

There are also numerous other disarmament bodies, including regional and subregional organizations working in the area of disarmament and non-proliferation, that fulfilled their mandates by adopting innovative working methods during the pandemic.

In addition, a number of major disarmament processes related to the review of multilateral disarmament treaties are not examined in this chapter:

- In 2020, the States parties of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention held its eighteenth Meeting of States Parties from 16 to 20 November and informal intersessional meetings on 30 June and 2 July, both in a virtual format.⁵⁹
- States parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions also held their second Review Conference in two parts, with the first part held from 25 to 27 November 2020 in a virtual format and the second from 20 and 21 September 2021 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva in a hybrid format, successfully adopting the Lausanne Declaration and the Lausanne Action Plan.⁶⁰

States parties to these multilateral conventions demonstrated flexibility in adapting the modalities of meetings so that they could fulfil the mandates established by the Convention and minimize the delay in undertaking their mandated activities during the pandemic.

This chapter addresses the impacts of the pandemic on various meetings of disarmament bodies and processes, but not other activities, such as inspections, confidence-building exercises, technical assistance, capacity-building, and education and outreach.

- The IAEA continued its verification and monitoring activities, implementing safeguards applied for 183 countries as well as verifying the nuclear-related commitments by the Islamic Republic of Iran under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.
- After a suspension forced by COVID restrictions, the OPCW was able to resume its inspections pursuant to article VI of the Chemical Weapons Convention,⁶¹ although it was able to carry out only 82 of the 241 inspections for 2020 and 80 for 2021. Despite limitations on travel and other restrictions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Organisation continued its mission to verify the elimination of the Syrian Arab Republic's declared chemical weapons programme.
- Despite the onset of the pandemic, the CTBTO, in cooperation with host countries, made focused efforts to secure the daily operation of the International Monitoring System (IMS) facilities and the International Data Centre (IDC), maintaining continuous and close interactions with operators, while continuing to maintain the uninterrupted and timely flow of data and products to States Signatories.

These are a few examples of substantive work undertaken by international organizations in the area of disarmament and non-proliferation. Their activities are vast in scale, covering over a

hundred countries. But they still constitute a fraction of various activities related to disarmament and non-proliferation around the world, as nearly 200 Member States and scores of regional and subregional organizations also engage in important work in this area. The COVID-19 pandemic affected such work in all its substantive aspects. This research, however, only reviews the policy-making bodies and processes. Such organs and processes do not themselves implement their decisions; rather, they evaluate implementation and adopt necessary decisions to further their purposes and goals. In this sense, it is particularly important to study the different responses by various bodies and processes to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are a number of factors that contributed to such different responses. The size of the meetings and the number of participants, for example, determined the viability of in-person meetings where physical restrictions were in place. It is certainly easier for a smaller number of participants to reach agreement on the modalities of meetings. The importance of topics addressed and stakes of the decisions involved also affected the degree of flexibility demonstrated by States in adapting the modalities of meetings. Where

meetings addressed highly sensitive issues and involved delicate negotiations, certain States demanded in-person participation. The nature and frequency of meetings may have been another factor: Established formal review processes tend to be less flexible in terms of working modalities than ad hoc groups with a time-bound mandate. Finally, different responses can be attributed to the personalities and preferences of individuals elected to preside over intergovernmental bodies and processes, such as presidents and chairpersons.

In a number of cases, strict adherence to in-person deliberations prevented agreement on adjusting the working modalities during the pandemic, resulting in repeated postponements and even cancellations. Meanwhile, generally speaking, States accepted and engaged in, albeit in varying degrees, virtual informal consultations, which paved the way for important decisions to be taken in formal settings in person. Therefore, by comparing the different responses, we can identify ways not only to better deal with such disruptive events in the future, but also to improve how to manage multilateral processes.

6

Observations

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to the intergovernmental processes of the United Nations, throwing the previous work streams of its primary organs into disarray. As an institutional arrangement anchored within the United Nations system, the disarmament machinery—comprising the First Committee of the General Assembly, the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament—was not immune to such disruptions. Nor were other disarmament bodies and processes either established by United Nations organs or reliant on United Nations offices and staff to conduct their business.

The lockdowns imposed at United Nations offices in New York, Geneva and Vienna posed serious logistical, technical, legal and procedural challenges to the Organization's main deliberative bodies and Secretariat, as well as its disarmament machinery, forcing them to adapt their working modalities to ensure business continuity. In particular, they had to find ways and means to continue to fulfil their mandates under severe limitations on in-person meetings. Virtual platforms enabled various intergovernmental bodies to continue their business remotely without physical presence and to operate informally throughout the pandemic. However, the

sudden outbreak also derailed previous planning and ongoing activities, resulting in numerous postponements, cancellations and rollovers of mandates.

Innovation in procedures: a summary

The responses of the primary United Nations organs to the pandemic varied considerably. Although both the General Assembly and the Security Council quickly developed new methods to continue their work without convening in person, they instituted markedly different modalities for taking action. The General Assembly adopted a 72-hour silence procedure for making decisions, allowing it to postpone mandated conferences, meetings and processes; however, the non-objection process allowed the Assembly to adopt decisions only by consensus, preventing Member States from taking decisions by voting without holding plenary meetings. In contrast, the Security Council quickly adopted a written procedure for adopting resolutions, whereby it was able to renew necessary mandates that were due to expire.¹

Disarmament bodies and processes subsidiary to or established by the General Assembly relied for guidance on the decisions of the Assembly. The First Committee aligned its working modalities

with those adopted for the high-level meetings of the General Assembly.² Furthermore, the Assembly postponed the 2020 session of the Disarmament Commission through the silence procedure set out in its decision 74/544, entitled “Procedure for taking decisions of the General Assembly during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19),” adopted on 27 March 2020. Following that same procedure, the General Assembly postponed a number of meetings of ad hoc bodies and processes that it had previously mandated, such as the seventh Biennial Meeting of States on the Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Fourth Conference of Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zones and Mongolia.

Disarmament processes established outside the United Nations also followed the written procedure for taking decisions adopted by the General Assembly, as States parties to various treaties postponed their mandated meetings through a 72-hour silence procedure. For cases in point, one can refer to the postponements of the tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the sixth Review Conference of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Neither the organs of the disarmament machinery nor other disarmament bodies adopted a written procedure for taking decisions by voting as the Security Council did as its very first action to continue its work in March 2020. Rather, those other bodies followed the decision-making modalities adopted by the General Assembly, which did not reach consensus on taking decisions by voting without holding plenary meetings. Although the General Assembly approved an electronic voting system on 13 November 2020, which would allow it to adopt its

resolutions and decisions remotely,³ neither the Assembly nor disarmament bodies have since resorted to the procedure. The continued absence of written voting procedures from disarmament bodies and processes reflects the traditional preference for consensus decision-making that continues to prevail in them. In particular, the Conference on Disarmament conducts its business by consensus as enshrined in its rules of procedure.⁴ The Disarmament Commission also adheres to the decision by the first special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament (SSOD-I) to make every effort to adopt decisions on substantive matters by consensus.⁵ This is a unique trait of disarmament bodies: Member States have long adhered to consensus decision-making that they see as warranted, since disarmament issues are highly sensitive and critical to national security.

The General Assembly and the Security Council also adopted different modalities for convening their meetings. The Security Council quickly embraced video teleconferences and elaborated necessary modalities for holding such meetings, although they were not considered formal meetings and no verbatim records were produced. Meanwhile, the General Assembly did not hold plenary meetings virtually. As a result, the Assembly held no formal plenary meetings for nearly six months, until it resumed in-person meetings in early September 2020.

Likewise, various disarmament bodies adopted a range of modalities for convening meetings. In keeping with the decisions adopted by the General Assembly, the First Committee did not hold formal plenary meetings via videoconference. Instead, it only held virtual informal meetings during the thematic debate in order to allow high-level officials and chairs of mandated

bodies to present their reports. In contrast, the Conference on Disarmament embraced videoconferencing technologies and held its plenary meetings virtually or, as COVID restrictions eased, in a hybrid format with limited physical presence.

The different modalities developed by various institutions and processes can be explained by the size of their respective memberships and technical and political difficulties. The 15 members of the Security Council were able to agree on the use of a written procedure for voting and holding their regular meetings, both open and closed, via videoconference. But it was not possible for the 193 members of the General Assembly to reach consensus on either holding plenary meetings virtually or adopting its resolutions or decisions by vote, either in writing or by electronic means. The 65 members of the Conference on Disarmament demonstrated greater flexibility in holding plenary meetings in a virtual format.

Still, those procedural innovations had their own limitations. Neither written procedures nor videoconference meetings allowed the General Assembly to hold key elections without physical presence. In June 2020, the General Assembly elected the chairs of its Main Committees through silence procedure because there was no objection to the candidates. But the Assembly could not elect the President of the seventy-fifth session through the same procedure, as the silence procedure placed on a draft decision to elect the candidate was broken.⁶ Fortunately, the General Assembly was able to agree on the modalities for holding secret ballots in person by staggering the voting schedule of Member States. Likewise, in June 2020, the silence procedure for the draft decision to elect the nominee for the post of vice-chair

of the First Committee from the African Group was broken. As a result, the First Committee held another election for the post at its organizational meeting, held in person on 6 October 2022.⁷

Importantly, if no physical presence had been allowed at the United Nations premises at that time, the General Assembly would not have been able to hold secret ballots to elect the President of the General Assembly, non-permanent members of the Security Council, or members of the Economic and Social Council.

The inability of the General Assembly to elect new office holders without convening in person highlights a critical difference between the impacts of the total lockdown and the limited opening of the United Nations premises during the pandemic. When no physical presence was allowed during the first several months of the pandemic, the primary organs of the United Nations, such as the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Secretariat, all shut down completely, forcing them to move their work entirely into virtual mode. The Security Council adopted the written procedure for voting on resolutions and holding all meetings, closed or open, via video teleconference. In the meantime, the General Assembly adopted modalities for taking decisions through silence procedure, which allowed Member States to adopt resolutions and decisions only by consensus. Despite the herculean effort by the facilitator on discussion of an e-voting system, consensus on that initiative proved elusive. Moreover, the General Assembly did not convene any plenary meeting with physical presence for nearly six months. Meanwhile, the Conference on Disarmament resumed holding its plenary meetings via videoconference.

Digital technologies: Why the resistance?

If the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had occurred one decade earlier, it would have forced upon the United Nations community an impossible situation that would certainly have shut down the entire Organization, rendering it impossible for Member States and the Secretariat to perform their essential diplomatic and administrative functions. Discussions, deliberations, consultations, negotiations, voting, and, for the Secretariat, supporting these activities, all required in-person interaction among and with delegates. The disarmament machinery and processes also would not have been able to fulfil their mandates. Yet thanks to digital technologies, particularly videoconferencing platforms, the United Nations and various disarmament bodies were able to continue to carry out most of their functions and fulfil their essential mandates. The lockdown of the United Nations Headquarters and other offices put to the test the Organization's ability to conduct its work without any physical presence by rapidly adapting its working methods and introducing virtual and remote modalities.

Almost all United Nations bodies and Secretariat staff shifted their business to online platforms. As the Security Council moved its discussion to virtual mode, the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, as well as facilitators entrusted by them, convened numerous rounds of informal consultations via videoconference platforms and continued to carry out their work remotely. To varying degrees, disarmament bodies and processes also moved their work to virtual or hybrid formats. In retrospect, it was inevitable that they would resort to digital technologies and adapt their working methods if they were

to maintain the continuity of their work and fulfil the mandates entrusted to them.

Yet, despite their promise, digital technologies have not been embraced universally or unconditionally by Member States. While some States were open to adapting the working methods of intergovernmental forums, others were reluctant to deviate from the rules of procedure and time-honoured practices. Such divergent views on the use of digital technologies in intergovernmental settings were reflected in the decisions by various bodies on whether or not, and to what extent, they would apply them to their meetings and other activities.

There remains strong resistance to virtual meetings and electronic voting, particularly at the General Assembly.⁸ That resistance partly derives from concerns about unequal access to virtual meetings. First, despite widespread use of online conference platforms, there are problems related to connectivity. Not all Member States have access to the requisite information and communication technologies that allow them to participate in meetings held virtually. Such technical concerns could potentially block or delay the process. The “digital divide” continues to adversely affect the developing world, for which capacity building remains an urgent priority. It remains a challenge to ensure uninterrupted and unfettered visual and audio connections to the same meeting for all 193 countries. Sooner or later, advances in technologies will resolve the problem of connectivity, but in the near term, this issue will remain a technical impediment to convening formal United Nations meetings online.

Second, there were political considerations that posed a difficult

challenge to holding formal meetings online. States subject to economic sanctions maintained that they were denied access to communication technologies necessary for them to participate in virtual meetings. On those grounds, the States reiterated their opposition to such unilateral sanctions measures and called for their removal. This concern was expressed as reservations on reliance on virtual platforms, especially when Member States insisted on participation by capital-based experts. It also resonated with concerns expressed by certain States about decision-making in fully virtual meetings.

A third important consideration was geographical. Time differences emerged as an impediment to equal access to virtual meetings, disadvantaging Member States located longitudinally far from the venue of a given meeting. As most United Nations meetings are held in New York, Geneva or Vienna, countries in Asia and the Pacific pointed out the difficulty in participating due to the different times in their capitals. Such time differences create inequality in access to virtual meetings, precipitating opposition to the digital mode of formal intergovernmental meetings.

Finally, there were logistical issues raised by various delegations. The remote interpretation platforms reduced the length of meetings from three to two hours, curtailing much-needed time for in-depth deliberations by a high number of participating States. In addition, the use of videoconferencing platforms and web streaming services gave rise to financial implications. For instance, as the Conference on Disarmament held virtual and hybrid meetings, the additional costs for such meetings were not foreseen in the 2020 programme budget.⁹ If virtual and/or hybrid formats were to become a part of the regular working modalities, the cost of remote

simultaneous interpretation services and related expenses would need to be included in budget estimates for future meetings. Furthermore, the organization of virtual and hybrid meetings entails logistical and organizational responsibilities to be assumed by secretariats, placing additional time and human resource demands on their staff.

Rules and practice in virtual settings

The existing rules of procedure of United Nations organs and disarmament bodies are silent on virtual and hybrid meetings. Technical innovations thus raised important questions on compliance with rules and practices established in settings such as intergovernmental negotiations and deliberations, where the physical presence of delegates and staff are considered *sine qua non*. Such rules and practices govern actions and interaction by delegates in physical meeting environments, but they do not address actions and interaction in cyberspace.

This simple fact poses a series of unanticipated legal issues regarding the introduction of digital technologies, particularly videoconference platforms. For example, can an entirely virtual meeting of a primary United Nations organ be considered a formal meeting? No delegate is physically present in such a meeting. Furthermore, there is no single venue for the meeting as its key actors, such as the chairperson and rapporteur, are absent from United Nations facilities. Can such a meeting be treated as “real” or formal?

The General Assembly and the Security Council do not consider them as such. The Security Council held no “formal” meeting from 12 March to 14 July 2020, although it conducted scores of open and closed videoconferences. The General Assembly

also held no formal plenary meeting until 3 September 2020.

Underscoring those facts is the absence of verbatim records for any meetings of the Security Council or the General Assembly during the respective periods when they were not formally convening. The absence of such records is attributable to long-honoured rules and practices: Verbatim records are produced only for statements and remarks delivered by representatives who are physically present at the venue of a formal meeting that is entitled to such records. Statements delivered at virtual meetings are not similarly entitled to such records.

The issue of records came to the fore during discussions on arrangements for the high-level meetings of the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session. It had long been the practice for heads of State and Government and other dignitaries address the General Assembly during its high-level week in September at the beginning of its annual session every year. In 2020, however, with COVID-19 restrictions on physical gatherings still in force in the State and City of New York, it was not possible to hold large in-person meetings of the General Assembly, which scores of world leaders typically attend. When the General Assembly decided to allow dignitaries to deliver statements at its high-level meetings as pre-recorded messages, the President of the Assembly had to issue a separate compilation of the statements that could not be included in the verbatim records.

The Conference on Disarmament, under its own rules of procedure, held formal plenary meetings via videoconference, with their proceedings duly recorded in formal verbatim records.¹⁰ Although that approach was a deviation from the established

practice of the United Nations organs, the Conference on Disarmament is not a part of the United Nations, despite its close association thereto. The Conference thus decided to adopt its own rules of procedure and interpret them itself—a practice applicable to other disarmament processes established outside the framework of the United Nations.

In an increasingly digital world, rules of procedure elaborated in the analogue world of multilateral diplomacy offer no, or limited, guidance on various issues related to conference management in hybrid or virtual settings. At a hybrid meeting held on 18 February 2022, the Conference on Disarmament was unable to adopt a draft decision on the organization of work due to the Russian position that the decision should be adopted in-person, since that document would guide the work of the Conference for the rest of the year.¹¹ In 2021, however, the Conference took a number of decisions virtually, although they were made in very special, unique circumstances. This underscores that there is no specific reference in the Conference's rules of procedure that governs decision-making in virtual or hybrid meetings.

Back to “business as usual”?

Will any of the ad hoc adaptations to COVID-19 survive the pandemic? As of this writing, indications suggest that few, if any, of the provisional measures will become permanent features of the work of the United Nations or of disarmament bodies and processes.

Throughout the pandemic, Member States showed a strong desire to return to previous practices, particularly in-person diplomacy. Underscoring that fact, in 2021, the President of the seventy-fifth session of

the General Assembly noted in a handover report to his successor that his office had been “vigilant in pushing for ever more in-person presence, to ensure the nuance and delicacy of diplomacy, all the while adhering to safety protocols.”

Delegations intensified their calls to resume old practices as the United Nations progressively reopened its Headquarters and other offices. In 2021, amid preparations for the high-level meetings of the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session, a number of Member States called for a return to pre-pandemic modalities and working methods, including in-person attendance by heads of State and Government and other dignitaries.

As Member States pushed to increase the number of in-person meetings, they also requested that each delegation be allowed to send more in-person representatives. In September 2021, at the General Debate of the General Assembly during the high-level week of its seventy-sixth session, 80 heads of State and Government addressed the General Assembly in person, while 70 more of them delivered statements in pre-recorded video messages.¹² In view of rising COVID cases due to the Delta variant in the summer of 2021, the large number of dignitaries who travelled to New York to attend the high-level meetings of the General Assembly appeared incongruent with widely held public concerns.

In 2022, following the removal of physical restrictions at United Nations Headquarters, the General Assembly decided to return to pre-pandemic working modalities for its seventy-seventh session. In reverting to fully in-person modalities, the Assembly discontinued all its COVID measures of the preceding two sessions, such as playing pre-recorded video

statements and issuing compilations of those statements as official documents.¹³ Underscoring that fact, the Assembly actually had to adopt a special decision (A/77/L.1) to allow Ukraine to present a pre-recorded video statement by its president during the high-level week in September on an exceptional basis.

The Security Council also reverted to pre-pandemic working modalities. During the pandemic, the Council adhered for months to the working methods and protocols developed in 2020, meeting virtually and adopting outcomes through written procedure. However, its members agreed that those working methods were intended to address exceptional circumstances, not to set a precedent for the future. In 2021 and 2022, a succession of Security Council Presidents acknowledged that understanding at the beginning of their presidencies in letters to the Council's membership on how they intended to conduct their work. Furthermore, the understanding was reflected in the 2021 edition of the “Handbook on the Working Methods of the Security Council”, commonly known as the “Green Book”. In his introduction to the 2021 Handbook, Ambassador Kimihiro Ishikane, Permanent Representative of Japan,¹⁴ noted that “in revising the Green Book in 2020, we decided not to include such unique practices taken under the physical constraints imposed by COVID-19, since it may take more time for the members of the Security Council to arrive at a consensus view regarding the nature of such practices”.¹⁵

The disarmament machinery also returned to its pre-pandemic working modalities in 2022. The First Committee restored its traditional programme of work and timetable, adding four formal meetings to the original schedule to accommodate a

higher level of participation and engagement by Member States. In April, the Disarmament Commission held its regular three-week session fully in person after a hiatus of three years. The Conference on Disarmament also held its 2022 session in pre-pandemic mode, convening hybrid meetings only on an exceptional basis. Major disarmament conferences, such as the review conferences of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Biological Weapons Convention, were held fully in person. Unbound from the prolonged COVID restrictions on travel, delegations filled conference rooms as they resumed in-person participation in various meetings with palpable enthusiasm and eagerness.

As the pandemic's threats subside, do we face a return to "business as usual"? We cannot underestimate the staying power of the pre-pandemic reality; delegates prize in-person consultations and negotiations, particularly on sensitive issues. Meanwhile, the provisional and extraordinary measures of the pandemic were not without controversy. Although the imperative of fulfilling intergovernmental mandates overrode certain opposition to those measures in the context of COVID-19, Member States confirmed that the measures were intended to address exceptional circumstances, not set precedents for the future.

At the centre of States' reservations or qualifications about the adaptive measures is concern that they might replace existing working methods or practices. Fearing that new working modalities and practices might place them at a disadvantage, some States insisted on applying the Charter of the United Nations and its organs' respective rules of procedure during the pandemic and opposed extending the measures thereafter.

In November 2020, at the annual debate on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly, a number of States voiced concerns about creating new working modalities, especially through the introduction of virtual or hybrid formats of meetings. By that point, Member States had already held numerous discussions on the continuity of work during the COVID-19 pandemic. But when a group of States decided to adopt, by a vote, a draft decision on an e-voting procedure, a sizable group of States vehemently opposed it.

On 13 November 2020, the General Assembly adopted its decision 75/510, entitled "Procedure for decision-making in the General Assembly when an in-person meeting is not possible", by a recorded vote of 123 to 19, with 29 abstentions.¹⁶ By the decision, the Assembly identified steps to ensure the full functionality of the General Assembly at all times in the future, including the procedure for voting without holding a plenary meeting, through an electronic means provided by the Secretariat. In the decision, however, the General Assembly (a) reaffirmed that it shall, as a rule and in accordance with established practice, always meet in person; and (b) recognized that any exception to that practice shall be made only in the most extraordinary circumstances and for as limited a time period as possible. Furthermore, the decision specified that such circumstances should preclude an in-person meeting for a prolonged period of time owing to concrete and ongoing risks to the safety and well-being of representatives of Member States and United Nations personnel.

With such restrictive and exceptional conditions, the e-voting procedure has not been utilized since its adoption. It certainly highlighted delegations' strong adherence to in-person meetings, and, given the

persistent to opposition to the e-voting system, their reluctance to shift to the virtual platform for convening formal meetings.

Illuminating a new direction

Despite the strong reservations of some States, the pandemic has already served as a catalyst for rethinking and changing working methods or rules of procedure. Many of the short-term changes induced by COVID-19 have provided new impetus to ongoing efforts to revitalize the work and processes of primary United Nations organs and other bodies. Formal procedures may not change overnight, but informal practices have already begun to evolve. Lessons learned from the pandemic cannot be unlearned.

Although the impulse to return to pre-pandemic practices remains, new technologies have revealed exciting opportunities to help strengthen international cooperation within the existing framework of United Nations bodies and disarmament processes. For example, while Member States have not yet accepted virtual formats for convening formal meetings of the primary United Nations organs and other bodies under normal circumstances, they have been actively using videoconferences to hold informal meetings, consultations and side events.

In fact, information technologies have transformed not only modes of communication and interaction, but also individual attitudes and preferences. Virtual formats have helped broaden the scope of consultations, increasing their inclusiveness and diversity by eliminating travel costs that pose barriers to participation. Furthermore, the relative ease of convening informal virtual meetings enables States to organize more of them, better preparing delegates to

take part in important in-person meetings, facilitate negotiations and contribute to consensus building.

Even after United Nations organs and disarmament bodies returned to holding mandated meetings in person, Member States continued to use virtual and hybrid meetings for informal dialogue and discussions. In particular, virtual consultations have proved increasingly crucial in conducting informal consultations and behind-the-scenes negotiations, facilitating agreement and building consensus on key issues. By incorporating virtual or hybrid informal meetings into formal processes, particularly during intersessional periods, Member States can address complex issues more effectively by expanding the space for informal consultations and increasing the chances for agreement.

Beginning in June 2020, for example, the Open-ended working group on cybersecurity held virtual informal meetings on a nearly monthly basis until its third and final substantive session in March 2021. During that last meeting, the Working Group negotiated its substantive report in both virtual and hybrid modes, which facilitated its adoption by consensus.¹⁷

In 2022, the Disarmament Commission held two rounds of virtual informal consultations in March, in advance of its organizational meeting, to address key organizational issues such as the nomination of the chair, the substantive agenda and the resumption of its three-year cycle. Those virtual meetings played an important role in ensuring the smooth adoption of necessary decisions at the Commission's organizational session on 4 April, particularly considering that the

body had not held a substantive session for three consecutive years.¹⁸

Likewise, Member States have embraced virtual and hybrid informal meetings as an important means to support their consultations and negotiations on various proposals and draft decisions, particularly First Committee resolutions and various substantive outcome documents.

The pandemic tested the flexibility of Member States and the Secretariat in carrying out their essential work under extraordinary circumstances. In various United Nations organs, differences in the views of Member States shaped collective outcomes. Whereas the Security Council adopted a written procedure in 2020 that enabled it to carry out its essential activities with almost no interruption, the General Assembly postponed or cancelled all its plenary meetings for nearly six months. Their different experiences provide an important lesson for any similar future crisis: where States insist on holding meetings in person, bodies will have no recourse but to suspend their work. In contrast, where States are prepared to conduct their business online, bodies will be able to make progress in fulfilling their mandates.

It is argued that virtual meetings and interaction will never replace “real” human

contact, a centrepiece of diplomacy and multilateralism. However, online working methods can certainly complement in-person negotiations and deliberations. There seems to be no reason not to make the best use of them. The question is how to maximize their advantages, thereby reducing in-person diplomacy that can in some cases be unnecessarily costly, time-consuming and occasionally even wasteful.

Although the pandemic disrupted the work of the United Nations and disarmament processes through various restrictions to delegates and staff, it created opportunities to rethink ossified working methods established over seven decades. Information technologies help us overcome the tyranny of distance and bring people closer—even without in-person human contact. We should not pass up the opportunity to undertake, with open minds, a forward-looking review of how the pandemic transformed the working environment of the United Nations and disarmament bodies with a view to considering how we can change their working methods for the better. That step is essential for strengthening the functions of the United Nations and revitalizing the disarmament machinery and processes.

Endnotes

Introduction

- 1 The disarmament machinery and other disarmament bodies and processes are either part of the United Nations or closely associated thereto. Two of the three primary organs of the disarmament machinery, namely the First Committee of the General Assembly and the United Nations Disarmament Commission, are formal United Nations organs, the former being one of the Assembly's six Main Committees of the General Assembly and the latter a subsidiary body thereof. The third pillar of the disarmament machinery, the Conference on Disarmament, was established at the first Special Session of the General Assembly devoted to Disarmament (SSOD-I) in 1978. In addition, there are numerous disarmament bodies and processes created by the General Assembly or the Security Council, such as open-ended working groups and groups of governmental experts, as well as the 1540 Committee, a subsidiary body of the Security Council. Also, there are a number of multilateral disarmament treaties for which the Secretary-General serves as the depositary and provides support for meetings.
- 2 The disarmament machinery and other disarmament bodies and processes are governed by the rules, regulations and decisions of the United Nations and depend on the services of its Secretariat. Accordingly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the United Nations organs, particularly the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Secretariat, directly affected those multilateral disarmament bodies and processes.

Chapter 1

- 1 As a result of confirmed cases of 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), on 31 January 2020, the US Secretary of Health and Human Services, pursuant to section 319 of the Public Health Service Act, determined that a public health emergency existed and had existed since January 27, 2020, nationwide.
- 2 Executive order 202, State of New York.
- 3 "This is not the time to panic; it is the time to be prepared," the Secretary-General cautioned, stressing that preventing the further spread of COVID-19 was a shared responsibility for all United Nations staff members around the world.
- 4 On 9 March 2020, advice for UN personnel on the declaration of a state of emergency was circulated in a broadcast email. It contained specific recommendations for their work arrangements: 1) all UN personnel travelling to and returning from five countries identified by the host country for self-monitoring (China, Iran, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea) to remain at home, working remotely during the 14-day upon their return; 2) UN personnel with a severe underlying medical condition or 65 years and older be permitted to work from home full-time; 3) remaining UN personnel fully implement telecommuting arrangement up to three days a week; and 4) all Offices and UN personnel use tools for remote working.

- 5 It was decided that only those in possession of a valid UN grounds pass or Special Event Tag (SETs) would be allowed access to the Secretariat building, and that all guided tours would be temporarily suspended until further notice.
- 6 [Letters dated 11 March 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Members and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.](#)
- 7 Delegations were encouraged to limit participation at meetings to no more than two New York-based delegates.
- 8 [Letter dated 11 March 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.](#)
- 9 In his letter, the President also flagged the necessity for the General Assembly to meet for a very short session to adopt a few key decisions regarding mandated events scheduled to take place at the end of April, such as the Fourth Conference on Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and Mongolia and the next session of the International Law Commission.
- 10 [Letter dated 13 March 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.](#)
- 11 The Security Council cancelled a meeting of its working group on children and armed conflict, while the Economic and Social Council cancelled plenary meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women for its 63rd and 64th sessions, as well as the informal consultations of the Commission on Population and Development.
- 12 Letter dated 13 March 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to all UN Staff members broadcast by email in the evening of 13 March 2020.
- 13 The “New York State on Pause” executive order included a new directive that all non-essential businesses statewide must close in-office personnel functions effective at 8 p.m. on Sunday, March 22, and temporarily banned all non-essential gatherings of individuals of any size for any reason.
- 14 The five postponed meetings were (a) the Commemorative Meeting on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; (b) the Commemorative meeting on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade; (c) the informal meeting of the General Assembly to hear a briefing on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy; (d) the eleventh session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA); and (e) the plenary meeting on Improving Global Safety. [Letter dated 17 March 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.](#)
- 15 Those General Assembly-mandated meetings cancelled by the President of the General Assembly are: (a) the plenary meeting for the Seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, scheduled for 6 May 2020; (b) the High-level thematic debate to take stock of progress on the impact of rapid technological change on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, scheduled for 11 May 2020; and (c) the informal interactive dialogue on commodity markets, scheduled for 22 May 2020. [Letter dated 3 April from the President of the General Assembly addressed to Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.](#)
- 16 After the onset of the pandemic, the Security Council held its first in-person meeting on 14 July 2020; and the General Assembly on 3 September 2020.
- 17 Letter dated 27 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/253](#)).
- 18 General Assembly decision 74/544 entitled “Procedure for taking decisions of the General Assembly during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)”, adopted on 27 March 2020 ([S/2020/253](#)).
- 19 [A/RES/75/1](#).
- 20 The briefings were held with representatives from the Department of the General Assembly and Conference Management, the Office of Information and Communication Technologies, the Security Council Affairs

Division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and the Offices of the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council.

- 21 The UN Medical Director recommended that in-person meetings should continue to be avoided whenever possible, regardless of the number of participants; and events should be virtual. Where there is no other choice, in-person meetings should have the absolute minimum number of participants; all should maintain standards of physical distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; and persons who are experiencing any symptoms of ill health should not attend.
- 22 General Assembly resolution 74/557 entitled “Procedure for holding elections by secret ballot without a plenary meeting during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic”.
- 23 The Headquarters complex comprises the Secretariat, General Assembly, Conference and Library buildings. Annex buildings are building located outside the HQ complex such as DC1 and DC2.
- 24 In Phase One, each United Nations entity will undertake an “on-site requirement” assessment to determine what activities must be done on site. Managers and their team members will agree jointly on the basis of an on-site requirement assessment as to whom in the team might need to physically return to the workplace, with certain exceptions for building maintenance and safety and security personnel who perform essential on-site functions.
- 25 In Phase Two, the return will be determined by discussion between managers and team members in accordance with Office of Human Resources guidance. Alternate working arrangements would remain in place on a large scale (e.g., duty station-wide) and many personnel will continue to work remotely (e.g., from home).
- 26 From Phase Zero to One, it required improvements in the local epidemic situation and healthcare capability in accordance with New York City and State recommendations, and the initial relaxation of New York State PAUSE order, in addition to completion of preparatory work for reopening the UN campus. Likewise, transition from Phase One to Two required further reduction in the epidemic and strengthening of the healthcare system based on data provided by New York State, and a relaxation in restrictions on retail and food service industries by New York City and State. Transition from Phase Two to Three required a reduction in workplace risk to pre-epidemic levels and removal of specific COVID-19 related restrictions by New York City and State, including, for example, reopening of daycares and public schools.
- 27 Phase 2 of New York State’s reopening officially allowed restaurants, bars, in-store retail and more to reopen, although dining and drinking was exclusively outdoors, and with new safety regulations in place. Anything involving an indoor space had to feature reduced capacity, social distancing, and mask compliance. See “NY Forward: A Guide to Reopening New York and Building Back Better”, May 2020.
- 28 In particular, the Secretary-General detailed ongoing preparations for transition from the current phase (Phase Zero), which is aimed to keep footprint at the Headquarters complex below 200 people, including both staff and delegates. He shared his expectations on Phase One, in which he said only those functions that needed to be performed on site would be conducted on site, while the vast majority of staff would continue to telecommute. The Secretary-General assured his staff that no more than 400 people should be at the Headquarters complex on any given day, with physical distancing strictly enforced for common spaces, and there must be a compelling reason for personnel to be present in the buildings.
- 29 Letter dated 8 July 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to all United Nations Staff members, New York.
- 30 After a second spike in cases prompted the Governor of the State of New York to impose new restrictions on 13 November 2020, the Security Council held only one in-person meeting in December and did not convene any in-person meeting in January 2021. As COVID-19 restrictions remained in place in the State and City of New York, the Security Council carried out its work largely or entirely virtually and adopted outcomes through written procedure. Only after May 2021 did the Council begin to revert to its normal functioning, moving back to the Security Council Chamber and Consultations Room over the second half of the year.

- 31 Letter dated 31 July 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to all United Nations Staff members, New York.
- 32 "Physical distancing will be strictly enforced for common spaces for staff who enter the complex during Phase Two, but there will be limited face-to-face meetings, as well as strict social distancing, mask use and adherence to all other guidance. Masks must be worn outside designated workspaces, and personnel will be expected to wipe down equipment and clean personal workspaces each day."
- 33 "By swiping their valid United Nations identification cards upon entering United Nations Headquarters premises, personnel will confirm that they meet the following requirements: 1) no COVID-19 symptoms in the past 14 days; 2) no positive COVID-19 test in the past 14 days; and no close contact with a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 case in the past 14 days."
- 34 If the United Nations had not been able to reopen its Headquarters, the Assembly and its Main Committees would have had no choice but to postpone the main part of its seventy-fifth session in its entirety. Meanwhile, the Security Council and the Fifth Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions would have continued their work completely in virtual mode.
- 35 During the annual pageant of multilateral diplomacy, Heads of State or Government and other dignitaries assemble from all over the world in late September to address the United Nations during the general debate of the General Assembly and other high-level meetings. In particular, they planned in 2020 to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the creation of the United Nations.
- 36 The First Committee devoted six meetings to thematic debates on the following seven clusters: (a) nuclear weapons; (b) other weapons of mass destruction; (c) outer space (disarmament aspects); (d) conventional weapons; (e) other disarmament measures and international security; (f) regional disarmament and security; and (g) disarmament machinery. Debate on the first four of those clusters spanned four meetings, while discussion on the remaining three clusters took place over two meetings.
- 37 Wearing a facial covering continued to be strongly encouraged at all times while in public spaces and in the conference room, except when directly addressing a meeting.
- 38 Among these conventions are the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects; the Arms Trade Treaty, and the Convention on Cluster Munition.
- 39 With 101 votes in favour, seven against, and 19 abstentions, the General Assembly adopted draft decision [A/77/L.1](#), allowing Ukraine, without setting a precedent, to submit a pre-recorded statement of its Head of State. The statement was played in the General Assembly Hall during the general debate of the Assembly at its seventy-seventh session.

Chapter 2

- 1 In accordance with Rule 38 of the Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly, the General Committee comprises the President of the General Assembly, who shall preside, the twenty-one Vice-Presidents and the Chairpersons of the Six Main Committees.
- 2 There is no reference to silence procedure {or non-objection procedure} in the rules of procedure of the General Assembly. However, this practice had been used in various intergovernmental processes to reach agreement informally. The adoption of decision 74/544 represented the first instance of the General Assembly's adoption of its formal decision through such a procedure. As such, some legal scholars questioned the legitimacy of this decision.
- 3 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 9 April 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 4 [Letter](#) dated 15 May 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 5 [Letter](#) dated 18 June 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.

- 6 [Letter](#) dated 21 July 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 7 [A/74/PV.62](#).
- 8 By its resolution [74/270](#) of 2 April 2020, the General Assembly called for intensified international cooperation to contain, mitigate and defeat the pandemic and calling upon the United Nations system to work with all relevant actors in order to mobilize a coordinated global response to the pandemic and its adverse social, economic and financial impact on all societies.
- 9 General Assembly resolution [74/274](#) of 20 April 2020, inter alia, requested the Secretary-General, in close collaboration with the World Health Organization, to take the necessary steps to effectively coordinate and follow up on the efforts of the United Nations system to promote and ensure global access to medicines, vaccines and medical equipment needed to face COVID-19, and, in this regard, to consider establishing, within existing resources, an inter-agency task force.
- 10 For example, Switzerland expressed concern about the need to consult with the General Committee, whose main functions are to consider the provisional agenda, recommend the closing date of the session, and assist the President in the general conduct of the work of the General Assembly, according to the Rules of the General Assembly. Expressing a similar view, Singapore noted that the General Assembly is the master of its own procedure and the General Committee cannot decide on behalf of the members of the General Assembly. [Letter](#) dated 28 March 2020 by the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations; and [Letter](#) dated 28 March 2020 by the Permanent Mission of Singapore to the United Nations.
- 11 [Letter](#) dated 22 April 2020 on the Draft resolution "United response against global health threats: combating COVID-19" ([A/74/L.57](#)).
- 12 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 23 April 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 13 In his letter to the President of the General Assembly dated 11 May 2020, Ambassador Rattray indicated the timeline for his consultations and his intention to submit the agreed text to him for adoption through the silence procedure mechanism under decision [74/544](#), once consensus is reached on a draft decision. Starting with the first round of informal consultations on 11 May 2020, Ambassador Rattray held three additional rounds of informal consultations on 18, 21 and 28 May.
- 14 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 14 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 15 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 20 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 16 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 27 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 17 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 1 June addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers.
- 18 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 29 May addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 19 [Letter](#) from the Permanent Representative of Jamaica dated 10 June 2020 addressed to the President of the General Assembly.
- 20 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 19 June 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 21 General Assembly decision [75/510](#), entitled "Procedure for decision-making in the General Assembly when an in-person meeting is not possible". See "Resolutions and decisions adopted by the General Assembly during its seventy-fifth session. Volume 2, Decisions, 15 September-31 December 2020 ([A/74/49 Vol. II](#))". For verbatim records for the debate on the adoption of this decision, see [A/75/PV.26](#).

- 22 Rule 30 of the Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly stipulated that the President of the General Assembly shall be elected at least three months before the opening of the session over which he or she is to preside. [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 27 January 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 23 In his effort to explore alternative mechanisms to hold the elections scheduled in June, the President of the General Assembly invited the chairs of the regional groups for the months of April and May to a virtual meeting on 30 April 2020. The non-paper was presented by Mr. Movses Abelian, Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management. [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 28 April 2020 addressed to the chairs of the regional groups for the months of April and May 2020.
- 24 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 5 May addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 25 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 14 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers. The proposed arrangements for such elections were set out in the annex to the draft decision.
- 26 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 20 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 27 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 22 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 28 [Letter](#) dated 29 May 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 29 On 15 May 2020, the President of the General Assembly informed Member States that a draft decision to extend decision [74/544](#) until the end of June (A/74/L.65) had been concluded without any objection and was now considered adopted as [74/555](#). [Letter](#) dated 15 May 2020 from the President of the General Assembly addressed to all Permanent Members and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 30 By resolution [71/323](#) of 8 September 2017, the Assembly, aiming to contribute to the transparency and inclusivity of the process, had decided to conduct informal interactive dialogues with candidates for the position of President of the General Assembly, and invited the candidates to present their respective vision statements.
- 31 In accordance with paragraph 1 of the annex to General Assembly resolution [33/138](#) of 19 December 1978, the President of the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session shall be elected from among the Western European and Other States.
- 32 On 27 May, the President of the General Assembly placed, on silence procedure until 1 June, a draft decision to elect the sole candidate of Mr. Volkan Bozkir of Turkey for the next President of the General Assembly. [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 27 May 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 33 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 1 June 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 34 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 2 June 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 35 Member States were requested to submit the name of the representative and his/her alternate to the Chief of the General Assembly Affairs Branch. To facilitate this process, an online registration form was sent from the Secretariat for Member States to register. The President of the General Assembly reported in his letter dated 11 May 2022 that all Member States had registered the name of their representative and an alternate.
- 36 [Letter](#) dated 9 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all permanent representatives and permanent observers to the United Nations.

- 37 [Letter](#) dated 15 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 38 Argentina, Austria, Bolivia, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Japan, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Mexico, Nigeria, Portugal, Solomon Islands, United Kingdom and Zimbabwe were elected members of ECOSOC. [Letter](#) dated 17 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 39 In the first round of voting held on 17 June 2020, neither Kenya nor Djibouti received the requisite two-third majority, requiring a second round of voting for the African Group. In a run-off vote the following day, Kenya was elected after receiving a two-third of votes.
- 40 [Letter](#) dated 12 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 41 The candidates were listed in the annex to a letter of the President dated 23 June: [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 23 June 2020 addressed to Permanent Members and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 42 In addition to sixteen representatives from five regional groups, the five representatives of the permanent members of the Security Council serve as Vice-President of the General Assembly. Rule 30 of the Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly, footnote 14.
- 43 [Letter](#) dated 29 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 44 In his letter addressed to Member States, the President of the General Assembly surmised that “the limitations on international travel and convening of large in-person meetings as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, may, in varying degrees, still be in effect in September 2020.” [Letter](#) dated 9 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 45 [Letter](#) dated 16 June 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 46 The President explained that the silence procedure placed on the draft Declaration had concluded without objection. [Letter](#) dated 7 July 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 47 The draft decision would revise the schedule for the three high-level meetings as follows: 1) the Summit on Biodiversity to be held 30 September 2020; the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women on 1 October 2020; and the high-level meeting to commemorate and promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons on 2 October 2020.
- 48 [Letter](#) dated 9 July 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 49 [Letter](#) dated 22 July 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 50 [Letter](#) dated 25 August 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 51 [Letter](#) dated 18 August 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 52 [Letter](#) dated 25 August 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers of the Observer States and the Head of Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations.

- 53 “Organization of the seventy-fifth regular session of the General Assembly, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items: First report of the General Committee” [A/75/250](#), 16 September 2020, paragraph 44.
- 54 The long-standing rules governing verbatim records did not allow the pre-recorded video messages to be included in the verbatim records of the high-level meetings, since only speeches that were actually delivered by representatives present at the conference room could be included in the verbatim records. As a consequence, the pre-recorded statements by dignitaries played at the high-level meetings held at the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly were not included in the verbatim records of these meetings. Only introductions by their representatives who were physically present in the General Assembly Hall were recorded in their *precis verbale*.
- 55 Although held in hybrid mode, this meeting was held as previously scheduled on 21 September 2020, with its Declaration formally adopted at the meeting. The General Debate of the seventy-fifth session of the Assembly was also held as scheduled. The three other high-level meetings were all held in hybrid mode, although postponed after the General Debate.
- 56 In its first report of that session, the General Committee recommended that the General Assembly adopt the decisions to allow (a) submission of a pre-recorded statement, which will be played in the General Assembly Hall after the introduction by the President of the General Assembly at the plenary meetings concerned and (b) circulation, as a document of the Assembly, of a compilation document of the statements delivered by means of pre-recorded statements at each of the formal plenary meetings, which will be attached to the verbatim records of the meetings. See “Organization of the seventy-sixth regular session of the General Assembly, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items: First report of the General Committee”, [A/76/250*](#), 15 September 2021, paragraph 42.
- 57 According to the “Synopsis of the General Debate of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly”, issued by the Department of the General Assembly and Conference Management, 80 heads of States and Government addressed the Assembly in person during its General Debate, while 70 more of them delivered statements in pre-recorded video messages.
- 58 On 16 September, the General Assembly adopted draft decision [A/77/L.1](#) with 101 votes in favour, seven against, and 19 abstentions, which allowed Ukraine, without setting a precedent, to submit a pre-recorded statement of its Head of State—which was played in the General Assembly Hall during the General Debate of the Assembly at its seventy-seventh session. See [A/77/PV.3](#).
- 59 “Organization of the seventy-seventh regular session of the General Assembly, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items: First report of the General Committee” [A/77/250*](#), 14 September 2022.

Chapter 3

- 1 [Letter](#) dated 27 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council. ([S/2020/253](#))
- 2 When the negotiation of a draft Security Council resolution is nearing completion, its text will be circulated as an official Council document, first in blue.
- 3 The Council member(s) presenting the resolution will not be able to withdraw or amend the resolution once the voting period has begun. There will be an announcement in the Council’s programme of work that the voting process is under way. The draft resolution will be translated into the six official languages before the end of the 24-hour period.
- 4 Any Council member that fails to respond within the 24-hour voting period will be considered to have been absent from the vote.
- 5 If the draft resolution is adopted, the Secretariat will, upon receipt of the President’s letter, circulate that resolution, with a date and number, to all Council members and the Member States concerned.
- 6 The invitation of non-Council members and the circulation of a compilation document will not apply to videoconferences of Council members that are announced in advance as closed videoconferences.

- 7 Subsequently, the Security Council continued to adopt resolutions through the voting procedure outlined in the letter of the President dated 27 March 2020 ([S/2020/253](#)) until it resumed in-person meetings in July 2020. Even thereafter, the Council continued to resort to the written procedure for adopting resolutions and presidential statements through the end of 2021, particularly when the resurgence of COVID cases rendered in-person meetings impossible..
- 8 On 27 March, the President of the Security Council sent its members four letters each containing the text of a draft resolution, informing them that he would put them to a vote in accordance with the voting procedure outlined in the letter dated 27 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council ([S/2020/253](#)) and requesting them to provide their vote in writing within 24 hours. On 30 March, the Security Council unanimously adopted four resolutions through the written voting procedure—namely resolution [2515 \(2020\)](#) on proliferation/the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, resolution [2516 \(2020\)](#) on Somalia, [2517 \(2020\)](#) on Sudan and South Sudan, and resolution [2518 \(2020\)](#) on United Nations peacekeeping operations (safety and security of peacekeepers). Letters dated 31 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council. [S/2020/266](#), [S/2020/267](#), [S/2020/268](#), [S/2020/270](#).
- 9 In its capacity as President of the Security Council, China also circulated to all members four letters announcing the adoption of these resolutions, together with the original letters dated 27 March 2020 from the President requesting the Council members' votes, as well as their letters indicating their votes. Furthermore, the Secretariat (Department of Global Communications) also issued a press release on each of the four resolutions adopted through the written procedure, based on information provided by the Security Council Affairs Division.
- 10 The members of the Security Council agreed that the implementation of the procedure for the adoption of the resolutions outlined in the President's letter dated 27 March 2020 would be assessed at the end of May. See paragraph 5 of the annex to the letter dated 7 May from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/372](#)).
- 11 This agreement was accompanied by the understanding that the procedure for the adoption of presidential statements is a temporary, extraordinary and provisional measure to enable the Council to discharge its mandate and will not be considered a precedent in the future.
- 12 Letter dated 2 April 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/273](#)).
- 13 The Secretariat (Department of Global Communications) issued press releases on those open videoconference meetings based on information provided by the Security Council Affairs Division. [S/14148](#), [S/14149](#) and [S/14154](#).
- 14 Letter dated 2 April 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council. ([S/2020/273](#)).
- 15 The Dominican Republic also informed the Council members that it will conduct videoconferences on the items included an informal plan issued by the presidency after its first working day. The informal plan included open and closed video teleconferences that usually appeared as briefings and consultations in the Council's programme of work.
- 16 Provisional Rules of Procedure ([S/96/Rev.7](#)).
- 17 It took a number of months for the Secretariat (Office of Information and Communication Technologies) to test and introduce remote simultaneous interpretation platforms. Unable to work in their booths, interpreters also needed to develop a "work-from-home" mode and acquire remote interpreting skills. Thus, the Security Council conducted its work in one working language, English, without interpretations, in the early months of the pandemic. During its presidency in June 2020, however, France presided over meetings and delivered statements in French.
- 18 According to the guidelines annexed to the letter from the President of the Security Council dated 6 April ([S/2020/273](#)), the President of the Security Council will circulate, as a document of the Security Council,

a compilation document, within 48 hours, containing the interventions of the briefers and those of the members and non-members of the Council participating in the video teleconference who ask for the inclusion of their statement in the document.

- 19 <https://media.un.org/en/webtv>.
- 20 In the guidelines annexed to the President's letter dated 2 April 2020 (A/2020/273), the President stated the intention to request that the webcasts of the statements delivered by briefers during the public portion of the Council's video teleconferences be archived on UN Web TV.
- 21 The Security Council began to webcast its open video teleconferences in their entirety, including the statements made by Council members, beginning 21 April. The Council also first webcast the briefers' statements at its closed video teleconference on 14 April.
- 22 Letter dated 7 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council. (S/2020/372).
- 23 Statement of the President of the Security Council on protection of civilians in armed conflict. (S/PRST/2020/6).
- 24 The Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Head of the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia and a civil society representative.
- 25 As set out in the annex of the President's letter dated 2 April 2020, (S/2020/273), circulation of a compilation document will not apply to closed video teleconference meetings of Council members. Nor will such meetings be webcasted, in line with the practice and rules of procedure of the Security Council. The [Secretary-General's remarks](#) at this meeting were released to the public.
- 26 Letter dated 7 May from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council (S/2020/372).
- 27 Particularly rules 9, 13, 37 and 39, as well as Chapter VI (Conduct of business), and measures governing the announcement and verbatim records of video teleconference meetings, circulation of compilation documents, and the language of meetings (English). Although the working methods of the Security Council for May were silent on the announcement of Council meetings in the Journal of the United Nations, the Estonian presidency also did not announce them in the Journal, continuing the practice of the previous month.
- 28 Although the working methods foreshadowed the possibility of delivery by non-Council members of their statements orally at these meetings, this proved technically infeasible.
- 29 The Security Council did not adopt any presidential statement in May 2020. The Council adopted its presidential statement under the shorter non-objection procedure for the first time on 28 July 2020 when it issued a presidential statement on peace consolidation in West Africa (S/PRST/2020/7).
- 30 Letter dated 7 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council (S/2020/372).
- 31 Letter dated 2 June 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council (S/2020/490).
- 32 At a [videoconference meeting](#) on 1 July, the Security Council announced its unanimous adoption of resolution 2532 (2020), expressing its support for the Secretary-General's appeal for an immediate global ceasefire, issued on 23 March 2020, and calling upon all parties to armed conflicts to engage immediately in a durable humanitarian pause for at least 90 consecutive days, in order to enable the safe, unhindered and sustained delivery of humanitarian assistance. (Press release [SC/14238](#)).
- 33 Letter dated 1 July 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council (S/2020/632). Press release [SC/14241](#).

- 34 Letter dated 4 August 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/778](#)).
- 35 Letter dated 2 September 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/877](#)).
- 36 According to the Secretariat, the Economic and Social Council Chamber provides a capacity of 97 participants while respecting social distancing.
- 37 The 8746th meeting of the Security Council, held on 14 July 2020 to consider the draft report of the Security Council to the General Assembly, was its first formal meeting held in person since its 8745th meeting, held on 12 March.
- 38 On 14 July, the Security Council adopted resolutions 2534 (2020), on the United Nations political mission overseeing a peace agreement between the Government of Yemen and the Houthi militia, as well as resolution 2535 (2020), on the role of youth in preventing and resolving conflict and building and maintaining peace. They were the first Council resolutions adopted at in-person meetings since March 2020.
- 39 The Security Council received briefings provided by Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs; Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations; and Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Their briefings, as well as the statements delivered by Council members, were issued in a document of the Council ([S/2020/897](#)). Also, see press release [SC/14296](#).
- 40 In addition to the social distancing and health and safety measures set out in the modalities of in-person meetings of the Security Council in July, as contained in the annex to the letter dated 1 July 2020 from the President of the Security Council ([S/2020/639](#)), the Russian presidency encouraged the Secretariat to explore the option of installing Plexiglas barriers between the seats and around the table where physical distancing is not possible to reduce the risk of exposure. Letter dated 1 October 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2020/966](#)).
- 41 In December 2020, the Security Council adopted eight resolutions and three presidential statements under the presidency of South Africa.
- 42 In January 2021, the Security Council adopted one resolution and two presidential statements under the presidency of Tunisia.
- 43 In February 2021, the Security Council adopted four resolutions and two presidential statements under the presidency of the United Kingdom.
- 44 The briefings provided by Ms. Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs; Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations; Mr. Atul Khare, Under-Secretary-General for Operational Support; and Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, as well as the statements delivered by Council members, at this meeting were contained in Security Council document [S/2021/90](#). Also see press release [S/14422](#).
- 45 Letter dated 26 February 2021 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2021/195](#)). Press release [SC/14454](#).
- 46 In March 2021, the Security Council adopted four resolutions and three presidential statements under the presidency of the United States.
- 47 In April 2021, the Security Council adopted four resolutions and two presidential statements under the presidency of Viet Nam.

- 48 In May 2021, the Security Council adopted four resolutions and two presidential statements during the presidency of China. It adopted one resolution, resolution 2576 (2021), at an in-person meeting held on 27 May.
- 49 The unique practices adopted by the Security Council under the physical constraints imposed by COVID-19 were not included in the 2021 edition of the “Handbook on the Working Methods of the Security Council” (the “Green Book”) developed by Japan, even though such methods enabled the continuation of the Council’s work under the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic.
- 50 On 27 May, prior to the adoption of resolution 2576 (2021), Ambassador Vassily A. Nebenzia, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, conducted a brief ceremony to hand over a plaque commemorating the use of Plexiglas partitions during the COVID-19 lockdown and the return of the Council to in-person meetings in the Security Council Chamber. (Press release [SC/14533](#)).
- 51 With the resurgence of COVID cases in December 2021, the Security Council adopted one resolution, resolution 2617 (2021), through the written procedure set out in the President’s letter dated 27 March 2020 (S/2020/253). The Council also adopted two presidential statements on 9 August ([S/PRST/2021/15](#)) and on 28 October ([S/PRST/2021/21](#)) through the written procedure, and their adoption was announced at open videoconference meetings attended by a number of dignitaries.
- 52 During the Estonian presidency, the Security Council held videoconferences on “The situation in Afghanistan” on 22 June 2021 ([S/2021/601](#)), “Children and armed conflict” on 28 June 2021 ([S/2021/617](#)), and “Maintenance of international peace and security: cybersecurity” on 29 June 2021 ([S/2021/621](#)).
- 53 At this videoconference meeting, the Prime Minister of India presented a presidential statement ([S/PRST/2021/15](#)). Also see press release [SC/2021/14598](#).
- 54 During its presidency, Ireland issued, as a document of the Security Council, a compilation of written statements submitted in connection with the 8851st meeting of the Council convened on 8 September 2021 under the agenda item entitled “United Nations peacekeeping operations: United Nations transitions” ([S/2021/783](#)).
- 55 During its presidency, Kenya also issued, as official documents of the Security Council, compilations of written statements submitted in connection with the 8883rd meeting of the Council, convened on 19 October 2021 under the agenda item “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question” ([S/2021/884](#)) and the 8886th meeting of the Security Council, convened on 21 October 2021 under the agenda item entitled “Women and peace and security” ([S/2021/886](#)).
- 56 During its presidency, Mexico issued, as official documents of the Security Council, compilations of written statements submitted in connection with the 8900th and 8906th meetings of the Security Council, convened on 9 and 16 November 2021 under the item “Maintenance of international peace and security” ([S/2021/935](#)) and ([S/2021/952](#)).
- 57 During its presidency, Niger issued, as an official document of the Security Council, a compilation of written statements submitted in connection with the 8923rd meeting of the Security Council convened on 9 December 2021 under the item entitled “Maintenance of international peace and security: security in the context of terrorism and climate change” ([S/2021/1026](#)).
- 58 At this meeting, Kenya, in its capacity of President of the Security Council for the month of October, presented a presidential statement ([S/PRST/2021/21](#)). Also see press release [SC/14677](#).
- 59 By its resolution [2617 \(2021\)](#), the Security Council extended the mandate of the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate until 31 December 2025, with an interim review slated to be conducted in December 2023.
- 60 Letter dated 17 January 2022 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council ([S/2022/32](#)).

Chapter 4

- 1 The Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee) of the General Assembly holds its annual substantive session in fall, usually over five weeks in October and early November.

- 2 In the fall of 2020, the continued safety measures to mitigate the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic were still in place at UN Headquarters, posing a serious challenge to the Organization in holding large in-person conferences. There were only two conference venues available at United Nations Headquarters—the General Assembly Hall and the combined space of Conference Rooms 1, 2 and 3 in the basement—that could accommodate all delegates from all 193 Member States and observers, while complying with social distancing requirements. This created a serious shortage of conference rooms for the General Assembly and its six Main Committees during the main part of their substantive session, particularly in October and November when a total of seven bodies, along with other numerous United Nations entities, Member States and non-governmental organizations, usually share five large conference rooms at the United Nations campus.
- 3 This procedure enabled the Main Committees of the Assembly to elect their chairs and other officers as long as the number of candidates was equal to or did not exceed the number of vacant seats. At the town hall meeting held on 8 May 2020, the President of the General Assembly explained that by adopting a draft decision to extend this decision ([74/544](#)), the Main Committee would be able to carry out the elections of their chairpersons and other officers. [Letter](#) dated 13 May 2020 from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers.
- 4 See [Letter](#) dated 12 June 2020 from the President of the General Assembly to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 5 The silence procedure for the draft decision to elect the nominee for vice-chair from the African group had been broken, and the nominee from Egypt was elected at the beginning of the organizational session on 6 November 2020. See [A/C.1/75/PV.1](#).
- 6 Its organizational session was held on 6 October 2020, five days later than the original schedule due to the limited availability of conference facilities under COVID-19 restrictions.
- 7 The Committee adopted an indicative timetable for thematic discussions ([A/C.1/75/CRP.2](#)), which envisaged three virtual meetings at which it would hear briefings by and hold exchanges with the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, chairs of mandated bodies and other relevant officials in area of disarmament.
- 8 As contained in the note [A/C.1/75/ CRP.3](#).
- 9 Member States submitted to the Committee a total of 18 written statements during the general debate and 49 written thematic statements, which were compiled and published as [A/C.1/75/INF/5](#).
- 10 The Committee was able to take action on all proposals in person at the General Assembly Hall and the combined space of three large conference rooms in the basement, although that stage was interrupted due to COVID contraction by delegates to the Security Council.
- 11 There were a number of General Assembly-mandated processes whose meetings had not been convened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the seventh Biennial Meeting of States on the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons, the Group of Governmental Experts on conventional ammunition, the Group of Governmental Experts on advancing responsible State behaviour in cyberspace in the context of international security and the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on developments in the field of information and communications in the context of international security. Thus, the Committee adopted four procedural decisions to roll over their mandates and postpone their meetings to later dates.
- 12 In the context of heightened concerns about biosafety and bioterrorism, the First Committee still did not adopt a draft resolution submitted by the Russian Federation calling for an update of the Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons. In explaining their negative votes, many States expressed concern about the proposal to transfer responsibility for relevant investigations to the Security Council, pointing out that it would undermine the right of any State to bring an allegation to the attention of the Secretary-General.
- 13 On 7 June 2021, following the election of Mr. Abdullah Shahid of the Maldives as President of its seventy-sixth session, the six Main Committees, including the First Committee, held meetings in accordance with

- rules 99 (a) and 103 of the rules of procedure of the Assembly for the purpose of electing their Chairs and other members of their respective Bureaus. The First Committee elected Amb. Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations, as Chair at its seventy-sixth session. At its seventy-eighth plenary meeting, on 11 June 2021, the President of the General Assembly announced the results of the election of the Chairpersons of the Main Committees ([A/75/PV.78](#)).
- 14 The compilation included statements made in the exercise of the right of reply as well as explanations of vote when Member States were unable to deliver such statements in person due to the strict time limit imposed on their interventions. Those statements were compiled and published as [A/C.1/76/INF/5](#).
 - 15 The Division of Health-Care Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOH) of the Secretariat was no longer conducting risk assessments of meetings taking place in the General Assembly Hall and specific conference rooms. But social distancing requirements remained in place, and, if Member States are to observe them, they would be required to use the only two venues (General Assembly Hall and combined Conference Rooms 1, 2 and 3) for full-membership in-person meetings.
 - 16 The seven clusters are: (1) nuclear weapons; (2) other weapons of mass destruction; (3) outer space (disarmament aspects); (4) conventional weapons; (5) other disarmament measures and international security; (6) regional disarmament and security; and (7) disarmament machinery.
 - 17 In addition, Member States sought to improve access to informal consultations by holding them in person or in hybrid mode and, in the case of hybrid or virtual consultations, enabling participation therein from Geneva; as well as to expand civil society participation in the work of the Committee, either in-person or online.
 - 18 The Bureau considered the use of Conference Room 4, which would enable the Committee to hold more in-person meetings and return to a normal programme of work without deviation from the provisional programme of work adopted by the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session. As the use of Conference Room 4 would compromise social distancing requirements, the Bureau prioritized the safety of delegations and decided to hold Committee meetings only at the General Assembly Hall and the combined space of Conference Rooms 1, 2 and 3.
 - 19 Only 24 proposals (39%) were adopted by consensus, (i.e., without a vote), with many resolutions subject to separate votes on multiple paragraphs.
 - 20 The Committee also ceased to issue a compilation of written statements as an official General Assembly document.
 - 21 States exercised the right of reply more than 130 times over the five weeks of work, a particularly high number relative to pre-pandemic sessions of the First Committee.
 - 22 [A/77/PV.46](#).
 - 23 In 1952, as neither the Atomic Energy Commission nor the Commission for Conventional Armaments was able to make progress in negotiating proposals for the creation of an international atomic development authority and the general reduction of armaments and armed forces, the General Assembly decided to consolidate them into a single Disarmament Commission composed of the members of the Security Council and Canada with the objective of preparing proposals for the regulations, limitations and balanced reduction by stages of all armed forces and all armaments.
 - 24 The original Disarmament Commission ceased to meet after 1965.
 - 25 The Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly ([S-10/2](#)), paragraph 118.
 - 26 At its seventy-fourth session, the General Assembly had decided, by its decision 74/511 of 12 December 2019, that the Disarmament Commission would hold a substantive session from 6 to 24 April 2020.
 - 27 The enclosure also included other draft decisions requiring the Assembly's approval. [Letter](#) dated 17 March 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to All Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.

- 28 At the beginning of its seventy-fourth session in September 2019, the General Assembly decided to allocate this agenda item to the First Committee, and it was necessary to reopen this agenda item in order for the General Assembly to address this matter at the plenary.
- 29 [Letter](#) dated 30 March 2020 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to All Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 30 In his [letter](#) to Member States dated 2 April 2020, the President of the General Assembly informed them that the silence procedure for draft decision of the General Assembly on the Disarmament Commission (A/74/L.43) had been completed without any objection on that day, and thus, it was considered adopted by the Assembly as decision 74/546.
- 31 A/CN.10/PV.375.
- 32 The Russian Federation reiterated that unless the issue of the head of the Russian delegation was resolved, it would block any organizational and substantive work. It suggested that either the meeting be postponed until the issue is resolved or the substantive session be transferred to Geneva, Vienna or a different country. ([A/CN.10/PV.375](#)).
- 33 The outgoing Chair of the 2018 session continued informal consultations on organizational matters, but on 12 April 2019, she informed Member States that there did not appear to be sufficient support for convening the organizational meeting in coming days. However, the Chair informed Member States that under her responsibility as Chair, she had requested Diedre Mills (Jamaica), Chair of Working Group I, and Jeroen Cooreman (Belgium), Chair of Working Group II, both elected for a full three-year cycle in 2018, to facilitate informal discussions on the Commission's substantive agenda items adopted at its 2018 session. For detail, see the 2019 United Nations Disarmament Yearbook, pp. 262–265.
- 34 Although Member States expressed deep concern about the cancellation of the Commission's 2019 substantive session, they had to address the question of the organization of its 2020 session in competing draft proposals put forward by Australia and Hungary, whose Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Amb. Katalin Bogyay, was nominated by the Eastern European Group, on the one hand, and the Russian Federation on the other. In its draft decision and draft amendment to the Australian/Hungarian draft proposal, the Russian Federation insisted that the issue should be discussed by the First Committee or that the Committee and the Disarmament Commission should be held in Geneva or Vienna. Australia and Hungary introduced a draft decision entitled "2020 session of the Disarmament Commission" ([A/C.1/74/L.52](#)) to ensure that the Disarmament Commission would hold its substantive session in 2020. Then, the Russian Federation tabled an amendment ([A/C.1/74/L.62](#)) to a revised Australian/Hungarian draft decision ([A/C.1/74/L.52/Rev.1](#)) in order to condition the convening of the session on the resolution of visa issues. The Russian Federation also introduced a draft decision entitled "Improving the effectiveness of work of the First Committee", requesting the Secretary-General to report on compliance with the Host Country Agreement and on his effort to ensure such compliance, as well as providing for the General Assembly to consider convening the Committee's 2020 session in Geneva or Vienna if the visa issue was not resolved ([A/C.1/74/L.57/Rev.1](#)).
- 35 The First Committee adopted the Australian/Hungarian decision as 74/511 without a vote, but the Russian Federation requested separate votes for two operative paragraphs and voted against them. The Russian draft decision on the work of the First Committee was defeated by a vote of 69 to 18, with 72 abstentions. Its amendment to the draft Australian/Hungarian decision on the 2020 was defeated by a vote of 66 to 21, with 59 abstentions ([A/C.1/74/PV.27](#)).
- 36 For detail, see the 2019 United Nations Disarmament Yearbook, pp. 260–261.
- 37 The Russian Federation reintroduced the same draft decision on the work of the First Committee and the same amendment to the decision on the 2020 session of the Disarmament Commission approved by the First Committee the previous month. However, the Russian Federation did not secure enough votes from Member States for either proposal. The draft decision entitled "Improving the effectiveness of the work of the First Committee" ([A/74/L.28](#)) was rejected by a vote of 66 to 17, with 63 abstentions. The

- draft amendment to the draft decision entitled “The 2020 session of the Disarmament Commission” ([A/74/L.29](#)) was rejected by a vote of 65 to 18, with 63 abstentions ([A/74/PV.46](#)).
- 38 In the absence of the 2019 session and the chair thereof, the acting Chair, Mr. Thomas Markram, Director and Deputy to the High Representative of the Office for Disarmament Affairs, opened the organizational session, but the Russian Federation immediately requested that the session be postponed because the United States had been actively hindering the arrival in New York of the head of its delegation, Mr. Konstantin Vorontsov, to participate in a substantive session of the Commission. The Commission debated the issue of visas, replicating the same discussions held at the Commission and subsequently the First Committee in 2019, which ended inconclusively, aside from agreement on suspending the meeting for ten days. See [A/CN.10/PV.376](#).
- 39 [A/CN.10/PV.376 \(Resumption 1\)](#).
- 40 The Russian Federation, again, disassociated itself from consensus on the decision ([A/75/PV.37](#)).
- 41 The in-person organizational meeting, originally scheduled for 18 February 2021, was postponed due to the absence of nominations for the chair and other Bureau members. In the absence of nomination of the chair, Member States entrusted Mr. Thomas Markram, Director and Deputy to the High Representative of the Office for Disarmament Affairs, to preside over informal consultations as acting chair. He held four rounds of virtual informal consultations with regional coordinators and nominees of vice chairs in February and March 2021. In his capacity as acting chair of the Disarmament Commission, Mr. Markram informed the President of the General Assembly that members of the Commission had decided to postpone its 2021 substantive session, which was scheduled for 5 to 23 April 2021, to a later date to be decided by the General Assembly and requested that the President submit a draft decision to postpone the 2021 session for formal adoption by the Assembly at a plenary meeting to be held before 5 April.
- 42 [Letter](#) dated 24 March 2021 addressed from the President of the General Assembly to All Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 43 Decision 75/519 of 7 December 2020 becomes decision 75/519 A. See section B.2 of the Official Records of the General Assembly, Seventy-fifth Session, Supplement No. 49 ([A/75/49, vol. II](#)).
- 44 [A/75/PV.58](#).
- 45 Before the General Assembly decided to postpone the 2021 session, the Secretariat had circulated to Member States options for the draft schedule of meetings, which envisaged hybrid working methods with in-person plenary meetings and virtual meetings for the Commission’s two working groups. However, the Commission was unable to address key organizational matters necessary for convening the substantive session, as no regional group had nominated its candidate for the Chair of the Commission, while the issue of non-issuance of a visa to the head of the Russian delegation remained unresolved. Since the nominee of the Eastern European Group for the Chair of the 2019 session was not elected, there was an issue on which regional group would nominate the Chair of the 2021 session. After consultations among Member States, particularly Hungary and the African States, the Group of African States were requested to nominate the 2021 Chair. As no candidate was nominated by the African Group, all other regional groups were also invited to nominate a candidate for the 2021 Chair. But it seemed that the prolonged complication related to the issue of visas may have discouraged any potential candidate from putting forward their candidacy.
- 46 Draft decision L.33 was formally recommended by the First Committee to the General Assembly in its report under agenda item 102 (b) ([A/76/446](#)) and formally adopted by the Assembly.
- 47 The organizational meetings of the 2022 Disarmament Commission were postponed to 23 March and then 4 April, immediately before the substantive session.
- 48 The Chair-nominee proposed (a) addressing the same agenda items as before, namely nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities; (b) resuming the work of the Commission from the first or second year of the three-year cycle; and (c) proposing that the African group assume the chairmanship for the 2022 session, with the

- sequence of the rotation of regional groups to be discussed further. He also referenced Russian proposals for the Commission to resume its work from 2018 and for the Eastern European Group to chair the 2023 session.
- 49 Although the most pressing issue of visas appeared to have been resolved as the head of the delegation had received his visas before the 2021 session of the First Committee in the fall of 2021, it was not completely resolved as applications for visas by other members of the Russian delegation were still pending. The United States assured Russia that it was working to process the applications of visas filed for additional members of the Russia delegation.
 - 50 The Commission's agenda items for its 2018-2020 cycle are: 1) Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons; and 2) Preparation of recommendations to promote the practical implementation of transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities with the goal of preventing an arms race in outer space, in accordance with the recommendations contained in the report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-building Measures in Outer Space Activities. See [A/CN.10/PV.376 \(Resumption 2\)](#) and the report of the Disarmament Commission for 2022 ([A/77/42](#)).
 - 51 The Commission elected Mr. Kurt Davis (Jamaica) Chair of Working Group I (nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons), and Ms. Szilvia Balazs (Hungary) Chair of Working Group II (transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities).
 - 52 [A/CN.10/PV.377](#), [A/CN.10/PV.378](#), [A/CN.10/PV.379](#) and [A/CN.10/PV.380](#).
 - 53 The Russian Federation stressed that the use of its nuclear capabilities would be possible only in response to the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction against it or its allies or in the event of an aggression against its country using conventional weapons that posed an existential threat to the State, adding those criteria could in no way be applied to the scenario currently unfolding in Ukraine. It also reconfirmed its adherence to the precept that a nuclear war could not be won and must never be fought. See [A/CN.10/PV.378](#).
 - 54 [A/CN.10/PV.378](#)
 - 55 The two working groups held a total of ten meetings each. Working Group I, which addressed agenda item entitled "Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons," considered the conference room paper submitted by the 2018 Chair and subsequently the Chair's non-papers dated 14 and 18 April 2022. Working Group II, which addressed the agenda item entitled "Preparation of recommendations to promote the practical implementation of transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities with the goal of preventing an arms race in outer space, in accordance with the recommendations contained in the report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-building Measures in Outer Space Activities," conducted a review of the 2013 report of the group of governmental experts on transparency and confidence building measures (TCBMs), informed by a series of presentations by representatives of international organizations, non-governmental entities and commercial actors. The Working Group also conducted an information exchange on space policies, with 11 States presenting their national space policies, and held a discussion on the eventual outcome of its work.
 - 56 Report of the Disarmament Commission for 2022 ([A/77/42](#)).
 - 57 In 2021, the acting chair, Mr. Thomas Markram of the Office for Disarmament Affairs, presided over informal consultations which resulted in agreement to postpone the 2021 substantive session to a later date.
 - 58 The Conference on Disarmament is, in the language of the final document of the first special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament, the "single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum" of the international community. The General Assembly, conscious of the work done by the international negotiating body that had been meeting since March 1962 and deeply aware of the continuing requirement for a single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of limited size taking decisions on the basis of consensus, welcomed the agreement reached during its special session devoted to disarmament

- regarding its membership, organizational and procedural rules and methods of work. See the Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly. [S-10/2](#), paragraph 120.
- 59 The presidency of the Conference on Disarmament rotates among all its members every four weeks while in session. The Conference on Disarmament meets for a total of 24 weeks in three parts every year. The Conference held the first part of its 2020 session from 20 January to 27 March, the second part from 25 May to 10 July and the third session from 3 August to 18 September 2020.
 - 60 Rule 9 of the rules of procedure of the Conference on Disarmament stipulates that when the Conference is in session, the Presidency of the Conference shall rotate among all its members based on the English alphabetical list of membership, with each President presiding for a four-working-week period. [CD/8/Rev.5](#).
 - 61 The Australian Presidency held informal online consultations and circulated a questionnaire to collect member States' views on the Conference. In addition, the Presidency proposed a technical update of the Rules of Procedure of the Conference to make them gender-neutral. ([CD/2198](#)). At the end of Australia's term, the Presidency circulated, as an official document, a summary of its consultations on the priorities and role of the Conference on Disarmament, and ways to break the impasse and work more effectively. ([CD/2197](#))
 - 62 [CD/PV.1540](#) and [CD/PV.1541](#).
 - 63 The UN secretariat was able to provide teleconference systems to allow the convening of plenary meetings in a 'hybrid' format with delegates participating both in person and remotely.
 - 64 [CD/PV.1542](#), [CD/PV.1543](#), [CD/PV.1544](#), [CD/PV.1545](#) and [CD/PV.1546](#).
 - 65 [CD/PV.1547](#).
 - 66 Report of the Conference on Disarmament to the General Assembly of the United Nations ([CD/2207](#) and [A/75/27](#)).
 - 67 This is a deviation from the practice of the United Nations, but the Conference on Disarmament is not a United Nations organ and thus can adopt and interpret its own rules of procedure.
 - 68 The year 2020 saw the lowest number of formal plenary meetings of the Conference on Disarmament in that forum's history.
 - 69 Virtual and hybrid meetings were not budgeted for in the 2020 programme budget as they were not foreseen.
 - 70 In an information note addressed to members and observers of the Conference on Disarmament in advance of its upcoming session, it was also stressed that hybrid and virtual meetings entail significant additional costs for which resources had not been included in the proposed programme budget for 2021, and the possibility of conducting meetings in those formats is therefore subject to the availability of financial, technical and human resources, which is currently uncertain. It was further noted that in the event of funding being identified, hybrid meetings would take place in rooms that support remote simultaneous interpretation platforms. See "Information for member and non-member States" issued on 23 December 2020 ([CD/INF.80](#)).
 - 71 At the second meeting of the 2021 session on 19 January, the Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament, Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, observed that at the Palais des Nations, business might not return to normal in the near term, and that as the epidemiological situation continued to be serious, several constraints on our ability to meet in person will remain throughout the first half of 2021. ([CD/PV.1549](#))
 - 72 Algeria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Senegal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Venezuela, Viet Nam and Zimbabwe.
 - 73 [CD/PV.1583](#).

- 74 [CD/2223](#) and [A/76/27](#).
- 75 Bahrain, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
- 76 [CD/PV.1548](#) and Report of the Conference on Disarmament to the General Assembly I ([CD/2223](#)), Annex II.
- 77 The Bulgarian presidency addressed agenda item 1 ("Cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament") on 11 and 12 May ([CD/PV.1568](#) and [CD/PV.1569](#)); and agenda item 2 ("Prevention of nuclear war, including all related matters") on 18 and 20 May ([CD/PV.1570](#), [CD/PV.1571](#), [CD/PV.1572](#) and [CD/PV.1573](#)). The Cameroonian presidency addressed agenda item 3 ("Prevention of an arms race in outer space") on 1 and 3 June ([CD/PV.1576](#), [CD/PV.1577](#) and [CD/PV.1578](#)); agenda item 4 ("Effective international arrangements to assure non-nuclear-weapon States against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons") on 8 June ([CD/PV.1579](#) and [CD/PV.1580](#)); and agenda item 5 ("Types of weapons of mass destruction and new systems of such weapons; radiological weapons") on 15 June ([CD/PV.1582](#)). The Canadian presidency addressed agenda item 6 ("Comprehensive programme of disarmament") on 22 July ([CD/PV.1585](#)); and item 7 (Transparency in armaments) on 27 July ([CD/PV.1586](#)).
- 78 The rules of procedure of the Conference on Disarmament contains only male pronouns and adjectives. The proposal is contained in document [CD/2218](#).
- 79 [CD/PV.1585](#).
- 80 [CD/PV.1587](#).
- 81 [CD/PV.1592](#).
- 82 [CD/PV.1550](#), [CD/PV.1560](#), [CD/PV.1561](#), [CD/PV.1562](#), [CD/PV.1563](#).
- 83 "Information for member and non-member States (Revision)" [CD/INF.82/Rev.1](#).
- 84 Notably, the draft decision included no reference to a programme of work. The Russian Federation called for the removal of a reference to the "Programme of Work" from the title of document [CD/WP.639](#) entitled "Draft Programme of Work of the Conference on Disarmament for 2022". The President quickly revised and circulated a revised draft decision entitled "Decision on the work of the Conference on Disarmament for 2022", [CD/WP.639/Rev.1](#).
- 85 [CD/PV.1605](#).
- 86 [CD/PV.1606](#).
- 87 In 2021, the Conference on Disarmament held the high-level segment in a fully virtual format.
- 88 Breaking with the long-standing tradition of adoption by consensus, on 4 November 2022, the First Committee adopted the resolution on the report of the Conference on Disarmament with 157 States in favour, none against and 12 abstentions. On 7 December, the General Assembly adopted resolution [77/89](#) by a vote of 159 in favour, none against and 12 abstentions.
- 89 During the three-day high-level segment, 39 out of 60 speakers condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- 90 In view of many requests by members to discuss the Russian invitation of Ukraine, it was widely anticipated that the President would hold a plenary meeting on this subject. On 1 March 2022, the President, in communicating her intention to convene a plenary meeting on 3 March without specifying its topic. At the beginning of the 1613th meeting held two days later, the Russian Federation, speaking on a point of order, challenged the legitimacy of the meeting and expressed objection to convening it without specifying its topic. Russia maintained that the Conference should discuss only issues related to its agenda or to the functioning of the Conference as a whole and that there was no consensus on the holding of a plenary meeting on that day. [CD/PV.1613](#).
- 91 Cuba did not support the Colombian presidency's proposal to hold a plenary meeting on gender on 8 March 2022 on the grounds that it was not on the agenda of the Conference on Disarmament ([CD/PV.1614](#)). The President held this event at an informal meeting.

Chapter 5

- 1 These are the Open-ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 73/27 of 5 December 2018; Group of Governmental Experts on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 73/266 of 22 December 2018; and the Group of Governmental Experts on problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus, established pursuant to resolution 72/55.
- 2 There are five regional treaties that established such zones: The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco); The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga); the Treaty on the Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Southeast Asia (Treaty of Bangkok); the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Pelindaba); and the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone in Central Asia.
- 3 For example, the Kinshasa Treaty, the ECOWAS Treaty; the [Inter-American Convention Against Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials, and the Inter-American Convention on Transparency in Conventional Weapons Acquisitions](#).
- 4 This organization has been in operation as the Preparatory Commission for the CTBTO as the treaty has not entered into force.
- 5 For example, the Arms Trade Treaty, the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions created their own secretariats outside the United Nations Secretariat.
- 6 Following extensive consultations with NPT States parties, the President-designate of the tenth Review Conference communicated the decisions on these postponement in his letters dated 27 March and 28 October 2020, 21 July 2021 and 11 March 2022 addressed to the Permanent Representatives and Observers of NPT States parties to the United Nations.
- 7 At their review conferences, NPT States parties review the implementation of the Treaty at three main committees and their subsidiary bodies, following the general debate. In addition, two additional committees review the credentials of delegates to the conference and coordinate the drafting of the Conference's outcome document submitted from the three main committees.
- 8 [Letter](#) dated 11 March 2022 from the President-designate addressed to All Permanent Representatives and Observers of NPT States Parties to the United Nations.
- 9 Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution [1540 \(2004\)](#).
- 10 When the Security Council adopted resolution [1977 \(2011\)](#), which extended the mandate of the Committee established pursuant to resolution [1540 \(2004\)](#), the 1540 Committee, for a period of ten years, until 25 April 2021, the Security Council, pursuant to its operative paragraph 3, decided that the 1540 Committee would conduct a comprehensive review on the status of implementation of resolution [1540 \(2004\)](#), both after five years and prior to the renewal of its mandate and would submit to the Security Council a report on the conclusions of those reviews. The first review was held in 2016. Shortly thereafter, the Security Council adopted resolution, [2325 \(2016\)](#) on 15 December.
- 11 Since 2016, visits have been conducted to 16 States at their invitation to discuss the implementation of resolution [1540 \(2004\)](#). Two in 2016, four in 2017 (one State was visited twice), six in 2018, and four in 2019.
- 12 [S/2020/847](#), S/AC.44/2020/NOTE.152/Add.6
- 13 By its resolution [2572 \(2021\)](#), the Security Council extended the mandate of the 1540 Committee and its Group of Experts until 28 February 2022. The measure was adopted through a written voting procedure set out in the letter dated 27 March from the President of the Security Council. [S/2020/253](#).

- 14 Letter dated 27 March from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Permanent Representative of the members of the Security Council. [S/2020/253](#)
- 15 In accordance with the procedure set out in document [S/2020/253](#), the Security Council held an open video teleconference meeting to announce the outcome of the votes. [S/2021/393](#), [S/2021/388](#) and [S/2021/400](#).
- 16 Members of the Security Council are also members of its subsidiary organs.
- 17 In fact, even before COVID-restrictions were lifted in April 2022, the Committee held five in-person meetings, while other subsidiary bodies of the Security Council largely continued their work virtually.
- 18 Letters from the Chair of the 2020 Meeting of States Parties dated 28 July 2020, 23 November 2020 and 9 February 2021.
- 19 After the decision to postpone the five Meetings of Experts, the BWC Implementation Support Unit of the Office for Disarmament Affairs held five corresponding informal meetings on the topics of the Meetings in October and November 2020. The meetings addressed five topics: (1) cooperation and assistance, with a particular focus on strengthening cooperation and assistance under article X; (2) review of developments in the field of science and technologies related to the Convention; (3) strengthening of national implementation; (4) assistance, response and preparedness; and (5) institutional strengthening of the Convention. For the reports of the five Meetings of Experts, see [BWC/MSP/2020/MX.1/2](#), [BWC/MSP/2020/MX.2/2/Rev.1](#), [BWC/MSP/2020/MX.3/2](#), [BWC/MSP/2020/MX.4/2](#) and [BWC/MSP/2020/MX.5/2](#).
- 20 The Final Report of the Eighth Review Conference of the States Parties to the Convention (in paragraph 77 of Part II of the Final Declaration, contained, inter alia, the following decision: "The Conference decides that the Ninth Review Conference shall be held in Geneva not later than 2021 and should review the operation of the Convention..." [BWC/CONF.VIII/4](#)).
- 21 Letter from the Chairperson of the Meeting of States Parties dated 21 May 2021.
- 22 Final report of the 2020 Meeting of States Parties ([BWC/MSP/2020/7](#)), paragraphs 29–34.
- 23 [BWC/CONF.IX/PC/10](#), paragraphs 5–14.
- 24 [BWC/CONF.IX/PC/10](#), paragraph 29.
- 25 [BWC/CONF.IX/9](#).
- 26 In accordance with its article 15 (1), the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons shall enter into force 90 days after the fiftieth instrument of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession has been deposited. On 24 October 2020, Honduras became the fiftieth State to ratify or accede, meeting the conditions for its entry into force.
- 27 Letter dated 10 August 2021 from the President-designate addressed to the Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers of States Parties and Signatory States to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to the United Nations.
- 28 Paragraph 8 (2) of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, stipulated, in part, that the first meeting of States Parties shall be convened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations within one year of the entry into force of this Treaty."
- 29 Annex to the letter dated 23 March 2022 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Austria to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General. [A/76/773](#).
- 30 Report of the first Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. [TPNW/MSP/2022/6](#).
- 31 For information on restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic applied to the first Meeting of States parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, see "Information for States parties, observer States and intergovernmental organizations", [TPNW/MSP/2022/INF/1/Rev.1](#).
- 32 "Group of Governmental Experts to consider the role of verification in advancing nuclear disarmament: Note by the Secretary-General" [A/74/90](#).

- 33 [IAEA General Conference, Arrangements for the Conference \(GC\(64\)/12\).](#)
- 34 [IAEA General Conference, Arrangements for the Conference \(GC\(65\)/17\).](#)
- 35 On 22 July 2020, the General Assembly adopted decision 74/562 entitled “High-level meetings of the General Assembly in September 2020”, by which the Assembly revised the schedule for the following three high-level meetings: 1) the Summit on Biodiversity to be held 30 September 2020; 2) the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women on 1 October 2020; and the high-level meeting to commemorate and promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons on 2 October 2020.
- 36 In 2001, the States participating in the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects decided to convene a conference no later than 2006 to review progress made in the implementation of the Programme of Action, which was held in 2006. Subsequently, in 2008, the General Assembly decided to convene a second review conference on the Programme of Action no later than 2012, thereby creating a six-year review cycle. [A/RES/63/72.](#)
- 37 In his letter dated to 11 May 2020, the President of the General Assembly informed Member States that he had placed on silence procedure until 14 May 2020 a draft decision of the General Assembly to postpone the Seventh Biennial Meeting of States to a date to be decided by its seventy-fifth session ([A/74/L.62](#)), pursuant to General Assembly decision 74/544. In his letter dated 14 May 2022, the President informed Member States that the silence procedure placed on the draft decision ([A/74/L.62](#)) had been concluded without any objection on 14 May and that it was adopted as decision 74/552.
- 38 Provisional Programme of Work ([A/CONF.192/BMS/2021/L.2](#)).
- 39 At its tenth meeting on 30 June 2021, the Meeting adopted the draft outcome document ([A/CONF.192/BMS/2021/CRP.2/Rev.1](#)) by a recorded vote of 114 to 0 with 0 abstentions. Report of the Seventh Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects ([A/CONF.192/BMS/2021/1](#)).
- 40 Organization of Work: Note by the Secretariat ([A/AC.290/2021/1](#)).
- 41 A compendium of statements in explanation of position was issued as a document [A/AC.290/2021/INF/2](#).
- 42 In 2018, the Russian Federation and the United States introduced two competing resolutions on cybersecurity, which resulted in establishment of parallel intergovernmental processes led by a group of governmental experts and an open-ended working group.
- 43 “Developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security: note by the Secretary-General”, [A/77/275](#).
- 44 The virtual discussions were focused on a number of papers prepared by the Chair, particularly those outlining key areas of broad agreement based on exchanges during the first session, and a possible approach to a multilayer framework dedicated to conventional ammunition management. Several experts also submitted working papers in support of the Group’s work. Please see the paper submitted on behalf of the Chair, entitled “Updated overview of the key considerations of the Group of Governmental Experts on problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/55.” [GGE/PACAS/2021/6](#).
- 45 [A/76/324](#).
- 46 The General Assembly mandated the Open-ended Working Group to hold a two-day organizational session, followed by two five-day sessions in 2022 and one five-day session in 2023, preceded by informal consultations, as needed. The Assembly further decided that Group shall submit a report on its work, including recommendations on a set of political commitments as a new global framework on conventional ammunition, to the General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session. [A/RES/76/233](#).
- 47 [CCW/2020/1](#).
- 48 High Contracting Parties were invited to submit commentaries on the previously adopted guiding principles at the national level. On 15 September 2020, the chair of the GGE issue a “commonalities paper”

- containing a summary of elements from the commentaries. The chair also issued a proposal on the way forward on 30 November. United Nations Disarmament Yearbook 2020: Part II, pages 109–110.
- 49 In 2021, the Group met from 3 to 13 August, from 24 September to 1 October and from 2 to 8 December. For details, see the Group's report, [CCW/GGE.1/2021/3](#).
 - 50 The Board was originally established in 1978 as the Secretary-General's advisory board on disarmament studies, pursuant to paragraph 124 of the Final Document of the first special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament.
 - 51 In December 1999, the General Assembly, in its resolution 54/418, decided to request the Secretary-General to adjust the language in the mandate of the Advisory Board of the Secretary-General on Disarmament Matters as set in his August 1999 report entitled "Work of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters" (51/218). Accordingly, the current functions of the Advisory Board are: 1) to advise the Secretary-General on matters within the area of arms limitation and disarmament, including on studies and research under the auspices of the United Nations or institutions within the United Nations system; 2) to serve as the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR); and to advise the Secretary-General on the implementation of the United Nations Disarmament Information Programme.
 - 52 The Secretary-General requested the Advisory Board to consider a new vision and new approaches for nuclear disarmament and arms control, specifically to address three main questions: (a) how to reduce siloed approaches and create a shared understanding about the destabilizing nexus of rapidly developing new technologies, including those in possible new domains of conflict, with nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction; (b) how to mobilize the support of Member States to reinvigorate nuclear disarmament and arms control, especially in the current challenging international climate; and (c) how to ensure that the actions of the United Nations system enable the development of creative, yet realistically achievable, new approaches to the common goal of nuclear disarmament.
 - 53 The Secretary-General's Advisory Board held, via videoconferencing, its seventy-fourth session on 15, 19, 24 and 25 June 2020, its seventh-fifth session on 4, 9 and 11 February 2021, its seventy-sixth session on 8, 10, 15, 17 and 29 June 2021 and its seventy-seventh session from 9 to 11 February 2022. The Board had to hold these sessions on adjusted schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For details see the annual reports of the Advisory Board, [A/75/283](#), [A/76/183](#) and [A/77/263](#).
 - 54 [A/76/183](#), paragraphs 27 to 50.
 - 55 [A/76/135](#).
 - 56 The foreign ministers of Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Japan and the Netherlands, as well as the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Executive Secretary of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization issued a video message on 1 October 2020 on YouTube video.
 - 57 [A/75/PV.101](#).
 - 58 [CCW/2020/1](#).
 - 59 For details, see the Final Report of the eighteenth Meeting of States Parties, [APLC/MSP.18/2020/10](#).
 - 60 For details, see the Final Report of the Second Review Conference, [CCM/CONF/2021/6](#).
 - 61 Article VI covers "activities not prohibited under the Convention" and contains provisions on non-proliferation and industry verification.

Chapter 6

- 1 The written procedure provided a 24-hour period in which the members of the Council submitted their votes to its President in writing and electronically. It also held videoconference meetings to announce the adoption of resolutions.
- 2 For example, both forums allowed the submission of pre-recorded video-statements and the issuance of compilations of written submissions as official documents.

- 3 Decision [75/510](#), entitled “Procedure for decision-making in the General Assembly when an in-person meeting is not possible”, was adopted by a vote of 123 to 19, with 29 abstentions.
- 4 Rule 18 stipulates that the Conference conduct its work and adopt its decisions by consensus. See [CD/8/Rev.5](#).
- 5 In its paragraph 118(b), the final document of the tenth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament stipulated: The Disarmament Commission shall function under the rules of procedure relating to committees of the General Assembly with such modifications as the Commission may deem necessary and shall make every effort to ensure that, in so far as possible, decisions on substantive issues be adopted by consensus, [A/S-10/4](#).
- 6 [Letter](#) from the President of the General Assembly dated 1 June 2020 addressed to all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations.
- 7 [A/C.1/75/PV.1](#).
- 8 Concerns on digital platforms were expressed during informal consultations on the proposed e-voting system from April to June 2020 (See Chapter 2), as well as during the debate on General Assembly decision 75/510 entitled “Procedure for decision-making in the General Assembly when an in-person meeting is not possible” at the 25th and 26th plenary meetings of the 75th session of the General Assembly held on 12 and 13 November 2020. For verbatim records for the debate on the adoption of this decision, see [A/75/PV.25](#) and [A/75/PV.26](#).
- 9 The cost of the remote simultaneous interpretation platform (Interprefy) was borne by extrabudgetary funds provided by donors.
- 10 The Conference held its annual high-level segment in a fully virtual format in 2021 and in a hybrid format in 2022.
- 11 [CD/PV.1605](#).
- 12 The General Assembly approved all recommendations of the General Committee contained in its first report, which had no reference to COVID-19 measures. See Synopsis of the General Debate of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly, Department of General Assembly and Conference Management.
- 13 [A/77/250*](#). Section II: Organization of the session.
- 14 Japan chaired the Informal Working Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Questions on the Working Methods of the Security Council in 2016 and 2017.
- 15 *“Handbook on the Working Methods of the Security Council”*, January 2021.
- 16 General Assembly decision [75/510](#), entitled “Procedure for decision-making in the General Assembly when an in-person meeting is not possible”. See “Resolutions and decisions adopted by the General Assembly during its seventy-fifth session. Volume 2, Decisions, 15 September-31 December 2020 ([A/74/49 Vol. II](#))”. For verbatim records for the debate on the adoption of this decision, see [A/75/PV.26](#).
- 17 See the final substantive report of the Open-ended working group on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security, [A/AC.290/2021/CRP.2](#).
- 18 See the proceedings of the organizational session of the 2022 Disarmament Commission held on 4 April 2022. [A/CN.10/PV.376 \(Resumption 2\)](#).

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