

Peacocks & Procedure

2026
EDITION

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR
UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
DELEGATES



BOB LAST & BEN LEE

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EDITION

With
extra
squawk

*THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR
UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
DELEGATES*

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GLOSSARY

CHR	<i>Commission on Human Rights</i>
COI	<i>Commission of Inquiry</i>
DDPA	<i>Durban Declaration and Programme of Action</i>
ECOSOC	<i>Economic and Social Council</i>
EOP	<i>Explanation of Position</i>
EOV	<i>Explanation of Vote</i>
FFM	<i>Fact-Finding Mission</i>
HRC	<i>Human Rights Council</i>
GA	<i>General Assembly</i>
GRULAC	<i>Group of Latin American and Caribbean states</i>
“IB” package	<i>HRC institution-building package (res. 5/1 and 5/2)</i>
JUSCANZ	<i>Japan, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand</i>
LDC	<i>Least Developed Countries</i>
LMG	<i>Like Minded Group</i>
NAM	<i>Non Aligned Movement</i>
NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organisation</i>
NHRI	<i>National Human Rights Institution</i>
OHCHR	<i>Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights</i>
OIC	<i>Organisation of Islamic Cooperation</i>
OP	<i>Operative Paragraph</i>
PdN	<i>Palais des Nations</i>
PoW	<i>Programme of Work</i>
PP	<i>Preambular Paragraph</i>
SIDS	<i>Small Island Developing States</i>
UNOG	<i>UN Office at Geneva</i>
UPR	<i>Universal Periodic Review</i>
VDPA	<i>Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action</i>

THE AUTHORS

BOB LAST

Bob arrived in Geneva in 2002 and never got round to leaving. He is the only state delegate to have served at every Human Rights Council session. That's 62 and counting, dear reader. And he's still relatively young.

Bob has been **blogging** about his experience of the Council since 2010 (<https://blogs.fco.gov.uk/author/boblast/>). He serves as Head of the United Kingdom Mission's Political and Human Rights Team.

BEN LEE

According to lore, Ben is the only person to have served at the Human Rights Council in four different capacities. He's been a state delegate and has represented non-governmental organisations, national human rights institutions, and the UN's human rights office.

Ben, in short, is a human rights mercenary. He was the Human Rights Advisor to the Australian Mission during Australia's inaugural term as a Council member.

WELCOME

So you're a new Human Rights Council delegate. Congratulations! It was probably a long, bumpy road getting here.

You're most likely in Geneva and ready to take on your first Council session. Or perhaps you're still prepping in capital. Either way, this guide aims to answer one immortal question.

What is it that a delegate actually does?

Meeting popular demand, we've released this updated 2026 edition full of freshly updated facts. We also know you're short on time and need to be up to speed fast. Possibly yesterday. That's why we've distilled our guide to the essentials, giving you the fundamentals in **one hour's** reading! You're welcome.

Right. If you're one of those lucky ducks in Geneva, first things first – go get your badge, take a selfie in front of the flags, and spot your first peacock. Thanks to the Indian Government's generosity, five new ones arrived in the summer of 2026, so you have a fine selection.

Done? Good. Let's get going.

THE BASICS

The **UN General Assembly (GA)**, in its infinite wisdom, created the Human Rights Council back in 2006 (**resolution 60/251**). The Council was brought in to replace the old Commission on Human Rights, which, after a solid 60-year run, was shooed into retirement on full UN benefits.

Many a commentator had criticised the Commission, and a time came when one was expected to add “discredited” before “Commission”. But even now, views remain divided on what the problems actually were. For some, it was its growing failure to address some of the most serious violations, and the shift in its membership towards those who were seeking to block scrutiny of themselves rather than cooperate with the UN. For others, the Commission had an unbalanced geographic representation and was focused on too many countries, or the wrong ones. But all that feels a long time ago now.

The Council has just hit the 20-year mark and gone past 60 sessions, with plenty of ups and downs. But it’s important to remember that, just like the Commission, our Council is made up of states and so it’s primarily a political forum that happens to work on human rights. Still, we all share the collective obligation to protect and progress human rights.

As a Council we have three main jobs –

- **promoting universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all**
- **addressing situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations**
- **promoting effective coordination and the mainstreaming of human rights within the UN.**

So that’s plenty to be getting on with.

The best things come in small packages

As a delegate, you will hear constant references to the Council's **"institution-building package"**, which we affectionately abbreviate to the "IB package". It's not small. But it's proved durable until now.

So what is the IB package? Well, after the General Assembly created the Council's outline, Geneva delegations grabbed their crayons and set to work colouring within the lines. After a year of solid scribbling work, the GA called "pens down". At midnight on 18 June 2007, Ambassador Luis Alfonso De Alba of Mexico, our first Council President, dropped the gavel and adopted **resolutions 5/1 and 5/2** as our IB package. We all clapped, then fell over with exhaustion.

Council reviews

Since the IB package was adopted, the Council has had a couple of scheduled services. After five years (or 100,000 paragraphs), the Council had its first review in 2011. Council President Sihasak Phuangketkeow of Thailand led this review, which was heavy on process but light on substance. The Council ultimately passed its health check with an oil change and a new set of tyres.

In July 2026 the UN General Assembly carried out a very light touch "status review" looking at whether to make the Council a principal UN body, like the Security Council and the GA itself. The result was to keep things the same, with another review scheduled sometime between 2036 and 2041. Save the date folks.

COUNCIL MEETINGS

If you've been told that the Council only meets three times a year for a total of ten weeks, then you should ask for your money back. Ten weeks of meetings was the starting point, but one we don't look like going back to any time soon. There are also **special sessions**, **intersessional meetings**, and meetings of various Council mechanisms (all explained below). These add up to having meetings pretty much all year round.

Regular sessions

Minus all the extras, the Council meets for about 13 weeks each year these days, across three **regular sessions**. The UN's protracted liquidity crisis has placed significant pressure on the Council's meetings, services and its accessibility. Budget cuts have resulted in sessions getting shorter after hitting a peak of 16 weeks in 2024. Much of the work is predictable and is based on what has happened at the same session in the previous year or two, which gives each session a distinct personality. But little can be taken for granted.

The **March** session is a rite of passage. We hit peak Council with a six-week March session a couple of years ago though have weaned ourselves back to five weeks of late (taking in some of February and April too). It begins with the better part of three days of speeches by high-level dignitaries and goes downhill from there. Daylight is short and days are cold and snowy. Our best advice is to try to begin the session as well-rested as you can. Or at least in a good mood. Kiss your loved ones goodbye at the start and beg for their understanding. National Dress Day usually takes place at the end of week one, once all the dignitaries have gone and gives everyone a joyful boost. Embrace the opportunity to do your heritage proud, but try to remember there's a difference between national dress and fancy dress.

June is a bit more cheerful. Summer has arrived and spirits and outfits are suitably sunny. The peacocks are usually in full voice. June is known by many as the "gender session" on account of a number of resolutions that bring a gender focus, but there's plenty of other work going on too.

September is usually a bit of a disorganised scramble. There's too little time after the June session, and most people go away during school holidays, which complicates the preparations. September sessions tend to have a mixture of thematic and country resolutions, which always adds some spice to the pot.

Special sessions

The Council occasionally holds special sessions on pressing human rights situations or issues. It's held 39 of these to date, which is quite a lot given that there have only been 62 regular sessions. Special sessions require the support of **at least 16 (one-third) of Council members**, and usually result in a resolution, with a new investigation being set up or a report requested.

Urgent debates

If a pressing situation or issue arises *during* a regular session, the Council will on occasion hold an urgent debate. These look much like a special session within a regular session (think of a "turducken", or a "tofucken" for the less carnivorous among you). The key difference is that where a special session only needs the support of 16 Council members, holding an urgent debate needs a majority, in the event that it is contested.

Urgent debates used to be a rarity but have become more fashionable over recent years. They have been held on Gaza (HRC7 and HRC14), Syria (HRC19, HRC23 and HRC37), Ukraine (HRC49), Afghanistan (HRC50) Israel/Qatar (HRC 60), Iran (HRC61) and Sudan (HRC 62). Urgent debates have also addressed thematic issues, for instance 'current racially inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and violence against peaceful protests' (HRC43), and 'acts of religious hatred' (HRC53).



WHO'S WHO IN THE ZOO?

The Bureau

The five-person Bureau is our representative body and is made up of the Council President and four Vice-Presidents. During sessions, the role of the President – and Bureau members when the President is otherwise engaged – is to chair our meetings. Outside of the session, the Bureau deals with organisational matters so that our meetings run smoothly. It's important, and an awful lot of work.

Each Bureau member is elected by their regional group, the five groups being **Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, Eastern Europe** and **Western Europe and others**. The Presidency rotates between these groups each year, so in any given year your regional group will either be the President or a Vice-President. You can find Bureau meeting minutes on the HRC Portal (formally known as Extranet.)

Members and Observers

The Council is a show to which everyone's invited. But it's the **47 elected members** (serving three-year terms) that get the best seats in the house. Members get to vote, speak for longer, and enjoy extra legroom. Non-members, called "observer" states, sit in more cramped seating towards the back.

On top of the regional groups, you'll need to get across all the political and other groups too. To mention a few, these include the **Commonwealth, European Union, La Francophonie, JUSCANZ, Like Minded Group, Lima Group, Mountains, Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation**, and **Small Island Developing States**.

The Secretariat

Your quality of life at the Council will depend in large part on the quality of your relationship with the **Council's Secretariat**. This is not to question the Secretariat's neutrality or independence. Far from it. Rather, we say this to emphasise how dependent we all are on the Secretariat in keeping our show on the road. They handle everything from the speakers' lists through to room allocations, meeting summaries, and the editing of our draft resolutions. The Secretariat also offers pre-session briefings for new delegates, and produces a very useful **"A to Z guide"** before each Council session that sets out the themes and countries that will be formally addressed, based on the programme of work. The Secretariat team is generally great. Be nice to them.

OHCHR

The **Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**, shortened to "OHCHR" and "UN Human Rights" (and all too often confused with UNHCR or OCHA), is the part of the UN Secretariat dedicated to human rights. The **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**, presently **Volker Türk**, is OHCHR's big boss. Our Council Secretariat are OHCHR staff members. And all of the things that we ask for in our resolutions – reports, debates, panels, intersessional meetings – are put together by OHCHR. Despite our reliance and increasing demands on it, OHCHR is chronically underfunded.

Civil society

One of the things that the Council inherited from the old Commission is the participation of accredited **national human rights institutions (NHRIs)** and **non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**. Civil society representatives can speak during Council debates, submit reports, and hold their own meetings (called side events) in the margins of the Council's main meeting. They have a genuine impact on the Council's work.

THE MAIN MECHANISMS

You’ve probably heard the names of all of the Council’s mechanisms but have yet to see them up close. There are plenty of great resources out there on each one, so we’ll save your time and keep our summaries sharp.

Universal Periodic Review

Born from a GA brainwave back in 2006, the **UPR**, like many a youngest child, has fast become the clear family favourite. And how could it not be? It’s a polite, state-run process, in which every country is subject to review on a roughly five-year cycle. Delegations make recommendations to a state being “reviewed”, which that country can then decide whether or not to accept. Civil society works hard to have their priorities taken up by states, but mostly needs to keep quiet during reviews.

The UPR is a good complement to – not a replacement for – other Council mechanisms. There are six weeks of UPR Working Group meetings each year. Yep, sorry.

Special Procedures

Special Procedures mandate-holders, which go by the names **Special Rapporteur**, **Independent Expert** or **Working Group**, are appointed by the Council to report on thematic human rights issues or specific country situations. Long regarded as the “crown jewels” of the Council and the Commission before it, these days the Special Procedures are vying with the UPR for Council limelight. Still, the system is well worth protecting.

Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions

Cols and FFMs are investigative bodies created by the Council. They are usually headed by three eminent experts supported by a secretariat. The increase in the number of these bodies in recent years, and their deepening expertise, might well be the Council’s greatest achievement thus far.

Advisory Committee

Billed as a “think tank”, the **Advisory Committee** is supposed to be the Council’s purveyor of expert, research-based advice upon request. But on the whole, the Committee’s done a lot more tanking than thinking. While some of its 18 members are solid and sagely, too many are not.

Complaint Procedure

The **Complaint Procedure** is an inheritance from the Commission. Its role is to (take a deep breath) *address consistent patterns of gross and reliably attested violations of all human rights and all fundamental freedoms occurring in any part of the world and under any circumstances*.

In brief, this is how it works. A first **working group** (made up of five members of the Advisory Committee) receives and screens **“communications”** – essentially allegations of violations sent in by individuals and organisations. Information that meets the admissibility criteria is passed on to a second working group on **“situations”** (made up of five ambassadors). The situations Working Group then packages it all up into a report with recommendations to the Council.

Adding to its intrigue, the Complaint Procedure is a “confidential” process. In practice, this means that anyone apart from Council members gets kicked out of plenary when the Council talks about the reports. You’ll find opposing views, but our main takeaway is that for all its procedure, there’s not much acting on complaints.

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

EMRIP, which reminds us of the sound our velcro wallets made as teenagers, is a seven-member body that gives the Council expert advice on the rights of indigenous peoples. It meets in Geneva straight after the June session, which partly explains the wavering levels of state attendance.

Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

The unpronounceable **EMRTD** was established by the Council in 2019. Its five members provide the Council with thematic expertise on the right to development and best practices. It holds two annual sessions of three days each – one in Geneva and one in New York.

Forum on Business and Human Rights

The Council set up the **Forum on Business and Human Rights** in 2011, and it's become a runaway success. Thousands of people come across for the three-day event from business, government, making it Geneva's biggest annual human rights gathering. It's mainly a networking event, but a useful one, with discussion often revolving around advancing the *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*.

Forum on minority issues

This is another of the lesser talked about achievements of the Council. The **Forum on Minority Issues** meets in Geneva for two days each year to talk shop on issues related to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.

Social Forum

Much less fun than its name suggests. The **Social Forum** meets in Geneva for two days each year to discuss a different human rights issue, usually with a focus on globalization and economic, social and cultural rights.

Other forums you'll come across include the **Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law** and the **Permanent Forum on People of African Descent**.



GETTING AROUND THE PALAIS

As you know by now, the Council meets at the **Palais des Nations (PdN)** – the Palace of Nations – which is the UN’s beating heart in Geneva. The PdN is a labyrinth, and much like the Hotel California, it often feels like you can never leave. In the old days, you might turn up in the morning to find distraught delegates who couldn’t find the exit in time and were forced to find a warm corner for the night. There are signs around the place these days but it’s still very tricky. Get yourself a map. And in the early days, bring an overnight bag. The building is in the midst of seemingly endless renovations, so expect your routes to change.

Plenary (The Assembly Hall)

Our plenary meetings used to take place in **Room XX** (Roman numerals for “20”, not kisses), which is officially known as the **Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Room**, famous for its magnificent technicolour stalactites.

But these days we are under temporary housing in the Assembly Hall. It has a certain grandeur but it is probably the least conducive room for reaching agreement or discreet conversation ever designed. Seats are heavy, and inaccessible, and far removed from the podium.

Your country’s nameplate will be on display in French. Members sit up front, with observer states behind them. Both run in French alphabetical order. The room’s back rows are assigned to UN agencies, observer institutions, NHRIs and NGOs.

The seating to the sides is for the press, NGOs and the Council’s Secretariat.

The Concordia Café

If the Assembly Hall is where the talking happens, the **Concordia Café**, is where most of the business gets done. Take the stairs or the lift down to the second floor (which, confusingly, is one of three floors at ground level). A simple glance around this rather cramped space offers a window into any number of schemes and negotiations. If you're looking for someone you can't find in plenary, look for them here. The Café is also a source of quick-fix snacks, though probably best to drop your culinary expectations below your lowest standards if you want to avoid disappointment. The Delegates Lounge on the 3rd floor offers a slightly more spacious alternative.

Informals and side events

Informal negotiations and side events are held all over the place, but for the most part they will be in either the **A Building or the Concordia meeting rooms**. Check your UNOG map or ask a friendly face for directions. But no one really knows how to get around the building so expect to get lost. Everyone does.

Pro tips on getting around

- ✓ *Learn Roman numerals.*
- ✓ *Use the coffee machines (cheap and Lavazza!).*
- ✓ *Download a PdN map (<https://www.unog.ch/>).*
- ✓ *Leave a trail of breadcrumbs to get you out again.*

PLENARY DAYS

Agenda splendour

Each Council session has the same **ten agenda items** but a change in 2020 saw General Debates limited to March and September. The agenda provides structure and some degree of order to our work. We make our oral statements and table our resolutions under specific agenda items. Here's a run through all ten.

Item 1 – Organizational and procedural matters

This is our conduct of business item. Things like our programme of work, our organizational meetings, and the election of our Council Bureau all fall here. We also take action on our draft resolutions under Item 1.

Item 2 – Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Item 2 is primarily reserved for the High Commissioner's global update. But it is becoming a crowded space with a growing number of country resolutions.

Item 3 – Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

This catch-all agenda item covers everything from freedom of expression to children's rights to corruption. Our challenge to you is to come up with a human rights issue that *doesn't* qualify under Item 3.

Item 4 – Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

This is the sharp tool in the box, and no country wants to be named or discussed under Item 4. It is used in cases of serious violations, usually when the state concerned will not cooperate with the Council. When it comes to statements by delegations, prepare for pyrotechnics.

Item 5 – Human rights bodies and mechanisms

Item 5 is often a non-event with the exception of the annual report by the UN Secretary-General on reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN. Otherwise, it tends to pass by unnoticed.

Item 6 – Universal periodic review

This is where the Council officially adopts the “outcomes” of the UPR country examinations that take place in the UPR’s working group. Reviewed states will indicate which recommendations they support. Other delegations get to speak again, usually to offer praise or to express regret that their recommendation has not been taken up. Item 6 is also the first (and only) opportunity for NHRIs and NGOs to speak in the UPR process.

Item 7 – Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories

Item 7 traditionally sees three or four resolutions run at the March session, along with reports by the Council’s Special Rapporteur. These resolutions have always passed so far.

Item 8 – Follow-up to and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

The **VDPA** is also a broad item and has its origins in the 1993 **Vienna Conference**, which gave birth to the position of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. You’ll hear a lot about the indivisibility, interdependence, interrelatedness and universality of all human rights.

Item 9 – Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up to and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

A less-than-snappy title, but it captures the focus of this agenda item well. The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent are both established under Item 9.

Item 10 – Technical assistance and capacity-building

Item 10 is another growing space. It's focus on technical assistance gives states the chance to work cooperatively with the Council to make improvements. Some states, to their credit, are active supporters of the Item 10 resolutions on their own countries.

Programme of work

The Council's **programme of work** is the day-to-day run sheet of each Council session. It shows all the panel debates, interactive dialogues with experts, and general debates that will fill our days. As a Council, we are notoriously bad at keeping to time, so expect things to shift around and keep an eye out for updated versions of the PoW.

Session Meeting Calendar (SCHED)

Another essential daily resource is **SCHED**, which provides a complete list of what's on and where. It covers plenary meetings, informal consultations, and side events. You'll find a link to SCHED on the Council session's webpage. Importantly, check to see whether a meeting is marked "private". If it is, only specifically invited delegations can attend.



ORAL STATEMENTS

Got something to say?

Most of your time in plenary will involve active listening in one of the six official UN languages. But every now and then it'll be your turn to grab the mic.

Interactive dialogues offer the most frequent opportunity to speak. Generally, an expert such as the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association and of Assembly will brief the Council on their latest report and country visits. States will then take the floor (in the order set out in the speakers' list) to comment on the expert's work and to ask them questions. "Interactive dialogue" is a bit of a misnomer. It's not really a dialogue so much as a succession of carefully-crafted pre-approved statements. These days speaking slots are limited to you need to prioritise which dialogues you want to speak at before the session.

Register to speak through your Mission's account on the Council's dedicated website. You'll need to be on the **EVENTS** system (<https://events.ohchr.org/>). Check out the Council's webpage for details or ask the Secretariat. Speaker's lists close about 15 minutes after debates have started.

General debates only happen in spring and autumn. All states wishing to make statements can do so and provide you with more flexibility in terms of what you can speak about.

Panel events are specially convened discussions. Registration to speak during them has moved on from the early days when at the President's command, delegates crazily hit their red buttons in plenary to get in first as though they were playing a game of Hungry H-UN-gry Hippos. Disappointingly, the registration process is now much more sedate – you send your preferences in ranked order to the Secretariat and hope for the best.

Speaking times used to depend on whether you're a member or an observer state, and what kind of discussion it is. Timings have changed over time, and at the time of writing had just changed again. As things currently stand all statements during dialogues and debates are for 1.5 minutes, though if you're a concerned country responding to a report, you get 5 minutes. And speaking time during voting is a bit longer (3 minutes).

Crafting your statements

Delivering your oral statement is not just an opportunity to claim back some of the oxygen in the room. It's your chance to articulate your delegation's positions on any number of human rights issues and situations.

A good statement is crisp and relevant to the issue under discussion. It has flow, substance, and will conclude with pertinent questions and recommendations. Statement delivery is also performance art. Your statements, remember, are aired and forever memorialised on the Council's **webcast**. And try to avoid chatting if you're sitting behind a speaker. It doesn't look good on camera.

Pro tips on statement delivery

-  *Make sure that your statement falls within your allocated speaking time. Do practice runs with a stopwatch. Your statement should keep an even pace, which will allow for its interpretation into other UN languages.*
-  *Visit **UN Web TV** and listen to some of the statements delivered at previous Council sessions. It will give you a feel for the pace, procedure and atmosphere.*
-  *Upload your statement on the Events system. E-mail a copy of your statement to the Secretariat if the system is closed.*
-  *Upload your statements to the Council Portal after delivery. This will let more people read them.*

RESOLUTIONS - I'LL CHAIR, YOU TABLE

Welcome to the main event. Resolutions are our core business. They are non-binding political expressions of our positions on thematic human rights issues and country situations. All of the reports that we ask for and all of the experts we appoint originate as requests in a resolution. Most resolutions are adopted by consensus though some go to a vote.

What does a resolution look like?

Resolutions have two parts. The opening paragraphs, which are known as **preambular paragraphs (PPs)** set the scene by recalling previous decisions and reports, and addressing developments. PPs aren't numbered.

The second part is the **operative paragraphs (OPs)**, which are numbered. These are the key “asks” of the resolution, which might include a report by the High Commissioner, or an intersessional workshop. Other asks can include the creation of an investigative or fact-finding body or the appointment of a Special Procedures mandate-holder.

Who runs resolutions?

We all do! Each resolution is led by a single state or a **core group**, which often includes a cross-regional mix of member and observer states. The core group is a draft resolution's parents, and in the lead up to a session the text is little more than a twinkle in that core group's eyes.

In many cases, a core group will have run a particular resolution for a number of years. Each new iteration of the text will serve a particular purpose. It might extend an expert's mandate or ask for a panel discussion on a new or emerging aspect of the human rights issue in focus. The delegation taking the lead on the drafting of the text is known as the **penholder**.

Resolutions on **country situations** typically run at least once a year, though some have a slightly longer time-span. **Thematic resolutions** can sometimes be one-off or will otherwise run on one, two or three-year cycles.

Starting at zero

The first version of a draft resolution is known as the **zero draft**. This version, often developed in consultation with previous co-sponsors (supporters) of the text, will serve as the basis for the first round of negotiations.



INFORMALS

“Informals” are the public negotiations that we hold on draft resolutions. They take place in side rooms, usually at the same time as plenary, and generally run for 90 minutes. All delegations are encouraged to attend and participate.

The first informal will involve a “reading” of the **initial draft**, chaired by the main sponsor (lead delegation) or core group of main sponsors. They will open the meeting by introducing the text, telling the room what it seeks to achieve, how it’s different from earlier versions and, if it is an update to a past resolution, where it takes its new language from (say, earlier Council and GA resolutions or recent UN reports).

General comments

After introducing the text, the main sponsor or core group will then “open the floor” to **general comments**. As the name suggests, this is where delegations will typically express their support for or opposition to the text in general terms. In some cases, delegations will “reserve position” if they are yet to receive instructions from capital.

While the content of general comments will differ from delegation to delegation, we usually all follow some established conventions:

- Thanking the main sponsor(s) for preparing the text and convening the informal consultation
- Expressing general support for, or opposition to, the text
- Indicating that the delegation will take the floor again to share substantive comments on specific sections of the text, if they have any.

Negotiations are often like a poker game and general comments are a delegate’s way of announcing that they are at the table and ready to play.

Substantive comments

After general comments, the core group will conduct a “read through” of the text, beginning with the PPs. Core groups will often take paragraphs in parcels of three, for instance PPs 1 to 3. It will introduce these parcels, then open the floor to delegations to make substantive comments on the paragraphs. This same process is repeated for the OPs.

For transparency, delegations are requested to present all of their proposed changes to the text in the room. This gives everyone the opportunity to hear and to consider each proposal, and to consult with their capital as necessary on the proposed change.

Words matter. There are several discussions that recur across all resolutions, while others are particular to certain topics. A common example of a request is changing the opening of a paragraph from *welcomes* to *notes*. A delegation may prefer the use of *notes* if the paragraph refers to a report or a decision it does not support. A compromise middle-ground might be *notes with appreciation*.

Similarly, language addressing negative developments may move from *noting with concern* all the way up to *deploring* or *condemning in the strongest possible terms*.

The chairs of an informal have the discretion to run the meeting as they choose. The standard practice is to invite comments from civil society and UN agencies either during general comments and/or after all state delegations have commented on PPs or OPs.

If a read-through of the entire text is completed, the core group will go away and produce a new draft that incorporates various views presented in the room. This new version will serve as the basis for negotiations at the next informal.

The number of informals will vary between texts and core groups. The Council’s minimum requirement is one, and for some resolutions this is enough. Other longer or more controversial texts may require four or more informals.

Importantly, a core group will continue to hold **bilateral negotiations** with delegations even after it has finished its informals. This is an important, sometimes final opportunity for you to advocate for any remaining changes you may seek to the text.

Pro tips on draft resolutions and informals

- ✓ *Send the first draft of all resolutions you receive back to capital as soon as you get them, and specify the deadline you need instructions by. Hopefully this will enable you to have instructions in time for the first informal. If you haven't received a draft text, check in with the traditional lead delegation(s) to find out what is going on.*
- ✓ *If you're a small delegation, identify your priority resolutions. You might also want to establish an information-sharing arrangement with some other like-minded delegations, which will allow you to follow meetings you can't attend.*
- ✓ *After you have introduced your proposed changes during an informal, e-mail them to the penholder or core group. This will let them see your exact language.*
- ✓ *Continue to engage with the main sponsor/core group bilaterally after informals are completed if you have been instructed to seek further changes to the draft resolution.*

Co-sponsorship and tabling of draft resolutions

Main sponsors have to submit their draft resolutions to the Council Secretariat by the **tabling deadline**. The submission of a text is called tabling. Traditionally, the tabling deadline was 13.00 on the second last Thursday of a Council session, but recent sessions have seen occasional shifts to other days to accommodate the growing length of sessions. As always, check with the Secretariat.

If a delegation wants to show its strong support for a draft resolution, it will **co-sponsor** it before tabling. Main sponsors hope to attract as many co-sponsors as possible before tabling. This sends a clear message of support for the text. It can also convince other delegations to co-sponsor, and may demonstrate that the text is no longer open for further changes.

After the tabling deadline, each draft resolution is given an **“L” document number**. For instance, the first registered draft at say, HRC60, would become *A/HRC/60/L.1*. The names of countries that co-sponsor before tabling are included on the L doc.

In times gone by tabling day was arguably the single most fun morning of every session. Main sponsors would wander around the plenary, clipboards in hand, optimistically chasing signatures and promising eternal gratitude in return. Targeted delegates would either duly co-sponsor, penning their country’s name, or offer a polite but poorly disguised rejection along the lines of “sorry, I’m still awaiting instructions”. As is often the case, technology ruined it for all of us and this is now all done on E-delegate. To be fair, it’s better for transparency as we can all see who’s co-sponsored.

The tabling of texts used to be done in person (with plenty of time to chat as you waited your turn). This is now done by uploading a “tabling version” of your draft resolution on E-delegate and e-mailing the same text to the secretariat.

Changes after tabling

A main sponsor or core group can make further changes to its own draft after the tabling deadline if this is done early enough before voting. In this case, the Secretariat will issue a revised draft with a new symbol number. Carrying forward our previous example, this would become *A/HRC/60/L.1/Rev.1*.

Other delegations can also table **written amendments** to the draft (often called a “hostile” amendment). A delegation may for instance choose to table a written amendment if language or changes it advocated during informals were not incorporated by the core group. Or just because they feel like it.

The deadline for the tabling of revised texts and written amendments will depend on when voting is scheduled to begin at the given session. After this deadline, a core group can still make further changes to its text, right up until the moment the text is introduced for action. These are called **oral revisions**. Other delegations cannot submit any further changes to the text until action begins (see below). Amendments proposed during action are known as **oral amendments**.

PBI

“There is a PBI attached to this resolution”. The first time we heard a Council President utter these words we sought to vacate the room and call a doctor. Gratefully, PBI simply means **programme budget implications** – an unnecessarily complicated way of saying “it’ll cost us money”. Some delegations regularly ask questions about the PBI during informals, and there’s no harm in asking.

The PBI for each text is posted on the **HRC Portal**. During action, the President will indicate whether or not each draft resolution has a PBI attached to it and will give the floor to the Secretariat to give details.

Pro tips on co-sponsorship and tabling

- ✓ *Make sure that your e-delegate account is active. You will need it to access draft resolutions and to co-sponsor texts after tabling. Contact the Secretariat if this makes no sense to you.*
- ✓ *After the tabling deadline, tabled revisions or amendments to the text are posted on the HRC Extranet.*
- ✓ *The PBI for each text is posted on the HRC Portal.*
- ✓ *If you don't manage to co-sponsor a text before tabling, you have until **two weeks** after the Council session ends to do so. One benefit of co-sponsorship is that co-sponsors are often given the chance to comment on the **pre-zero** draft of the next iteration of the resolution. They are also invited to private co-sponsors' meetings.*

Almost all resolutions request some form of follow-up action by the UN system. At HRC55, the Council adopted a Decision postponing a long list of activities that OHCHR could not carry out due to the UN's liquidity crisis. Sadly, it feels like we may be stuck in this situation for a while but hopefully all will be back to normal before too long.



LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

"Was that a general comment or an explanation of vote?"

"Can I even speak? I'm a co-sponsor!"

"What now! Was that a request for a vote?"

Every delegate who's worked for a Council member has tied themselves into this procedural tizzy. The remedy? Learn the Council's voting procedures, framed around the **General Assembly's Rules of Procedure**.

Both authors carry the scars of procedural battles won and lost. In summary, the golden rule of action is that **only the Council's 47 members can participate during voting on a draft resolution**. If you are not on the Council, you can introduce your resolution but then you are done.

Step 1: Introduction of the draft resolution

The President will open action on the particular draft resolution and will invite one of its main sponsors (a core group member) to introduce it. This delegation can be a member or an observer.

Step 2: General comments

After the text is introduced, the President will invite members to make **general comments**. Any member can make a general comment, which is generally a statement for or against the initiative (just like general comments in informals). If a delegation wants to introduce an **oral amendment** or to **call for a vote** on the draft resolution or any section of it, it must do so during its general comment. In turn, a core group member may state its opposition to any **proposed written or oral amendments**.

Step 3: Explanation of vote

After general comments, the President will invite members to give an **explanation of vote (EOV)**. This will happen even if there hasn't yet been a request for a vote. An EOV is much like a substantive comment during an informal. Where general comments are usually broad and will address the whole text and what it seeks to achieve, EOVs may be more technical and might address specific paragraphs or elements of the draft resolution. In practice though, there's often little difference between the two, just like a café latte and a flat white coffee (neither of which will mean anything to those serving you in the UN).

Importantly, **co-sponsors cannot give an EOV**. This makes sense when you think about it. If you've co-sponsored the text, you've already indicated your clear support for it.

Step 4: The vote

Most resolutions pass by **consensus**, which means *without a vote*. But if a vote has been requested, it takes place here. Proposed oral or written amendments will be voted on first. Next are votes on individual paragraphs of the draft resolution, if any such votes have been called. Finally, there might also be a vote on the draft resolution as a whole.

Members vote by pressing one of three buttons on their microphone panel. This will indicate either a **“yes”, “no” or “abstain” vote**.

Sometimes a delegation won't enter a vote. This may be for political reasons, at times exercised through a strategic toilet break. On other occasions, blame has been attributed to a particularly engrossing round of Candy Crush or a heavy lunch. If your voting button is not working, you need to immediately call a point of order by making a T-sign with your country name plate and your hand.

Step 5: Result of the vote

Based on the on-screen tally, the President will read out the result of the vote and rule that the amendment has either succeeded or failed, that the paragraph has been retained or removed, or that the draft resolution as a whole has been adopted or rejected. Amendments need a majority (excluding abstentions) to succeed. Similarly, resolutions need a majority to pass (again excluding abstentions). A tie means that an amendment or a resolution will fail.

Step 6: Explanation of position or explanation of vote after the vote

Some members will provide an **explanation of position (EOP)** or an EOV after the vote. Like earlier EOVs, these are clarification statements. They can include **disassociations**, which is a way for delegations to distance themselves from particular paragraphs in the text they don't like, but didn't feeling strongly enough to vote against or to block consensus. EOVs after the vote take place once the whole agenda item has been completed. This can mean waiting until day two of voting, even if the resolution is adopted on day one. In practice, EOVs after the vote are used as a lower-key way of putting concerns on record.



SIDE EVENTS

Side events are meetings that take place outside of plenary. Usually about 90 minutes long, they can be organised by a delegation, OHCHR, an NHRI, an NGO, or any combination of the these. Side events address a range of human rights issues and situations. Some are very good and topical with high attendance. Many aren't.

“So what’s in it for me?” you may well ask. Well, a bunch of things, actually. Side events are a great way to get more detail on a range of issues pertinent to our Council’s agenda. They’re also informal, so you’re free to listen to interesting exchanges and to pose questions in an informal setting. Third, you’ll get to rub shoulders with a strong spread of NGO representatives, who in most cases are well worth getting to meet. Finally - wait for it - there are **free sandwiches**. The sandwich tables outside side events are where delegates go to lose their dignity. It really brings out the worst in otherwise decent people. Imagine feeding time at a hyena sanctuary but with much poorer table manners.

We know, we know. We could’ve just started with the free sandwiches and left it at that.

Pro tips on side events

- ✓ *Do your due diligence before attending a side event. Ask a friend about the host and the topic before you commit. The Global Utopian Order for the Democratic Proliferation of Cat Videos may not be to everyone’s taste.*
- ✓ *Only take a sandwich if you’re going to the event. If you take one without attending, then that makes you a bad person and you will forever be considered as such. No excuses.*

BONUS SECTION - UPR WORKING GROUP

There's a chance, dear delegate, that your first Council meeting will be a UPR working group session rather than a regular session. No problem, we'll cover off on that here. Again, there are some solid UPR resources out there, so we'll cut straight to what you really need to know.

Ummm, please recommend...

Each delegation brings a different approach to developing its UPR recommendations. Some draft them at capital, others in Geneva. Regardless, crafting a UPR recommendation, indeed delivering one, is an art. It requires finesse, strict adherence to time limits, the ability to speak at lightning speed, and the use of the word "recommend".

We know that's a fair bit to take in, so we offer you the following tips.

Pro UPR tips

- ✓ *If you arrive in Geneva in time, attend **UPR-Info's** pre-sessional briefings. These offer sound briefings by civil society on each country under review at the upcoming session. NGOs will often also share a great range of proposed recommendations with you, making life easier.*
- ✓ *When crafting your recommendations, think about issues that coincide with your priorities that other delegations may be less likely to raise. Treaty ratification and the establishment of an independent NHRI will get plenty of airtime in the room.*
- ✓ *Check the allocated speaking time for states during each review. The Secretariat will let you know. Unlike Council sessions, the amount of time allocated to speakers at UPR working group sessions depends on how many states register to speak. In a highly subscribed review, you might only get 45 seconds.*

- ✓ Consider putting your recommendations right at the top of your statement, then move into other issues. This way, should you run out of time, you will have got your recommendations in. **If you do not read out your recommendations, they will not be included in the UPR report.**
- ✓ You have to actually say “recommend” for a recommendation to count.
- ✓ It’s better to keep your statement short and to speak at a steady rate, just like in all other segments of the Council. If you speak too fast, your recommendations may be difficult to decipher and classed as “unclear recommendations”. In this case, the "Troika" will have to track you down to clarify exactly what you meant (see more below on troikas).
- ✓ Speak in the language of the state under review (if it’s a UN language) for flair, but complement this by giving the Secretariat an English version of your recommendations. All recommendations are ultimately translated into English in the working group’s report.

Troika Town

“Troika” is the collective name for the three delegates that oversee the compilation of recommendations during a UPR examination. They are drawn from three different regional groups, one of which can be from the group of the state under review, if it so requests. Being on a troika is one of the more rarified experiences for a Council delegate. The stars need to align for this to happen. First, you need to be a Council member. And second, your country’s name has to be drawn out of a hat.

But troika membership, we can tell you, is a rewarding experience. It gives you the chance to be an active part of the UPR, engaging with any number of delegations to ensure that the process is accurate and transparent. And you get to sit on the podium during the adoption of the UPR report!

Pro Troika tips

- ✓ *During the UPR review you are assigned to, the Secretariat will convene a meeting of the three troika members. You decide amongst yourselves which states you want to follow up with, based on regional group and/or language, or just who you know best.*
- ✓ *As we said above, all recommendations are translated into English. If you are assigned to follow up with non-English speaking delegations, prepare draft e-mails to those delegations before you receive the draft report from the Secretariat to save time. The Secretariat should give you a list of state contacts.*
- ✓ *In your e-mail to delegations, you can also ask them whether they would be happy to have their recommendations merged with identical recommendations made by other states. This happens most often with recommendations on human rights treaty ratification.*
- ✓ *If you need to speak to delegations in person, have a look at the list of speakers for the upcoming UPR reviews. If that country is registered to speak, you know they'll be in the room.*



SPEED READ SURVIVAL TIPS

Top tips for when you first arrive

- ✓ *Get your badge issued (at the Pregny gate) during the week before the Council session starts to avoid massive queues on the first Monday.*
- ✓ *Ask a colleague to give you a Palais tour before session starts, or have a wander round yourself (but make sure you tell someone in case you need a search party). Look out for the Assembly Hall and Concordia. Learn Roman numerals. The rest can come later.*
- ✓ *Visit **UN Web TV** and listen to some of the statements delivered at previous Council sessions. It will give you a feel for the pace, procedure and atmosphere.*
- ✓ *Ensure that you have registered to speak under relevant agenda items through your **EVENTS account**.*
- ✓ *Get a full list of the resolutions likely to run at each session and identify your priority resolutions. Look at the HRC webpage for the corresponding sessions from the previous two years to get a good indication of what is likely to come up. Contact the core groups of these resolutions and ask for copies of zero drafts and informal dates.*
- ✓ *Read the Secretariat's **"A to Z guide"** before the session starts.*

Top tips for your first week of session

- ✓ *Check **SCHED** each morning for the full list of plenary and informal meetings.*
- ✓ *Introduce yourself to the Secretariat, register to attend a pre-session briefing.*

- ✓ *Contact your regional group coordinator to find out when and where coordination meetings will be held. If you belong to a political or other group, make contact with the coordinator.*
- ✓ *Check the HRC website for newly uploaded reports that will be considered at the session.*
- ✓ *Make sure that your **e-delegate account** is active. You will need it to access draft resolutions and to co-sponsor texts after tabling.*

Top tips for sustenance

Listening and negotiating is hungry, thirsty business. Etiquette (and UN Security) forbids bringing a burger into plenary or nachos into that right to food informal. Here's how best to chase sustenance.

- ✓ *The Concordia café has sandwiches, salads, and other options. None of which are great. Like most delegates, you'll probably spend a lot of time and money there, and never feel happy about it. It closes very early. Welcome to Switzerland.*
- ✓ *If you can spare the time, sit down to a civilised meal at the underground **Cafeteria** in the old part of the building. There's a lot of choice and a lot of people. Only open over lunch.*
- ✓ *The **Delegate's Lounge** in the A Building has recently reopened after being closed for refurbishment. Not much choice but the comfy seats are good for an early afternoon lie down.*
- ✓ *The **8th floor Delegates Restaurant** above the Assembly Hall has reopened after a long renovation. It's convenient if you have a VIP in town. But it's not cheap. Good views from the balcony.*
- ✓ *The self-service **Grab n' Go** in H building was convenient back when the Council was in room 20. You can get coffee but, sadly, no tea. They also have plug sockets so you can work there too.*
- ✓ *If you're coming in through the flag gate, duck by **SAFI** (UN Duty Free), which sells a range of ready consumables. It also sells cards and gifts, for those of us who have a habit of nearly forgetting birthdays and anniversaries.*

Top tips for plenary

- ✓ Know where your seat is before the session starts. The Secretariat has a seating plan of the room.
- ✓ Keep a copy of the **General Assembly's rules of procedure** with you. The Council uses the same rules.
- ✓ At the beginning of each item, check the list of speakers with the Secretariat to make sure that you're registered to speak and to see which speaker number you are.
- ✓ Confirm how long you have to speak (as a member or observer) and practice by reading out your statement at a steady rate while using a stopwatch.
- ✓ Upload your statements to the events platform (or e-mail to the Secretariat if you're stuck).

Top tips for informals

- ✓ Send the **first drafts** of all resolutions back to capital as soon as you receive them, specifying a deadline by which you need instructions.
- ✓ Engage actively at your priority informals. Present proposed textual changes, speak in defense of language you like, support proposed changes that are consistent with your instructions.
- ✓ After the informal, e-mail your proposed textual changes to the main sponsor(s). This will let them see your exact language.
- ✓ Continue to engage with the main sponsor(s) bilaterally after informals are completed if you have been instructed to seek further changes to the draft resolution.

Top tips for draft resolutions and during action

- ✓ If you want your country name to appear on the “L” doc version of a draft text, you need to co-sponsor it before tabling. The deadline is **usually 13:00 on the second last Thursday** of each session.
- ✓ After the tabling deadline, check the **HRC Portal** for tabled revisions or amendments to the text. You can table your own proposed amendments to a text up, usually until **lunchtime on the final Tuesday** of each session. Check exact deadlines with the Secretariat.
- ✓ The **programme budget implications (PBI)** for each text is posted on the HRC Portal.
- ✓ Only members participate during “action” on a text. If you’re a co-sponsor, you can make **general comments** on a text, but you can’t give an **explanation of vote** during action.
- ✓ You have up to two weeks after a Council session finishes to co-sponsor a resolution.



FAREWELL AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Congratulations on getting through our guide (unless you've just read the first and last paragraphs, which is fairly standard at the UN). Like most things in life, the real learning at the Council comes through being there and doing the work. But you should feel confident to start your first session now, equipped with a foundational knowledge of what's ahead.

For the speed-readers and extra-curious among you, here are some other resources on all things Human Rights Council.

Publications

- *The Human Rights Council: A practical guide* (Swiss Mission)
- *Manual for UN Delegates* (UNITAR)
- *Glossary of Terms for UN Delegates* (UNITAR)
- *United Nations Human Rights Council - A Practical Guide for NGO Participants* (OHCHR)

Websites and online resources

- Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly
- Human Rights Council website
- Human Rights Council Portal
- OHCHR website
- Geneva Mission online account (EVENTS)
- E-delegate system
- Bob's blog on the Council (<https://blogs.fco.gov.uk/author/boblast/>)

