



7 February 2012

The International Court of Justice is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. Its seat is at the Peace Palace in The Hague (Netherlands). It began work in 1946, when it replaced the Permanent Court of International Justice which had functioned in the Peace Palace since 1922. It operates under a Statute largely similar to that of its predecessor, which is an integral part of the Charter of the United Nations.

Functions of the Court

The Court has a dual role: to settle in accordance with international law the legal disputes submitted to it by States, and to give advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by duly authorized international organs and agencies.

Composition

The Court is composed of 15 judges elected to nine-year terms of office by the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council sitting independently of each other. It may not include more than one judge of any nationality. Elections are held every three years for one-third of the seats, and retiring judges may be re-elected. The Members of the Court do not represent their governments but are independent magistrates.

The judges must possess the qualifications required in their respective countries for appointment to the highest judicial offices, or be jurists of recognized competence in international law. The composition of the Court has also to reflect the main forms of civilization and the principal legal systems of the world.

When the Court does not include a judge possessing the nationality of a State party to a case, that State may appoint a person to sit as a judge *ad hoc* for the purpose of the case.

Since 6 February 2012, the composition of the Court is as follows: President Peter Tomka (Slovakia); Vice-President Bernardo Sepúlveda-Amor (Mexico); Judges Hisashi Owada (Japan); Ronny Abraham (France); Kenneth Keith (New Zealand); Mohamed Bennouna (Morocco); Leonid Skotnikov (Russian Federation); Antônio A. Cançado Trindade (Brazil); Abdulqawi A. Yusuf (Somalia), Christopher Greenwood (United Kingdom), Xue Hanqin (China), Joan E. Donoghue (United States of America), Giorgio Gaja (Italy) and Julia Sebutinde (Uganda). Judge Al-Khasawneh (Jordan) having resigned as Member of the Court, the United Nations Security Council has fixed Friday 27 April 2012 as the date for the election of his successor.

The Registrar of the Court is Mr. Philippe Couvreur, of Belgian nationality, and the Deputy-Registrar is Ms Thérèse de Saint Phalle, of American and French nationality.

Contentious cases between States

The Parties

Only States may apply to and appear before the Court. The Member States of the United Nations (at present numbering 193) are so entitled.

Jurisdiction

The Court is competent to entertain a dispute only if the States concerned have accepted its jurisdiction in one or more of the following ways:

- (1) by the conclusion between them of a special agreement to submit the dispute to the Court;
- (2) by virtue of a jurisdictional clause, i.e., typically, when they are parties to a treaty containing a provision whereby, in the event of a disagreement over its interpretation or application, one of them may refer the dispute to the Court. Over 300 treaties or conventions contain a clause to such effect;
- (3) through the reciprocal effect of declarations made by them under the Statute whereby each has accepted the jurisdiction of the Court as compulsory in the event of a dispute with another State having made a similar declaration. The declarations of **67 States** are at present in force, a number of them having been made subject to the exclusion of certain categories of dispute.

In cases of doubt as to whether the Court has jurisdiction, it is the Court itself which decides.

Procedure

The procedure followed by the Court in contentious cases is defined in its Statute, and in the Rules of Court adopted under the Statute. The Rules date from 1978 and certain provisions have since been amended (the latest amendment entered into force on 29 September 2005). The proceedings include a written phase, in which the parties file and exchange pleadings, and an oral phase consisting of public hearings at which agents and counsels address the Court. As the Court has two official languages (English and French) everything written or said in one language is translated into the other.

After the oral proceedings the Court deliberates in camera and then delivers its judgment at a public sitting. The judgment is final and without appeal. Should one of the States involved fail to comply with it, the other party may have recourse to the Security Council of the United Nations.

The Court discharges its duties as a full court but, at the request of the parties, it may also establish *ad hoc* chambers to deal with particular cases (six cases have been dealt with by such chambers since 1946). A Chamber of Summary Procedure is further elected every year by the Court in accordance with its Statute.

Since 1946 the Court has delivered **112 Judgments** on disputes concerning *inter alia* land frontiers, maritime boundaries, territorial sovereignty, the non-use of force, violation of international humanitarian law, non-interference in the internal affairs of States, diplomatic relations, hostage-taking, the right of asylum, nationality, guardianship, rights of passage and economic rights.

Sources of applicable law

The Court decides in accordance with international treaties and conventions in force, international custom, the general principles of law and, as subsidiary means, judicial decisions and the teachings of the most highly qualified publicists.

Advisory Opinions

The advisory procedure of the Court is open solely to international organizations. The only bodies at present authorized to request advisory opinions of the Court are five organs of the United Nations and 16 agencies of the United Nations family.

On receiving a request, the Court decides which States and organizations might provide useful information and gives them an opportunity of presenting written or oral statements. The Court's advisory procedure is otherwise modelled on that for contentious proceedings, and the sources of applicable law are the same. In principle the Court's advisory opinions are consultative in character and are therefore not binding as such on the requesting bodies. Certain instruments or regulations can, however, provide in advance that the advisory opinion shall be binding.

Since 1946 the Court has given **27 Advisory Opinions**, concerning *inter alia* the accordance with International law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, legal consequences of the construction of a wall in the occupied Palestinian territory, admission to United Nations membership, reparation for injuries suffered in the service of the United Nations, territorial status of South-West Africa (Namibia) and Western Sahara, judgments rendered by international administrative tribunals, expenses of certain United Nations operations, applicability of the United Nations Headquarters Agreement, the status of human rights rapporteurs, and the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons.

Pending cases

Thirteen cases are currently pending:

1. *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project (Hungary/Slovakia)*
2. *Ahmadou Sadio Diallo (Republic of Guinea v. Democratic Republic of the Congo)*
3. *Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo v. Uganda)*
4. *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Croatia v. Serbia)*
5. *Territorial and Maritime Dispute (Nicaragua v. Colombia)*
6. *Maritime Dispute (Peru v. Chile)*
7. *Aerial Herbicide Spraying (Ecuador v. Colombia)*
8. *Questions relating to the Obligation to Prosecute or Extradite (Belgium v. Senegal)*
9. *Whaling in the Antarctic (Australia v. Japan)*
10. *Frontier Dispute (Burkina Faso/Republic of Niger)*
11. *Certain Activities carried out by Nicaragua in the Border Area (Costa Rica v. Nicaragua)*
12. *Request for interpretation of the Judgment of 15 June 1962 in the case concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand) (Cambodia v. Thailand)*
13. *Construction of a Road in Costa Rica along the San Juan River (Nicaragua v. Costa Rica)*

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