

United Nations Information Resources on International Law

Introduction.

From treaties to tribunals, resolutions to refugees, information about the United Nations' legal work permeates all of its information resources. While information exists in abundance, and much of it has been made available digitally in the past few years, the challenge remains to identify and exploit the appropriate resource. This article introduces some of the major UN legal information sources, describes the kinds of information available from each, and provides some tips for researchers.

The UN system is a large and complex set of intergovernmental organizations. For the sake of clarity, this article focuses on the United Nations itself, and does not address the legal information resources of the Specialised Agencies, Programmes, Funds, or related organizations. We will highlight several important sources: the parliamentary documents of the UN, the website of the International Court of Justice, the UN Treaty Collection, and the Audiovisual Library of International Law.

Human Help

UN information is quite complex and even experienced researchers may need help on occasion. Many UN bodies have libraries. Online library catalogues often provide access to all types of information produced by the Organization. Many also have email reference services available through their websites. A list of UN system libraries is available at <http://www.unsystem.org/en/libraries/index.html>.

In addition, there are 63 UN Information Centres and over 400 UN depository libraries around the world. The networks of UN Information Centres (UNICs) at <http://unic.un.org/> are part of the UN Department of Public Information and provide information about the UN to people in their regions. UNICs generally have a reference collection of UN documents and publications, and are staffed by people familiar with UN information resources. They aim to disseminate timely information, often translating official information into local languages and organizing events to raise awareness of the UN's work.

UN depository libraries at <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/deplib/index.html> provide another service. Over 400 libraries provide public access to UN documents and publications. Often the UN deposit is kept as a separate collection within the library and the librarian who manages the collection can help individual researchers. In an Internet world that seeks to be self-sufficient, researchers sometimes forget that there are people with specialised knowledge who can assist.

Within Australia, there are seven depository libraries, including the National Library of Australia and several of the State Libraries. At the National Library, UN publications are integrated within the Library's general collection of overseas material and can be searched via the Library's catalogue. More information about the National Library's collection of United Nations resources is available through the Library's website at <<http://www.nla.gov.au/app/eresources/item/1583?id=1583&loaditem=true>>.

Maintaining familiarity with the resources of the UN requires regular attention; one source that can help is UN Pulse at <<http://unhq-appspub-01.un.org/lib/dhlrefweblog.nsf>>. Maintained by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library's Reference Team, this blog provides regular updates on major documents issued and new information resources created by the UN.

Parliamentary documentation of the UN

To approach research on the UN, it helps to have a clear idea about the structure of the Organization. The Charter establishes six principal organs: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat. *The United Nations Handbook*, an annual publication of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, is an excellent reference work on the current structure of the UN. The online UN Documentation Research Guide at <<http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/>> provides detailed information about the documentation of each organ.

The parliamentary bodies of the UN are the General Assembly, Security Council, and Economic and Social Council, and the Trusteeship Council which no longer meets on a sessional basis. These organs are composed of Member States and govern the work of the Organization. Each has distinctive patterns of documentation. The Security Council, Economic and Social Council, International Court of Justice, and the Secretary-General, report annually to the General Assembly on their work. In general, all of these organs have subsidiary bodies which report to the parent organ. Each subsidiary's report usually includes recommendations to the parent organ, a summary of meetings, and any resolutions or decisions adopted by the subsidiary. Meetings of the parent organ are called 'plenary meetings' and documents of the parent organ are sometimes called 'plenary documents.'

Online Availability of Parliamentary Documentation

The parliamentary documentation of the principal organs covers almost every aspect of the work of the Organization and provides an impressive historic record of the world of international relations. The UN began its online document repository, the Official Document System (ODS) at <<http://documents.un.org/>>, in 1993. UN depository libraries of long-standing have documents in hard copy. Most documents published between the years 1946-1992 are not yet available online, with some important exceptions outlined below.

All resolutions of the principal organs, that is, the General Assembly, Security Council, ECOSOC and Trusteeship Council, were digitised and added to the ODS. Symbols were assigned to the resolutions, according to the current pattern of document symbols, as follows:

- A/RES/- for General Assembly
- S/RES/- for Security Council
- E/RES/- for ECOSOC
- T/RES/- for Trusteeship

To find resolutions by subject or title, it is more convenient to use the UN library's catalogue, UNBISnet at <<http://unbisnet.un.org/>>, as it offers more search options and includes links to the full text.

Another category of documents available online in entirety is the plenary documents of the Security Council. All documents of the Council, including all the official records, have been scanned and added to the ODS and UNBISnet.

In addition, special projects have been undertaken by the UN libraries to make certain documents available online. These projects often have dedicated websites and the documents have also been added to the ODS and UNBISnet. Projects include:

- Documents related to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights <<http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/udhr/>>
- General Assembly General Debate statements since the first session in 1946 <available through UNBISnet's Index to Speeches>
- Statements made on the anniversary of the founding of the UN <<http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/anniversary/index.html>>
- Individual documents scanned upon request by a client of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library's Reference Desk

Other departments have also made certain important documents and publications available, usually in only one or two of the official languages of the UN. The sites of particular interest for legal research include:

- Yearbook of the United Nations <<http://unyearbook.un.org/>>
- UN Treaty Series <<http://treaties.un.org/>>
- Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council <<http://www.un.org/en/sc/repertoire/>>
- International Law Commission documents and publications <<http://www.un.org/law/ilc/>>
- Legal Publications <<http://www.un.org/law/UNlegalpublications/index.html>>
 - Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs
 - Reports of International Arbitral Awards
 - Summaries of ICJ Judgments and Advisory Opinions
 - Juridical Yearbook
 - Official Records of Diplomatic Conferences

International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the main judicial body of the UN and is comprised of 15 judges. The ICJ has two jurisdictions: first, to settle disputes between States in accordance with international law; second, to give advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by UN organs and specialised agencies.

The ICJ publishes extensive documentation related to both the contentious cases and the advisory opinions. The major series of publications are:

- Judgments, Advisory Opinions and Orders
- Pleadings, Oral Arguments, Documents
- Acts and Documents
- Yearbook
- Bibliography

While these publication series are not available in the format in which they were published on the website of the ICJ, the information content of some publications is available through the 'Cases' section of the website.

The website of the ICJ at <http://www.icj-cij.org/> provides a general overview of the structure and work of the Court. Included in 'The Courts' section are all annual reports of the ICJ to the General Assembly from 1985-1986 to the present. The 'Cases' section includes all the public documentation related to the cases from the application instituting proceedings or the request for an advisory opinion to the judgment and opinions of the members of the Court. For older cases, these are digital copies of the relevant materials from the print publications *Judgments, Advisory Opinions and Orders*; *Pleadings, Oral Arguments, Documents*; and *Acts and Documents*. For the newer cases, these materials are added as they are received or created.

'Basic Documents' includes the Charter of the United Nations, the Statute of the Court, the Rules of the Court, and Practice Directions. In addition, there are some other texts that have a bearing on certain legal aspects of the work of the Court.

In 2007, when the ICJ launched this version of its website with the complete historic documentation about all its cases and advisory opinions, they also added all the publications of the Permanent Court of International Justice (1922-1946), the predecessor to the ICJ. All PCIJ publications, Series A through F, plus some additional documents, were scanned and made available in the website. This provides an amazing source for students of the history of international law.

The site has a clear structure and those familiar with the working methods of the Court can easily find their way to needed information. The search feature searches all content, including the scanned materials, on the site. There is no advanced search that allows for more structured queries, although limited Boolean searching is possible. If a researcher has a citation in hand to one of the print resources of the ICJ, it can be difficult to find the

electronic version, unless the case and type of document are known. Overall, this is a well organized website packed with high quality information.

UN Treaty Collection

The United Nations Treaty Collection at <http://treaties.un.org/> is the online website for the work of the Treaty Section of the Office of Legal Affairs. In the age of print-only publications, there were two main series produced by the UN about treaties: the *UN Treaty Series* and the *Multilateral Treaties Deposited with the Secretary-General: Status as at...* The website includes these series as well as additional publications and information related to treaties.

The *UN Treaty Series* reproduces the texts of all legal instruments registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations. This includes all sorts of treaties and instruments – bilateral or multilateral – in their authentic language(s) with translations to English and French, as needed. This is an immense series, with over 2,400 volumes at this time. It was available as a subscription database for many years, and has recently been migrated to new software and made available free of charge through the UN Treaty Collection site.

There are a variety of search options. Within the Advanced Search, it is possible to search on one or more of the metadata fields, such as English Title, Participant, Place of Conclusion, and several date fields. It is not possible to search by citation of a treaty, such as “999 *U.N.T.S.* 171” or “2220 *U.N.T.S.* 93”. There are several reasons for this, the main one being that the information about the standard citation format of English-language law journals has never been entered into the metadata of the UN’s online Treaty Series. In addition, the start of the treaty in the UNTS is the unnumbered title page: the treaty text follows, first the authentic languages and then the translations. Often English-language journal citation is to the page on which the English text begins, which does not always correspond to the title page. As an alternative to citation searching, one may search by Volume Number in the Advanced Search, open the volume in PDF format and find the appropriate page.

Within the website, the section for the *Status of the multilateral treaties deposited with the Secretary-General* is organized as the print publication was, by chapter. Each chapter deals with a certain subject, and lists the treaties and any subsequent protocols or amendments. Each instrument’s record includes basic information, icons with links to the full text and certified true copy, and the list of participants and actions taken by them, followed by the text of any declarations, reservations, or other notifications or actions.

Search options within the Status section are limited. The Index search allows for searches by word or phrase of the title of the instrument. The full-text search allows for full text searching; however the results can be challenging to interpret as the metadata displayed for each treaty is the chapter and item number within the chapter, rather than the treaty’s title. The tab for the Advanced Search actually takes one out of the Status

area, and back to the UN Treaty Series area, which will provide a list of participants for the multilateral treaties, but does not link to the full status information with the texts of the declarations, reservations, and other notifications.

In addition to these two main areas, the UN Treaty Collection contains an abundance of additional information related to treaties. The 'Publications' area links to the *Treaty Handbook*, the *Handbook of Final Clauses*, and the *Summary of Practice of the Secretary-General as Depositary of Multilateral Treaties*, all of which provide detailed technical information. In the 'Overview' section, the *Definitions of key terms used in the UN Treaty Collection* and the *Glossary of terms relating to Treaty actions* serve as important reference sources for treaty terminology.

Audiovisual Library of International Law

The Audiovisual Library of International Law (AVL) at <http://www.un.org/law/avl/> is the newest large addition to the legal resources available from the UN. As part of the UN Programme of Assistance in the teaching, study, dissemination and wider appreciation of international law, the AVL aims to promote understanding of the UN's role in the field of international law. There are three sections of the AVL: Historic Archives, Lecture Series, and Research Library. Orson Welles can be heard reading the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations if one's speakers are on when visiting the home page of the site. There is an RSS feed for notification of additions to the site.

The Historic Archives provide audiovisual materials related to the drafting and adoption of legal instruments. Each instrument is introduced by an essay written by an international law scholar or practitioner and includes a bibliography of related materials. Tabs provide access to a detailed procedural history and links to documents available online. Icons on the right of the screen link to the audiovisual content for each instrument: digital film footage, audio recordings, and photographs of the drafting process. While the audiovisual materials are engaging, the importance of the procedural histories cannot be overstated. The difficult work of preparing the travaux préparatoires¹ of the treaties and declarations has been completed for many of the instruments drafted under UN auspices. As of this writing, thirty-four of the proposed seventy-three instruments have been completed. More are added regularly as the material is digitised and the research completed.

The Lecture Series presents video lectures by leading international law scholars and practitioners on topics in international law. Organized by topic, the lectures range from about 20 to 70 minutes and are delivered in one, or occasionally two, of the official languages of the UN, with most in English. Many of the lectures include a bibliography of related materials: the lecturer's selection of important articles, books, and jurisprudence related to the subject. This provides a wonderful avenue for students to begin to explore these topics in more depth.

¹ The official record of a negotiation, sometimes published, the travaux are often useful in clarifying the intentions of a treaty or other instrument

The Research Library section of the AVL website provides links to online resources in international law. The 'Treaties' area has links to treaty collections maintained by the UN and other international organizations, by states, and by a few other entities, including the Australian Treaties Library. The 'Jurisprudence' section includes links to International Courts, Tribunals, quasi-judicial entities and other mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes. The 'Publications and Documents' area provides links to online repositories of official publications of many UN system bodies, with a focus on sources for international law. 'Scholarly Writings and Research' provides a list of journals and yearbooks available for free online and links to research guides and websites of other intergovernmental legal bodies and professional organizations. The aim of this area of the AVL site is to provide a range of resources for students of international law to launch their research into the field.

This ambitious new project opens the world of international legal scholarship to students without direct access to these leading figures. In addition, the 'Historic Archives' section makes available never before seen audiovisual materials from the archives of the UN. The procedural histories will benefit researchers immensely. And the extensive reading lists and online resources will support the independent studies of students around the world. It remains to be seen how the site will develop over time. Currently there is no search function on the site, and the use of non-standard navigation, such as icons on the right of the screen, may leave some users wondering where the audiovisual content is. Overall, however, the content quality obscures any difficulties with the site structure.

Conclusion

The information resources of the UN grow daily, not only with new material, but also as older materials are digitised and posted to various websites. In addition, new types of information are created and posted to the various websites of the UN. Often new international law resources are promoted through the UN's International Law website at <http://www.un.org/en/law/index.shtml>, which serves as a portal for information about the UN's activities in international law. Of course, there are also human resources who can help, either through the UN libraries, UN Information Centres, or UN depository libraries around the world, including those in Australia. The world of UN information challenges researchers, but can provide a rewarding wealth of information.