

Keeping order in the General Assembly: The strange saga of how a Viking gavel was broken, then lost, then carved again

If you're a keen observer of the United Nations [General Assembly](#), you may have noticed the body's President wields a very unusual looking gavel. It is a gift from Iceland, and there's a very interesting story behind it.

Iceland's democracy is believed to be the oldest in the world: the country's parliament, *Althing*, sat for the first time in 930, making it the "grandfather" of modern parliaments.

Given their democratic heritage, Icelanders decided that the person who presides today over the "world parliament" – the UN – should be "armed" with an Icelandic gavel.

The many conference rooms at UN Headquarters in New York have a standard small wooden gavel. But the gavel used in the General Assembly Hall – where the UN's [193 Member States](#) gather to hash out the business of the world – used in the is unmissable: large, ornate and brownish-red.

The President's gavel is an integral element of official GA sessions. It is used to declare the beginning and end of meetings; the approval of the agenda; the election of officials; and the adoption of resolutions. It is also employed forcefully at times, to bring the gilded chamber to order.

Former Permanent Representative of Iceland to the UN, Hjálmar W. *Hannesson*, sums up the history of the striking object, this way:

"In 1952, when the new UN Headquarters building was opened on the bank of the East River, here in New York, Mr. Thor Thors, Iceland's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations, presented the gavel to the President of General Assembly. Because of this, our gift was nicknamed "Thors' gavel."

The gavel "served" in the General Assembly for eight years. But then: "In October 1960, our gavel made global headlines. Because it ... broke. To be more precise, it was broken by the then President of the General Assembly, the Irishman, Frederick Boland.

Ambassador Boland wanted to calm down the Soviet leader, Nikita Kruschchev, and in particular, to stop him banging his shoe on the table."

There was an incredible noise in the hall and Boland tried to put things in order, so he hit the desk with his gavel and broke it. "

According to press-reports, after this incident, many delegations, in

solidarity with Boland, sent him dozens of replacement gavels for his consideration.

However, at the UN it was decided to ask Iceland to make an exact copy of the broken gavel. Unlike the original, the copy managed to hold out at the UN for almost half a century, said Ambassador *Hannesson*:

“But this is not the end of the story. In 2005, it turned out that the (replacement) gavel... disappeared. A senior UN official informed us about this, and we immediately responded that Iceland would make a second copy of the gavel. This time, the author was one of the most famous carvers in the country, *Sigríður Kristjánsdóttir*.”

The Government turned to Ms. Christiansdóttir with a request: taking into account the previous incident, she was asked to make the gavel especially sturdy. She chose pear tree wood. Was it the right choice? Although it's now 2018 – let's wait and see.

“A small tablet with a brief inscription in Icelandic and Latin is affixed to the gavel,” explained Ambassador Hannesson. “This is an excerpt from one of the Icelandic sagas, which dates back to the 10th century.”

“During this period, we adopted Christianity, which contributed to the cessation of internal strife and unification of the country. And one of the leaders said then: ‘Society must be built on the basis of laws.’ This phrase now decorates our gavel.”

Stylistically, “Thors’ gavel” does not look much like an instrument of peace, making one think more perhaps, of the Viking era of pillage and conquest. But as history shows, even in the world’s parliament at UN Headquarters in New York, from time to time, a bit of old-fashioned Viking force is needed, to bring world leaders to heel.

[Human Rights Council hears plea for victims of ‘brutal’ sexual violence in South Sudan](#)

The plight of South Sudan’s women and girls “should no longer be ignored”, UN investigators told the [UN Human Rights Council](#) on Monday, citing the disturbing testimonies of sexual abuse victims who have been treated by soldiers and militias as the “spoils” of the more than five-year conflict.

“The Commission...once again heard testimonies of wanton killings and numerous accounts of brutal sexual violence,” said Yasmin Sooka, Chairperson of the

Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan.

“Women in South Sudan have been treated by government soldiers and armed actors to the conflict, including local militias, as spoils of the conflict.”

In Yei county, women community leaders told the UN panel that many had been abducted by government soldiers and raped. The resulting stigma the women faced led them to abandon their babies, Ms. Sooka said, their testimonies marking yet more trauma linked to the infighting that grew out of the country’s declaration of independence, in 2011.

Women in South Sudan have been treated by government soldiers and armed actors...including local militias, as spoils of the conflict –
Yasmin Sooka, Commission Chairperson

In her update to the Human Rights Council, the UN-appointed rights expert also noted that Government soldiers attacked a college in Goli, Yei county, in May, raping young women and leaving 10 people dead – including five schoolchildren.

In addition to highlighting testimonies of killings and sexual violence in South Sudan, the UN panel also found food shortages at crisis levels.

According to its findings, six million people face “desperate” food insecurity – a 20 per cent increase from last year, Ms. Sooka said.

“Given the acute levels of food insecurity in the country, one would imagine that the Government of South Sudan would do its utmost to facilitate unimpeded access to UNMISS and the humanitarian organizations,” she explained.

“Instead, there is constant bureaucratic stalling of access and more alarmingly, targeted attacks against humanitarian convoys which makes it almost impossible to deliver emergency relief.”

In a call for the Government to tackle impunity, the UN Commission chair welcomed a recent ruling by a national military tribunal in the high-profile Terrain Case, in which 10 soldiers received sentences for their part in the murder, rape, sexual harassment, theft and armed robbery of aid workers, some of them foreign nationals.

“Under pressure by the international community, the Government of South Sudan was able to muster the political will to combat impunity,” Ms. Sooka said, before noting that “only the foot soldiers were prosecuted, while those with command responsibility have gone unpunished”.

It should be remembered, she continued, that UN forces documented the gang rape of more than 217 South Sudanese women by Government forces in 2016 and none of the perpetrators has been held accountable or received any compensation for their ordeal.

It is a matter of regret, the UN Commission chair continued, that President Salva Kiir has yet to sign fast-track the establishment of a special court to address impunity in South Sudan, as it had recommended in March 2018.

“The failure to punish the perpetrators of serious crimes in South Sudan has led to many to believing that they can continue to commit these crimes with total impunity,” she said.

Established by the Human Rights Council in March 2016 according to [resolution 31/20](#), the UN Commission has a broad mandate to investigate wrongdoing in South Sudan, and seek to clarify who is carrying out alleged gross rights violations.

Since 2013, South Sudan’s civil war has led to the displacement of more than 1.7 million people inside South Sudan and created 2.5 million refugees – including more than 65,000 unaccompanied minors.

In response to the Commission’s findings, South Sudan insisted that the security situation in the country had improved and would continue to do so, following the signing of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, just last week.

At its core was a permanent ceasefire agreement, according to Paulino Wanwilla Unango, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, who also noted that sporadic skirmishes had also occurred.

Turning to the UN Commission’s call for a hybrid court, the minister said that a ministerial committee had been set up for this purpose, but that discussions had been superseded by the need to push ahead with the peace deal.

[Senior UN official calls on Israel to stop demolition of Palestinian village in the West Bank](#)

The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, [Nickolay Mladenov](#), [expressed concern](#) on Monday “at the intention of the Israeli authorities to demolish the Bedouin village of Khan Al-Ahmar/Abu Al-Helu” in the West Bank, where 181 Palestinians currently live, more than half of whom are children.

“I call on the authorities not to proceed with the demolition and to cease efforts to relocate Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank”, said Mr. Mladenov, denouncing such actions as “contrary to international law” and warning that they “could undermine the chances for the establishment of a

viable, contiguous Palestinian state.”

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), Khan Al-Ahmar/Abu Al-Helu, located in the outskirts of East Jerusalem, is one of 18 communities located in – or next to – an area slated in part for an Israeli settlement reorganization plan that would reportedly create a continuous built-up area, between the Ma’ale Adummim settlement and East Jerusalem.

On 24 May, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected the community’s petition to prevent demolition, and nearly all of Khan Al-Ahmar/Abu Al-Helu’s structures are now at immediate risk of being torn down, including the school – built with donor support – which serves several communities in the area.

On 1 June, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, [Jamie McGoldrick](#), issued [a statement](#) noting that “Israel’s obligations as an occupying power to protect the residents of Khan al Ahmar are clear”.

“Should the Israeli authorities choose to implement the outstanding demolition orders in the community and force the people to leave, they would not only generate significant humanitarian hardship but also commit one of the grave breaches of international humanitarian law,” stated Mr. McGoldrick.

In July, the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)) also [denounced](#) the planned demolitions as breaching international humanitarian law as they would likely result in the forcible relocation of dozens of families.

[‘Wind of hope’ blowing through Horn of Africa says UN chief, as Ethiopia and Eritrea sign historic peace accord](#)

There is a powerful wind of hope blowing across the Horn of Africa region, said UN chief António Guterres on Sunday, in Saudi Arabia to witness the signing of a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, ending decades of simmering conflict.

Saudi Arabia facilitated the agreement, and in a message on Twitter, the Foreign Ministry said that the accord, signed in Jeddah “is a historic milestone for the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and will contribute to strengthening security and stability in the region at large”.

“The signature of the peace agreement between the President of Eritrea and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia is indeed a historic event,” said the

Secretary-General, speaking at a press conference following the signing in Saudi Arabia's second-largest city, on the Red Sea coast, with Foreign Minister Adel Aljubeir.

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UN chief, António Guterres

"We have seen a conflict that has lasted for decades, ending, and that has a very important meaning in a world where we see, unfortunately, so many conflicts multiplying, and lasting forever," added Mr. Guterres.

He expressed his "deep appreciation" for the role played by Saudi Arabia, before paying tribute "on one hand to the courage, the vision, the wisdom of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia – who has had the capacity to overcome enormous resistance from the past and open a new chapter in the history of his country – and also the way the President of Eritrea has promptly responded to his peace initiatives."

The thaw in relations between the neighbouring countries, who fought a bloody, unresolved war in the late 1990s, began in earnest in June, when Ethiopia's newly-elected leader, Abiy Ahmed, made peace overtures to his counterpart, which have now come to fruition.

Seizing on the implications for the whole region, Mr. Guterres said that the agreement meant that "there is a wind of hope blowing in the Horn of Africa. It is not only the peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea – it is the fact that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow we will have, here in Saudi Arabia, the President of Djibouti and the President of Eritrea – two countries that have also been at odds with each other."

According to news reports, Eritrea and Djibouti announced on Friday that they would also normalize diplomatic relations with each other following a falling out on the border, in 2008, which left several dead and resulted in prisoners being taken on both sides.

The UN chief also noted the peace agreement between the President and his former Vice President in South Sudan, that was signed on Thursday – in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa – as another indicator of real diplomatic movement across the Horn of Africa and its borders.

"I want to say that this window of hope is enormously important in a world where, unfortunately, hope has been very scarce," added the Secretary-General.

More than 65 million 'low-carbon jobs' can be created by 2030: UN-backed Climate Summit urges action 'to the next level'

New UN-backed commitments to take action against the damaging effects of climate change, could result in \$26 trillion in economic benefits worldwide, and help create 65 million new “low-carbon jobs” by 2030 – the deadline for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).

Those are some of the opportunities of moving to a low-carbon economy, outlined on Friday, at the close of the Global Climate Action Summit, which took place in San Francisco.

It brought together national, regional and urban leaders from across the world, together with businesses, investors and civil society organizations, in an effort to keep global warming to well-under 2 degrees Celsius, in line with the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change.

Committing to take “their collective ambition to the next level”, participants focused on five specific areas.

- **Healthy Energy Systems:** An alliance of more than 60 state, regional and city governments pledged to 100 per cent zero-emission targets, together with 23 multinational corporations with revenue of more than \$470 billion.
- **Inclusive Economic Growth:** 488 companies from 38 countries, adopted emission-reduction goals, in line with the Paris Agreement – 40 per cent up on the number last year.
- **Sustainable Communities:** More than 70 big cities are now committed to carbon neutrality by 2050, representing 450 million citizens.
- **Land and Ocean Stewardship:** A leaders' group will head a new alliance linking more than 100 NGOs, pledged to more action on behalf of forest, food and land sustainability.
- **The Investor Agenda:** brings together nearly 400 investors, managing \$32 trillion of assets, who pledged to scale up the flow of capital into climate action, and a more sustainable, low-carbon economy.

The summit issued a formal “Call to Global Climate Action” saying that “now is the time for all leaders to step up”.

“Only together will we transform our communities and energy systems, create employment opportunities and economic prosperity, protect our oceans and natural environment and complete the transition to a zero-carbon world”.

This Summit and its Call to Action make an important contribution

towards achieving our collective goal: to boost ambition that we need to address climate change – *Patricia Espinosa, UN climate change chief*

UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#), said the summit had demonstrated “*the vast opportunity afforded by climate action. They are betting on green because they understand this is the path to prosperity and peace, on a healthy planet.*”

The Call to Action, was presented to the UN’s [Special Envoy on Youth](#), Jayathma Wickramanayake, in a symbolic gesture to illustrate that it is future generations who will be most affected by the decisions of the current generation to build a more resilient world.

Accepting the Call to Action on behalf of the United Nations, [UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa](#), said: “This Summit and its Call to Action make an important contribution towards achieving our collective goal: to boost ambition that we need to address climate change.”

“We must increase climate action and create unstoppable momentum towards COP24 in Poland and the Secretary General’s 2019 Climate Summit,” she added adding that the summit “will encourage governments worldwide to step up their actions, demonstrating the vital role that states and regions, cities, companies, investors, and civil society are playing to tackle climate change.”

The event took place against a background of accelerating impacts of climate change, evidenced this week through the destructive power of Super Typhoon Mangkhut in South East Asia, and Hurricane Florence, on the east coast of the United States, which killed dozens and caused billions of dollars-worth of destruction.

[UN Environment](#) highlighted the vital role of non-Party stakeholders in propelling the global fight against climate change forward, in an excerpt of their [Emissions Gap Report](#), launched at the Summit.

“Climate change is undoubtedly the defining issue of our time, and working together across nations, organizations and communities is the only way that we can tackle this enormous task and seize the huge opportunities,” said head of UN Environment, Erik Solheim.

“We have seen here over the past few days the inspiring amount of work that is already being undertaken by communities around the world to address these issues. If we manage to put our environment first, we can come out on the other end of this formidable challenge and achieve our common goal: a sustainable world for all.”