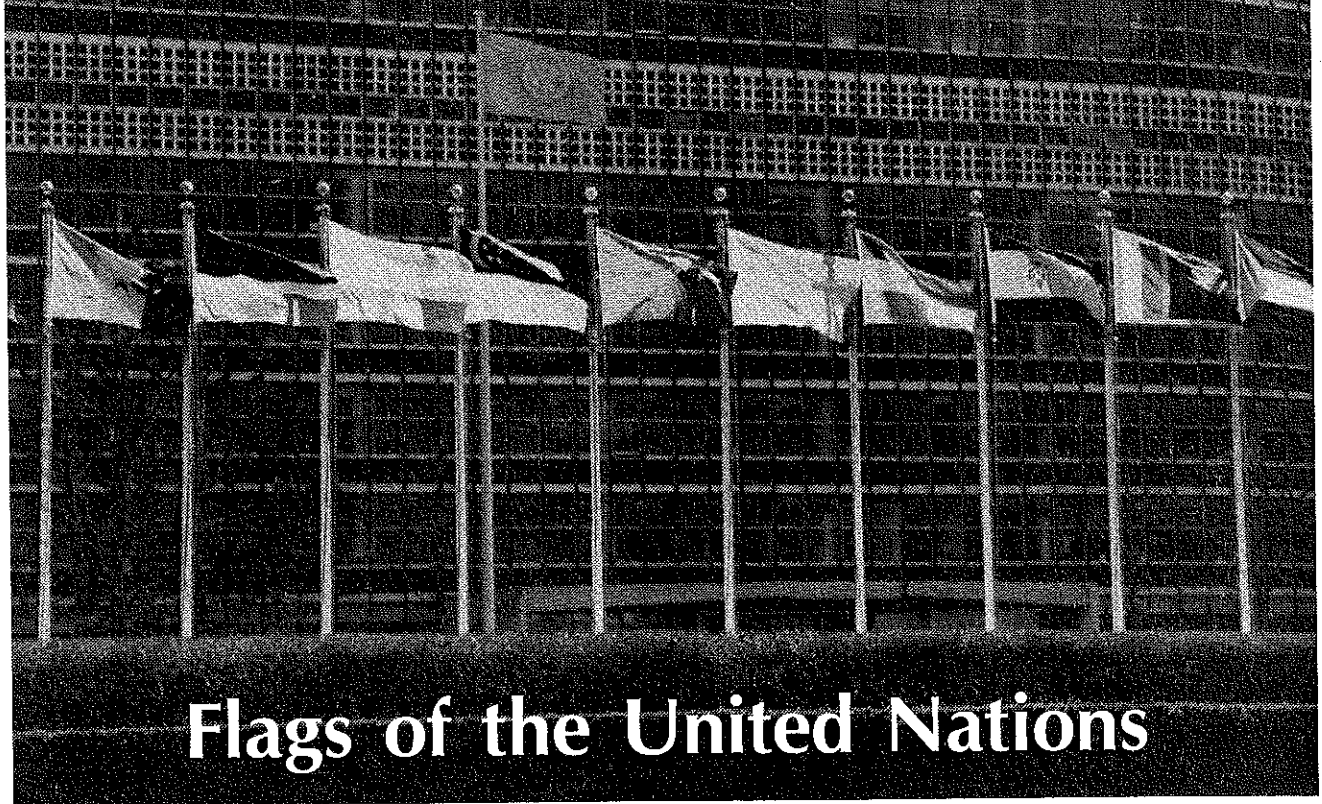


So Proudly They Wave . . .



Flags of the United Nations

UN Photo 16877/M. Grant

By Elsa B. Endrst

Projecting an image of unity and hope for the future, 179 flags of UN Member States stand in an undulating row in front of Headquarters in New York City. All the flags are of equal size, except for the 180th—the blue and white flag of the UN—that is slightly larger and stands apart as if to keep a protective watch over the others.

Each day—except on Saturday and Sunday or when the weather is inclement—at approximately 8 a.m., a team of 8 to 11 security officers hoist these colourful national banners. It takes about half an hour to raise all 179 flags. At 4 p.m., the flags are lowered and stored in boxes at the foot of each flag pole. On weekends, unless a meeting takes place, only the UN flag is raised.

While Member States have wide-ranging views on political, social,

cultural and other questions, when it comes to flags, they often conform to other nations' designs, patterns, shapes and motifs.

Most national flags are comprised of two or more of seven bold colours: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, black and white. Nations from the same region often choose similar combinations. For example, Latin American countries prefer yellow, blue and red; and French-speaking African countries favour red, green and yellow.

Arduous protocol

The resident UN flag expert is Michael Dulka, External Relations Officer for the UN Library and its former map librarian, responsible for many years for giving tours of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library's map collection to new staff members, visiting dignitaries and groups of researchers.

"We have files for each national flag of the world and also of flags of sub-national groups", explained Mr. Dulka, an American of Polish descent, who sometimes wryly refers to himself as the UN "Flag Pole".

"We keep official, as well as unofficial commercial information, information which often comes from periodicals and monographs. Even if we do not have an accurate depiction of a flag, we are able to provide an accurate description."

Some of the most common questions asked revolve around protocol. UN flags must comply with a specific code—last updated and published by the Secretary-General's office in 1967—which mandates their size and the order in which they are displayed.

To promote a unified look, all national flags for outdoor display at the UN are 4 by 6 feet, while flags

used for indoor ceremonies are 3 by 5 feet.

Nations are assigned a flag pole, in English alphabetical order, north to south. With only five spaces left to accommodate new flags, further additions will require some relandscaping of the UN garden.

Creating a flag for a new Member State can be an arduous process. First, the Government must provide a sample flag and/or artwork to the UN Protocol Liaison Service, which notifies all concerned departments in the Secretariat, including the Map Collection section and the Security and Safety Service. The Office of General Services is responsible for procuring the actual flag made to UN specifications.

Parade of new flags

With the rapid parade of 20 new Member States that joined the UN in the past year, there often has not been enough time to manufacture a flag with the correct dimensions.

In such instances, the UN temporarily flies a sample of whatever size is provided by the Member State. For several months, San Marino, a 24-square-mile land-locked country in Italy—and the smallest Member State—was represented at UN Headquarters by the largest flag.

Many national flags of the world have totally different proportions than the height-to-width ratio of two to three used by the UN. This can lead to complaints from delegates or officials who notice that their country's flag looks stretched, or otherwise strange to the eye.

The specific shades of colours used can also be a problem, since the UN has a limited selection of colour choices for producing its flags. For example, there are only three kinds of reds available and

therefore the red used on a particular UN flag may not be as bright or as intense as the original pennant.

The type of material used in the original national flag can also create difficulties. Most national flags are made of a type of cloth called bunting, which is extremely resilient to the wear and tear of inclement weather and the passage of years. But some countries use other materials not available in the



The flag of Georgia is hoisted at the UN for the first time on 31 July 1992.

United States. UN flags are reproduced in nylon, Mr. Dulka reported.

The challenge of accurately replicating new national flags has created some uneasy moments for the UN. Once, the small graphic provided by a new Member State was accidentally photocopied upside-down and produced that way by the manufacturer. The new ambassador immediately noticed the error when he was shown the flag on the day his State was to be admitted. Fortunately, the diagonal stripes of the flag could be temporarily hung

upside-down, making the design appear right-side-up when the flag was raised for the first time outside Headquarters.

Vexillology

The study of flags is sometimes called vexillology, a term that originated from an old Saxon or Germanic verb, "fllakken or fleogan", meaning "to fly".

There are many traditions or codes associated with flags, which dictate when they can be used and how they are to be handled. One tradition forbids the burial of a national flag with the dead. Others mandate that these precious national emblems be discarded in particular ways. For example, after being flown for 6 to 12 months, UN flags are considered unfit for display and are carefully cut up and the pieces burned.

One would-be vexillologist has theorized that the purpose of such ethics is to associate with the flag "a sense of everlastingness, of integrity and endurance under even the most trying circumstances".

Since September 1980, the UN Postal Administration has honoured the flags of Member States with a series of impressive postage stamps.

Flags are also honoured with a new look when the ideologies or values of nations change. In December 1989, for example, Romania removed the Communist crest—a garland of wheat surmounted with a red star and enclosing symbols of socialist industry—from the centre of its blue-yellow-red national flag. And for a while, during its political transition, Romanians flew a flag with a hole where those symbols used to be.

By reflecting such transformations, in addition to both the diversity and commonalities among nations, national flags have become high-flying mirrors of history. ■