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**Background to the Fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice**

The United Nations Congresses on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (referred to below as the UN Crime Congresses) are the world’s largest global gatherings on crime and justice. They are also the oldest periodic conferences organized by the United Nations on a specific subject area. The Congresses are organized every five years by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) together with the host country, in accordance with mandates given by the General Assembly.

The first UN Crime Congress was held in Geneva in 1955, and the fourteenth is to be held in Kyoto, Japan on 20-27 April 2020. The most recent UN Crime Congress, the Thirteenth, was held in Doha in April 2015, and included among its 4,000 participants (a record number) the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the President of the General Assembly, and the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). About one half of the over 140 national delegations to the Doha Congress were headed by the country’s Minister of Justice, Minister of the Interior, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Prosecutor-General or other official of ministerial rank.

***1. What are UN Crime Congresses for?***

UN Crime Congresses are intended for the exchange of views between States, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and individual experts, the exchange of experiences in research, law and policy development, and the identification of emerging trends and issues in crime prevention and criminal justice. [[1]](#footnote-1)

In the formal sense, the UN Crime Congresses do not set UN policy. The outcome of the Congress, the so-called Congress Declaration, is submitted to the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, which is the UN policy-making body in this field (referred to below as the UN Crime Commission). However, the argument has been made that a Congress convened every five years, and attended by senior policy makers from the large majority of UN member states, does have a marked influence in setting the framework of the work of the UN Crime Programme for the next five years.

The UN Crime Congresses are unique in their mix of participants. They bring together senior policy-makers, practitioners, UN agencies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations as well as individual experts in crime prevention, law enforcement, prosecution, the courts, corrections and related fields. In doing so, they provide an opportunity to invigorate policy discussions by permitting front-line practitioners, civil society representatives and individual participants to raise issues of concern, bringing these to the attention of policy-makers. Over the sixty years that the UN Crime Congresses have been held, they have served to help identify and raise world-wide attention regarding a wide range of issues, for example victims’ rights, restorative justice, computerization of the management of criminal justice, prison overcrowding, domestic violence, environmental crime, transnational crime, cybercrime and hate crime.[[2]](#footnote-2)

UN Crime Congresses have a formal part and an extensive informal part. The formal part takes place in the plenary and in two Committees which sit in parallel with the plenary. The formal part consists of the opening and the closing sessions, the “high-level segment” in plenary immediately after the opening,[[3]](#footnote-3) the discussion on the four agenda items, and the discussion in the four workshops. The informal part consists of a large number of so-called ancillary meetings (described below), meetings of regional groups, and possible informal negotiations among national delegations.

***2. Who attends UN Crime Congresses?***

The participants at UN Crime Congresses consist of a mix of representatives of national governments, UN agencies, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, and individual experts.

***National delegations***. The majority of participants at UN Crime Congresses belong to national delegations.

There is little practical difference in status between members of national delegations and other participants at UN Crime Congresses. Other than is the case at sessions of the UN Crime Commission (and other UN functional commissions), national delegation members do not have priority in taking the floor. (However, when the list of speakers is opened, their requests are generally accommodated first.) An exception to this rule is the high-level segment, at which the floor is given only to speakers of ministerial rank and above, and thus in effect only to the heads of some national delegations.

Only national delegation members may sit in on negotiations on the outcome of the Congress, the Congress Declaration. Other categories of participants do not have the right to be present in these negotiations even as observers.

The chairpersons and other elected officials are selected solely from among the members of national delegations.

***UN bodies, agencies and related entities***. Various UN Secretariat units, bodies and specialized agencies (e.g. ILO, UNESCO and WHO) send representatives to UN Crime Congresses to participate as observers.

A special subcategory that is grouped under “UN bodies and agencies” consists of the members of the UN Crime Programme Network of Institutes (referred to below as the PNI institutes). The first such institutes were established through agreements between the UN Secretariat and the host country and include regional institutes in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and the Arab countries, as well as the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute. In time, the network expanded to include several already existing institutes (such as the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy, in Vancouver, the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, in Montreal, and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, in Lund, Sweden), national institutes (the National Institute of Justice in the United States, the Australian Institute of Criminology, the Korean Institute of Criminology, and the Thailand Institute of Justice) as well as other entities around the world, eighteen in all.[[4]](#footnote-4) These PNI institutes have been assigned a formal role in the UN Crime Congresses, in that they have the primary responsibility for the organization of the Workshops.

***Intergovernmental organizations***. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) have the right to participate in UN Crime Congresses as observers. Examples of IGOs which often send representatives to the UN Crime Congresses are the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, the African Union and the European Union.

***Non-governmental organizations***. As is the case with intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations participate in UN Crime Congresses as observers. A distinction is made between NGOs with consultative status with ECOSOC, and other NGOs. Those with consultative status are invited to attend the UN Crime Congresses, whereas other NGOs need to apply to the UN Secretariat for an invitation to attend.

It is primarily the non-governmental organizations that organize so-called ancillary meetings at the UN Crime Congresses, which have drawn a broad mix of participants. These have often been of very high quality, and the number of such meetings has been increasing rapidly.

***Individual experts***.Persons with an interest in crime prevention and the treatment of offenders may apply to the Secretariat for an invitation to participate at UN Crime Congresses as individual experts. At past UN Crime Congresses, the number of individual experts in attendance has varied from a few hundred to over one thousand.

***The Congress officials.*** The officials of the Congress (referred to collectively as the general committee) consist of the President (by tradition, the head of the delegation of the host Government), and vice-presidents (vice chairpersons), as well as a general rapporteur. A distinction is made between the general category of vice-presidents (of whom there were 27 at the Thirteenth UN Crime Congress in 2015, and who are selected on the basis of equitable geographical balance, with an additional person designated as First Vice-President), and two persons to serve as chairpersons of the two Committees.

The United Nations Secretary-General is represented by a senior UN official referred to as the Secretary-General of the Congress, who is assisted by the Executive Secretary. The extensive responsibilities of the Executive Secretary include ensuring that all of the official documentation as well as interpretation services are available in the official languages,[[5]](#footnote-5) servicing the meetings (including maintaining the list of speakers for the chairperson) and assisting the rapporteurs in the drafting of the reports.

***3. What does the UN Crime Congress programme and structure look like?***

The Fourteenth UN Crime Congress will take place at the Kyoto International Conference Centre ([www.icckyoto.or.jp](http://www.icckyoto.or.jp)) from Monday, 20 April to Monday, 27 April 2020.

The UN Congress is preceded by two events: a “Youth Forum” at which young people from around the world discuss selected issues related to the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress, and so-called pre-Congress consultations, at which national delegations deal informally with certain procedural issues, such as a tentative agreement on who will be elected as President, Vice-President, vice-chairpersons and rapporteur general of the Congress.

The Fourteenth UN Crime Congress is expected to be attended by some 5,000 participants. Every participant needs to obtain his or her “grounds pass” from UN security staff. The waiting line is of course longest on the morning of 20 April. If possible, you should obtain your grounds pass during the preceding weekend.

The UN Crime Congress follows the usual UN working times for meetings: the morning session is from 10:00 to 13:00, and the afternoon session is from 15:00 to 18:00.

Before the morning session, it is common practice for regional groups (in particular the EU and the Group of 77 + China) as well as several national delegations to hold coordination meetings.

Once you’ve arrived and passed through security, it is advisable to pick up a copy of the daily “Journal” published by the UN Secretariat. This lists what meetings and other events are planned for the day, and often contains some useful background information. In addition, the scheduled meetings are listed on monitors located around the conference centre. The “Journal” is available at the documentation distribution desk.

The basic (formal) programme of the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress consists of a plenary and work in two committees. The plenary is used for the formal opening session, the high-level segment and the closing session. The four agenda items and the four Workshops are dealt with in the committees, and the results are reported at the end of the Congress to the plenary session.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Seats in the plenary and the two committees are assigned to the different delegations. The seats for the national delegations are closest to the podium, in alphabetical order.

***Opening of the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress***. The opening on Monday, 20 April will consist of a series of statements given by distinguished speakers from the host Government and the United Nations. The expectation is that the “Kyoto Declaration”, which is to be negotiated in advance of the Congress, will be adopted during the opening ceremonies. (If not, then negotiations on it will continue throughout the Congress in parallel with the formal proceedings, and it will be adopted at the closing of the Congress. At the UN Crime Congresses in 2000, 2005 and 2010, these negotiations were difficult and time-consuming, lasting late into the evening and at times until the early morning hours.)

***High-level segment***. During this part of the Congress, heads of national delegations of ministerial rank or higher (and selected other participants; perhaps 70 – 80 all together) give their statements. Heads of state or government are generally allotted about 20 minutes, and other high-level segment speakers about 10 minutes. The high-level segment can be expected to last through at least Wednesday, 22 April.

***Work in the Committees***. The Fourteenth UN Crime Congress has four substantive agenda items, as follows:

* Comprehensive strategies for crime prevention towards social and economic development;
* Integrated approaches to challenges facing the criminal justice system;
* Multidimensional approaches by Governments to promoting the rule of law by, inter alia, providing access to justice for all; building effective, accountable, impartial and inclusive institutions; and considering social, educational and other relevant measures, including fostering a culture of lawfulness while respecting cultural identities, in line with the Doha Declaration; and
* International cooperation and technical assistance to prevent and address all forms of crime: (a) Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations; (b) New and emerging forms of crime.

It is expected that the two Committees will each deal with two of these agenda items. The discussion begins with an introduction by the chairperson and a representative of the Secretariat, after which representatives of national delegations, and other participants, will make their statements. The summary of the discussions and the conclusions of the Chairperson, which are not subject to negotiation,[[7]](#footnote-7) are forwarded to the plenary for information.

Each agenda item is linked to a Workshop. The topics of the Workshops at the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress are as follows:

* Evidence-based crime prevention: statistics, indicators and evaluation in support of successful practices;
* Reducing reoffending: identifying risks and developing solutions;
* Education and youth engagement as key to making societies resilient to crime; and
* Current crime trends, recent developments and emerging solutions, in particular new technologies as means for and tools against crime.

Each Workshop precedes the discussion on its respective agenda item, and the results of the Workshop are reported to the Committee under that agenda item.

While the discussion on the agenda items tends to focus on policy and on developments in the different member states, the Workshops are intended to be more practical and technical, of interest in particular to practitioners. Each Workshop is prepared by one or more institute in the UN Programme Network of Institutes. The discussions will be based on panel presentations, followed by a debate with interventions and questions from the floor, avoiding as much as possible the “reading of statements”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

***Closing session***. The closing session of the Congress, on the afternoon of Monday, 27 April, consists of the adoption of the report on the Congress, and closing statements. In the event that the Kyoto Declaration was not adopted at the opening, it will be adopted during the closing ceremonies.

The draft report is generally made available in all six official UN languages on the day before the closing session, or on the morning of the final day. Depending on the political sensitivities involved, the adoption of the report may proceed smoothly and quickly, or it may be slowed by lengthy discussions over the proper wording of a phrase.

***Ancillary meetings***. As already mentioned, also ancillary meetings are organized in connection with the Congresses. These are meetings of non-governmental, professional organizations and geographical interest groups. The level of discussion at such meetings has often been quite high. At the Thirteenth UN Crime Congress in 2015, where a total of 195 ancillary meetings were held, some ancillary meetings were designated as “special events”, and were given more publicity by the Secretariat.

Although the meetings are not part of the formal proceedings of the UN Crime Congress, the Secretariat is requested “to take appropriate action to encourage the participation of the academic and research community” in these meetings. Governments are encouraged to participate in these meetings “as they provide an opportunity to develop and maintain strong partnerships with the private sector and civil society organization.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The coordination of these ancillary meetings is done by the International Scientific and Professional Advisory Council (ISPAC), and in practice by one individual working in close coordination with the Secretariat and the host government, Mr Gary Hill. Under his guidance, arrangements for the ancillary meetings are made so that, to the extent possible, these do not overlap with formal sessions or other ancillary meetings covering similar issues.[[10]](#footnote-10)

***Professional and specialized meetings***. Various professional and regional associations may wish to take advantage of the participation of many of their members at the Congress, and organize meetings that are limited to their members and to invited guests. Such closed meetings may also cover a specific item where security is concerned (such as the training of police cybercrime technicians). Also these meetings are coordinated, on request, by ISPAC.

***Exhibits***. Throughout the duration of the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress, various governments, NGOs, professional associations, UN bodies (including the Programme Network Institutes) and commercial vendors present information on their work or products.

***4. What documentation will be available at the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress?***

The documentation prepared by the Secretariat includes the Congress Discussion Guide, background reports on the different agenda items, reports of the regional preparatory meetings, and other UN Secretariat reports requested by the UN Crime Commission or otherwise regarded as necessary in view of the items to be discussed. The identification of the official documentation is done in consultation with the extended Bureau of the UN Crime Commission.

The documentation is made available through the UNODC’s website: <http://www.unodc.org/congress/?lf=1&lng=en> (this link is to the English language versions; the official documentation is to be made available in all six official UN languages).

The Ministry of Justice of Japan has its own Congress website: <http://www.moj.go.jp/ENGLISH/m_hisho10_00002.html>

Mr Gary Hill has opened a website that provides information on the ancillary meetings, exhibitions and other events that he is coordinating, as well as useful background information: <http://www.un-congress.org/>

National delegations, other delegations and individual experts often bring publications and other material for distribution to Congress participants. There are not official Congress documents, which would need to be translated into the six official languages of the UN. The Secretariat sets aside tables outside of the meeting rooms on which delegations and individual experts may leave documents they believe would be of interest to the participants. With some exceptions, only official documents may be placed in the “pigeonholes” set aside for each individual delegation (near the documentation distribution desk) or distributed inside the meeting rooms directly to the tables of the individual delegations.

**5. What does the UN Crime Congress produce?**

Each UN Crime Congress produces a single document called a Congress Declaration “containing recommendations derived from the deliberations of the high-level segment, the round tables and the workshops, to be submitted to the Commission for its consideration”.

The concept of a single Congress Declaration was introduced at the 2000 UN Crime Congress, and replaced the different resolutions that earlier Congresses had adopted on a wide range of topics.

The (draft) Congress Declaration is negotiated in advance of the Congress, using as its basis the recommendations and conclusions from the different regional preparatory meetings organized during the first four months of 2019. Thus, although General Assembly resolution 56/119 specifies that the consolidated Congress Declarations should contain “recommendations derived from the deliberations of the high-level segment, the round tables and the workshops, to be submitted to the Commission for its consideration”, the reality is different. It has proven to be difficult, if not impossible, to develop a mechanism that would distil the deliberations taking place simultaneously in the plenary and in the two Committees sitting in parallel, and, in real time, draft and negotiate a Congress Declaration that could be adopted by consensus by the Congress.

The Congress Declaration is not the only outcome of each Congress. In addition to the official report of the Congress, each Congress produces a considerable amount of documentation, such as the official background documents prepared by the Secretariat (which have been of very high quality), the reports of the regional preparatory meetings, a number of conference room documents, a large number of unofficial documents submitted by various participants in the different categories, as well as the unofficial reports of the ancillary meetings. At the more recent UN Crime Congresses, the respective UN Programme Network Institute that had the lead role in organizing each Workshop has usually produced a report containing the various panel presentations and related material. In respect of the Thirteenth UN Crime Congress, thanks to cooperation between the UNODC and the host government, much of this material has been made available very quickly through the Congress website,[[11]](#footnote-11) thus providing a wealth of information even for those practitioners, policy-makers and researchers around the world who had not participated, and in this way increasing the impact of the Congresses.

Finally, it may be noted that over the past two decades, both the UN Secretariat and the UN Crime Commission have devoted increasing attention to ensuring that the UN Crime Congresses are not “one-off” events, which are forgotten as soon as preparations begin on the next five-year cycle. Following the Thirteenth UN Crime Congress in Doha (2015), the Secretariat has even established an operational programme to take forward the Doha Declaration. A standing item on the agenda of the UN Crime Commission is the UN Crime Congresses, during which implementation of action points raised by the previous Congress is reviewed and discussed, at the same time as the preparations for the next Congress are advanced. This ensures continuity in the process.

1. GA resolution A/RES/46/152, para 29. Further refinements are provided in ECOSOC resolution 1992/24 and GA resolution A/RES/56/119 (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Joutsen, Matti (2019), The Evolution of the United Nations Congresses on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Thailand Institute of Justice.

   As a point of comparison, the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs does not have a corresponding world congress that would serve as an indirect pathway to infusing new ideas into global (and national) drug policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For reasons of simplicity, the description given in this guide regarding issues such as when the high-level segment is held, and how many agenda items and workshops are to be found in the programme, applies to the Kyoto Congress. Earlier UN Crime Congresses, for example, have had up to six agenda items. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Information on the PNI network and on the individual institutes is available at <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CCPCJ/PNI/institutes.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The six official working languages of the UN are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The final agenda will not be formally approved until the opening session of the Congress. It is possible that one agenda item and one Workshop will be assigned to the plenary. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Before the 2015 UN Crime Congress, the chairperson’s summary of and conclusions on the basis of the discussions did not excite any controversy. A sign of the increasing politicization of the debate in the UN Crime Congress is that the chairperson’s summary and conclusions at the 2015 UN Crime Congress were challenged, leading to the adoption of the formulation referred to here in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It has often proven difficult to wean participants – and indeed the expert panellists – away from the reading of prepared statements and draw them into an “open dialogue”. This difficulty, of course, is all too familiar at academic and professional conferences around the world, no matter what the subject. The difficulty is all the greater when the participants at a UN Crime Congress Workshop number in the hundreds, and they come from different cultures and backgrounds, with different debating styles. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, for example, A/RES/72/192, para. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Through the efforts of Mr Hill and those of his team of volunteer “interns”, ancillary meetings at the more recent UN Crime Congresses have also been provided with interpretation as needed, and summaries of the different ancillary meetings have been made available. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://www.unodc.org/congress/en/previous/previous-13.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)