



WE THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The Ban Ki-moon Archival Project

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How can the nations of the world unite to fight piracy off the coast of Somalia, provide assistance to Myanmar following a deadly typhoon, and ensure that global development is done in a sustainable manner?

These are some of the questions that confronted Ban Ki-moon, the eighth Secretary-General of the United Nations, during his decade-long tenure from 2007 to 2016 and that can be found in his records.

Born in Japanese-occupied Korea in 1944, the future chief administrative officer of the United Nations decided to embark on a path of public service as a young man, following an encounter with President John F. Kennedy in 1962. The American president, standing on the South Lawn of the White House, had addressed a group of foreign visitors that included Ban Ki-moon, telling the assembly, “There are no national boundaries, there is only a question of whether we can extend a helping hand.” More than fifty years after that meeting, as Ban Ki-moon’s second term was coming to a close, the United Nations’ Archives and Records Management Section (ARMS) began a multi-year effort to process, digitize, and review the records of the Secretary-General to make them available to the largest possible constituency: the world.

Arrangement, Description, and Classification

The United Nations is the world’s largest international organization, with a broad mandate that includes maintaining worldwide peace

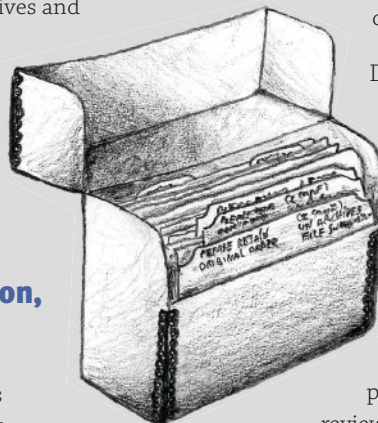


UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon briefs press in Geneva. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré.

and security, protecting human rights, and solving economic and social problems through sustainable development. The all-encompassing nature of its activities makes the United Nations’ institutional archives an invaluable source of information to a wide variety of researchers and is indispensable

for providing accountability to its 193 Member States. It also made this archival project a highly visible endeavor.

The project began in late 2015 when the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG) began transferring the records of Ban Ki-moon’s early years to ARMS’ custody. Once there, a team of processing archivists—sometimes as many as six working concurrently—began tackling the contemporary archives of the United Nations’ most senior diplomat.



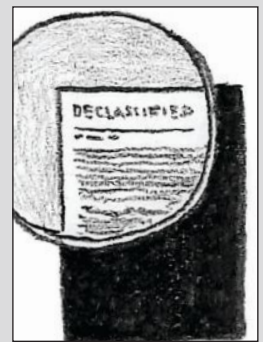
Courtesy of UN Archives, Simon Griffée.

Due to the nature of the information handled by the United Nations, records are classified by their creators according to their sensitivity. A key part of processing included reviewing and arranging each record at the item level into subfolders

based on their classification and using screening guidelines that were developed in coordination with the EOSG. This meant that the processing archivists had to engage with the records’ content with an eye not only to their description but also their security classification.

The United Nations uses three levels of security classification which are meant to represent the risk the information may cause if released: unclassified, confidential, and strictly confidential.

Archives falling in the first two categories are automatically declassified after 20 years. Strictly confidential archives, however, are declassified only following an ad hoc review by a subject matter expert. Because Ban Ki-moon’s archives are less than 20 years old, each record had to be reviewed by a competent authority prior to disclosure. Having records aggregated at a subfolder level according to their classification was critical to facilitating their subsequent declassification.



Courtesy of UN Archives, Simon Griffée.

A Million Pages in Multiple Languages

Following processing, the records were passed to a digitization team based in the same office. This ensured that any questions regarding the arrangement and description were immediately addressed by the processing archivists. Each item, whether a single-page letter or a hundred-page report, was digitized as a discrete file.

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A preservation master was made as a color TIFF. After a quality review was completed, pages were converted to PDF access files, which were OCR'd and could be put online for easy viewing and downloading.

The next step of the project involved individuals selected by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General reviewing each record and deciding on its disclosure. These individuals had worked in different capacities and in various offices in the organization for decades and were keenly aware of the political and legal sensitivities that are involved in the disclosure of United Nations records. They were also knowledgeable in multiple languages and read more than a million pages, making

the ultimate decision on the disclosure of each document, taken in accordance with United Nations policy. Although decisions were based on the content of the records, they were informed by the classification and arrangement completed by the processing archivists. Nonetheless, archives that were “unclassified” were in some cases not released, and others, classified as “strictly confidential,” were.

Ready for the World

The last step of the project consisted of uploading the PDF access files to the ARMS website and promoting the project

There are no national boundaries, there is only a question of whether we can extend a helping hand.

—John F. Kennedy

throughout the United Nations and to researchers worldwide.

The Ban Ki-moon Archival Project took more than two years

to complete, due to the gradual accretion of records received from the Executive Office of the Secretary-General for processing and digitization. The last of Ban Ki-moon's records were transferred to ARMS in the year following his tenure. The finished product totaled nearly 600 linear feet of materials, housed in more than 1,100 boxes. Digitized, these files consist of more than 100,000 individual documents, the majority of which are now accessible to all citizens of the world via the United Nations Archives website. Go check them out at <https://search.archives.un.org/secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-2007-2018>. ■

Provenance Need Not Apply continued from page 7

connection or context with the others. In one such instance, business correspondence found in one accession and described in a separate finding aid was directly related to correspondence found in another accession, but this connection was not known or identified. By retaining this loose principle of provenance, many of the records were taken completely out of context.

Creating a New Collection

In an effort to alleviate confusion and increase coherence, staff in the early 2000s attempted to describe all relevant accessions under one manuscript number via an EAD finding aid, but didn't arrange any further. Thus, the materials remained under their original accession number and in their original segregated boxes. In addition, there were some accessions that were neglected entirely and not included in the description effort. Some of the small accessions received unnecessary item-level description, but material of the same type located in another accession did not receive the same treatment.

After assessing the current state of the records, staff decided that the best solution for ideal accessibility was to create a synthetic collection of papers relating to Philadelphia merchants. In doing so, relevant papers from each individual accession were identified and transferred into the original accession purchased from George S. MacManus & Co. in 1958. Those accessions that included papers unrelated to Philadelphia merchants remained in their original accessions to be described at a later time.

In what situations should archivists forgo the principle of provenance?

The new arrangement groups together papers from individual mercantile firms, allowing greater accessibility for researchers and reference staff. In addition to implementing a more cohesive arrangement and description method, staff also addressed preservation concerns. During rearrangement, materials were rehoused in new archival boxes and fragile documents were properly encapsulated in polyester sleeves.

Finding Exceptions to the Rules

Although some work remains to complete the collection, the project itself attempted to solve some of the enduring problems associated with legacy collections, especially those purchased by institutions to begin building their collections. By no means is this type of project feasible on a large scale in most repositories, but by applying similar techniques to collections of comparable provenance, archivists can help alleviate major accessibility issues, increase a

collection's visibility and coherence, identify previously undetected

conservation and preservation issues, and clean up confusing administrative information pertaining to accession data.

Archivists must continually reevaluate the foundational principles that govern the profession to better meet the needs of users. The principle of provenance is not ironclad. Sometimes there are exceptions to the rule, but do tread lightly! ■