

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)



UNHCR

The UN Refugee Agency

Topic I : Addressing the internally displaced people of Myanmar and asylum seekers from Central America

Topic II : Refugee Resettlement

The topics proposed for this committee delve into issues of national sovereignty, international relations, and military action. The UN Refugees Committee, conventionally known as the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, does not have the authority of the Security Council. Its member-states cannot mandate any action to be taken by another state. Instead, delegates are restricted to making suggestions and recommendations. That being said, the chair and co-chair want to encourage delegates to explore the thorny geopolitical issues at hand. If the state you represent would be antagonistic to certain policies, then let that be reflected in your positions during the conference.

The chair highly recommends that delegates are well-informed about international precedent regarding refugees. For example, refugee and asylum seeker are not interchangeable terms, and knowing the difference between the two will be a key factor in your success in the committee. While not required, it would be helpful for delegates to go over the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as well as the 1967 Refugee Protocol. The chair looks favorably upon delegates utilizing precise language and understanding of what a refugee actually is and what international statutes and guidelines govern the issue. As a starting point, I've included two articles below that should provide clarity on the topic.

Links for More Information

- <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2015/the-normative-terrain-of-the-global-refugee-regime/>
- <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html>

The Rohingya Crisis

Myanmar's Rakhine state is home to the *Rohingya* people, an ethnic minority group that practices Islam. It has long been the policy of Myanmar's government to violently persecute its religious minorities, as Myanmar has a strong Buddhist majority. Violence has been escalating

since August 22nd, 2017, such that an estimated 400,000 Rohingya have fled to neighboring Bangladesh.

Like much of refugee policy, the Rohingya situation has both political and humanitarian elements. Any successful solution will address the immediate needs of displaced Rohingya but will also address long-term political tension in the region.

Rohingya's Political Situation

Through the twentieth century, Myanmar was under the rule of a military dictatorship that routinely abused the civil and political rights of its citizens. One tactic of oppression was to restrict the rights of Myanmar's minorities, including the Rohingya. As early as the 1970s, the Burmese military led campaigns to violently harass the Rohingya, causing thousands to flee to places like Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia.

The government of Myanmar has long held the position that the Rohingya are not rightful citizens. Their argument goes that the Rohingya are, in fact, illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. This is contrary to historical evidence, which shows a Muslim population in the Rakhine state as early as the 15th century. In 1982, the Burmese government passed an act defining which minority groups were citizens of the state. The right to citizenship was not extended to the Rohingya. To this day, they live as "stateless people," not recognized as citizens in the nation in which they were born.

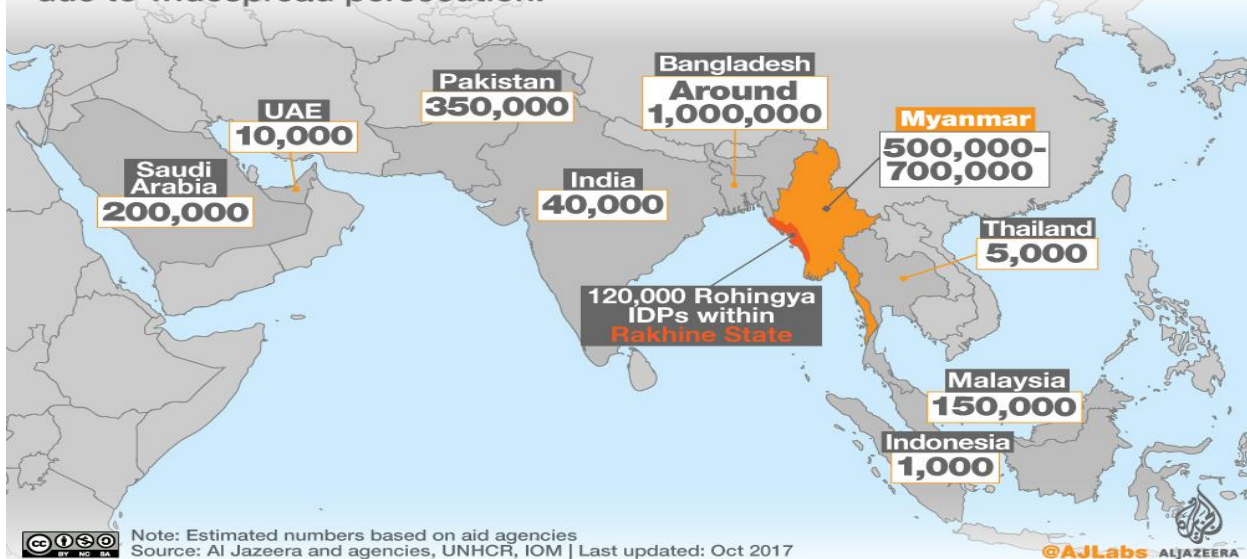
For international actors, the situation is complicated by Myanmar's government. As previously mentioned, Myanmar's military has a has immense power in the government. Indeed, they hold most high level cabinet positions. However, the military also initiated the creation of a new constitution in 2008 and new elections in 2010. In 2015, they released political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi and allowed her political party, the National League for Democracy, to run in elections.

Aung San Suu Kyi now sits in a position of governmental power which was seen by the international community as a sign of good faith by Myanmar. In response to changes in Myanmar, the US loosened trade sanctions and resumed diplomatic relations with the state. Aung San Suu Kyi herself has been seen as a model for political protest; her disciplined dissidence won her a Nobel Peace Prize. Yet now, as a leader of Myanmar, she has failed to speak out against the violence towards the Rohingya. This is largely because the systematic removal of Rohingya is popular amongst the Buddhist majority. Additionally, the Burmese military remains independent and strong, such that they could remove Suu Kyi if she criticized them too heavily. All the same, it remains problematic that this international defender of human rights presides over systematic ethnic cleansing.



Following Myanmar's fleeing Rohingya

Since the late 1970s, more than one million Rohingya have fled Myanmar due to widespread persecution.



Humanitarian Challenges Facing the Rohingya

There are a number of challenges that face anyone attempting to ameliorate the plight of the Rohingya. First, it is important to understand the indignity they are facing while in Myanmar. The elderly are being burned in their homes while women and girls are being subjected to sexual violence. There have been reports of callous killing of children and the razing of entire villages. It is for this reason that the UN has declared this an incident of ethnic cleansing, the largest of its kind since the Rwandan genocide.

Angered citizens and military members have also denied the provision of food and other immediate aid to Rohingya populations remaining in Myanmar. Additionally, there are reports of the military planting landmines along the border with Bangladesh to prevent Rohingya who have fled Myanmar from reentering the country. All-in-all, the open hostility towards the Rohingya is both the problem and an obstacle to the provision of aid.

The UN Refugee Committee does not have the power to mandate sanctions or demand any actions of a sovereign state. Regardless, it would be valuable for the committee to make suggestions to the Security Council, advocating on behalf of the Rohingya and ensuring the long-term success of any implemented solutions.

Links for More Information

- http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGlpI4E/b.9536117/k.9DB4/Rohingya_Crisis.htm
- <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/the-truth-about-myanmars-rohingya-issue/>
- https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/opinion/sunday/myanmars-peace-prize-winner-and-crimes-against-humanity.html?_r=1
- <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/oct/05/rohingya-crisis-un-suppressed-report-predicting-its-shortcomings-in-myanmar>
- <http://abcnews.go.com/International/rohingya-crisis-tales-abuse-attacks-hunger/story?id=50772826>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/17/un-report-on-rohingya-hunger-is-shelved-at-myanmars-request>
- <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/03/asia/rohingya-united-nations-report/index.html>
- https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-ethnic-cleansing.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FMyanmar&action=click&contentCollection=world®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=8&page_type=collection

Asylum Seekers from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala

Known as the “Northern Triangle” of Central America, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are experiencing a mass exodus of asylum seekers fleeing to Mexico and the United States. The influx of this population to the United States has been so significant that the proportion of Mexicans attempting to enter the U.S. has been dwarfed by the Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans making the same journey.

Why is this happening? After all, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are not engaged in civil wars like those seen in Syria and South Sudan. The three countries have some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Innocent families are being exposed to such indiscriminate violence and abuse that they are choosing to leave their homes and risk the dangerous journey to safety in Mexico and the United States.

Violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America

The twentieth century was marked by authoritarian regimes in Central America. By the nineties, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador saw resolution of their respective conflicts. As a result, levels of violence declined in all three countries. Since then, though, levels of homicide, extortion, sexual violence, and intimidation have skyrocketed. Cities like San Pedro Sula in Honduras and San Salvador in El Salvador are some of the most dangerous in the world. El

Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have consistently been in the rankings of the five countries with the highest homicide rates in the world.

This violence has largely bloomed around intense gang conflict, but is furthered by police brutality and unwillingness on their part to defend innocent citizens. Gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) hold immense power and influence in the region, and are largely able to operate free from police interference. As a result, they are able to commit atrocities with impunity. For example, there are reports of women having their fingers cut off for failing to pay their extortion fees. Individuals who were unassociated bystanders to gang violence have since themselves been targeted with threats and violence.

In order for an individual to be granted refugee status, they must demonstrate a well-founded threat of persecution should they remain in their home country. According to data collected by Amnesty International, those living in the Northern Triangle of Central America are facing war zone-esque death tolls. In 2012, there were 7,172 murders in Honduras; El Salvador's murder rate spiked in 2015 at 6,656 murders (108 homicides per 100,000 citizens). The exact numbers fluctuate each year depending on the state of gang affairs.



In addition to the sheer number of murders, there is also a distinct gender-violence dimension to the situation in Central America. In a survey done of women fleeing El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, 64% reported that direct violent or threats of violence motivated them to leave their home countries. 60% of the women surveyed cited sexual violence or the direct threat of sexual violence being a primary reason for fleeing. All three countries have seen a spike in female homicide rate, tied to both interpersonal violence and gang violence. Additionally, reports of sexual assault have increased significantly over the past few years.

This gang violence also puts young people, particularly young men, at a high risk of being targeted by police brutality. There are frequent accounts of young men and women, unassociated with any of the gangs, being killed by law enforcement. This has led to civilians feeling as though they have nowhere to turn. They are persecuted by gang violence, and they experience harassment from the authorities.

Mass Migration out of the Northern Triangle

As a result of the high levels of violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, civilians are fleeing towards Mexico and, eventually, the United States in unprecedented numbers. This first became apparent under the Obama administration, when thousands of unaccompanied children attempted

to cross the border from Mexico to the United States. They were children from the Northern Triangle whose families had sent them alone on the perilous journey across Mexico. The United States was faced with a difficult decision between sending the children back into an inhospitable environment or allowing them to stay in the United States, with no support structure or legal documentation.

This conflict speaks to the underlying issue regarding those fleeing Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. They are fleeing legitimate horrors in their home countries, such that they qualify as refugees. In fact, the situation facing the people of the Northern Triangle has been labelled as a humanitarian crisis of displaced people by the United Nations. Yet, as racialized, nationalistic rhetoric intensifies in the U.S., there is little room in the current administration to recognize a large group of Latin Americans as refugees.

There are concerns of gangs, like MS13, gaining a foothold in the United States. In fact, the recent Virginia gubernatorial race focused on MS13's presence in local communities. While these claims and concerns are dismissed by many as poorly-disguised racism on the part of certain sections of U.S. politics, they are a major obstacle in the search for a humanitarian solution to the plight of the Northern Triangle. At the moment, the United States is helping Mexico pay for increased border security at Mexico's southern border. This has led to an increased number of deportations, and has encouraged fleeing people to take even more dangerous and obscure routes through Mexico.

The UN Refugees Committee should look at this situation from multiple angles. Of course, their priority should be to provide assistance to those fleeing violence in their home country. However, delegates should also be interested in peacekeeping options as well as a solution to the problem of Mexico and the United States' hesitancy to accept these migrants as refugees.

Links for More Information

- https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/nyregion/a-paradoxical-position-on-youths-fleeing-violence.html?_r=0
- <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr01/4865/2016/en/>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/us/us-continues-to-deport-central-american-migrants.html>
- <http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.pdf>

- <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Operational%20Update%20Central%20America%20and%20Mexico%20May%20-%20July%202015.pdf>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/central-america-violence-refugee-crisis-gangs-murder>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/us/politics/obama-refugees-central-america.html>

Refugee Resettlement

The past five years have been marked by a growing global refugee crisis. In 2016, there were 65.6 million displaced people as a result of conflict and persecution - the highest figure since World War II. Global media tends to focus on those fleeing the Syrian Civil War, but there are also large numbers refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Nigeria, and more. In this committee alone, we have covered topics that geographically range from Southeast Asia to Central America. With the growing number of refugees across the globe, it becomes important to evaluate the international responses to these refugees. In particular, we'd like delegates to assess the problems surrounding refugee resettlement into new, culturally dissimilar states.

Many countries across the globe are wary about allowing numerous refugees to resettle within their borders. There are various objections, including xenophobic sentiments tied to changes wrought by globalization. As a result of these xenophobic sentiments, some countries like Hungary have taken strong stances against any Arab, Muslim refugees being resettled within their borders.

Concerns are not only founded on cultural fear. Many governments and citizens fear that refugees will place a drain on their economy and will take advantage of social services seen as the sole right of citizens. National security also plays a role in motivating states to reject refugees. Politicians from the United States, for example, have called for a freeze on all refugees being resettled in the U.S. until a more thorough vetting process can be put in place.

While some states make a moral case for accepting refugees, the concerns of disparate states are legitimate. It is important that this body address those concerns, and come up with a plan to update the standards of refugee treatment. As a starting point, delegates should seek to understand current UN protocol on refugees, as is provided in the introduction letter to this background guide. There are three guiding principles on refugees: non-penalization, non-discrimination, and non-refoulement. This means that governments should not penalize refugees for entering their borders illegally given that they were fleeing danger. Further, governments should not make decisions about how those refugees are treated based on the refugees' gender, religion, race, sexual identity, or other uncontrollable factor. Finally, non-refoulement means that governments cannot return refugees back to their home states so long as they have legitimate fear of persecution upon return.

How should these principles be applied in the current environment? The committee should also consider the fact that states like Turkey, Greece, and Kenya accept a disproportionately large portion of the refugee population. What responsibility do other states, not burdened by being

located near a refugee exodus, have in aiding those receiving the most refugees? How should that burden be shared?

Furthermore, the fears and concerns of certain states must be addressed in full. How can the committee ensure that the vetting process is safe? The economic condition of the states receiving refugees must be stabilized, lest they refuse to take any further resettlers. Delegates would do well to remember that this is a GAP (General Assembly Plus) committee, so it will incorporate crisis elements. Decisions that are made about resettlement policy will have a direct impact on refugees' lives all across the world.

Thank you

UNA-Houston and Global Classrooms would like to give thanks to The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Model United Nations Chapel Hill, and give full writing credits of this Background Guide to Hannah Olmstead a second-year student at UNA-Chapel Hill. The mission of Global Classrooms is to introduce students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to a realm of international relations and diplomacy. We target Title 1 schools in the Houston area and give them an affordable opportunity to attend a Model UN conference.

Original Background Guide Link

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5984ff533e00bec843b8f96a/t/5a70d00a71c10b606d9b2c0f/15173427319/UN+Refugees+Background+Guide+%28PDF%29.pdf>