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Northwestern University Model United Nations

SOCHUM

Topic B: Humanitarian Issues Confronting
Refugee Camps

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Humanitarian Issues Confronting Refugee Camps

Introduction:

The persecution of the defenseless has existed for as long as there has been social hierarchy. It is only in relatively recent years, however, that these victims have been able to flee the site of their oppression and receive legitimate aid from organized authorities. This sense of global community continues to develop today, as more and more people begin to realize that the mistreatment of their fellow man is not something that they should observe idly. Within this context of greater human responsibility, however, lies an increasingly militarized world.

Increased accessibility of weaponry and a variety of other factors have led this world into unparalleled, destabilizing danger. Governments turn against their own citizens with greater force and with a longer reach than previously imaginable. Refugees, a reported eleven million of them, emerge from this type of situation. Forced to flee from their native land, these people are accepted into other nations, but their presence introduces an enormous number of challenges to the local government and to the rest of the world.

The challenges presented range from the practical questions of financial support to more complicated legal issues. Refugees inherently receive a smaller allocation of resources and of legal support than the natural-born citizens of a given nation. Therein lies the first and greatest of the many humanitarian issues involved in the problem of refugees—they literally receive less food, water, clothing, and other necessities than an average citizen, despite whatever action may be taken by sympathetic organizations. A lack of legal support exacerbates the situation, as refugees find it nearly impossible to argue for their own rights with local governments. Yet many of the nations that accept refugees can barely afford to support their own citizens, regardless of their intentions.



A dearth of wealth in many areas has led to humanitarian crises within some countries that attempt to help their neighbors' citizens—while more politically stable, some nations do not have the resources to aid their neighbors as they would wish. A more complicated question of sovereignty and of responsibility comes into play when addressing this issue. The United Nations and its related organizations cannot get involved and offer their support without the agreement of the host nation. Yet, if a nation is allowing its people and its refugees to starve, can the United Nations simply sit back and wait? Should it really hesitate to call on other, financially stable nations to support their weaker allies?

The United Nations Committee on Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Affairs, known as SOCHUM, confronts the problems of sovereignty and of financial support as much as any committee within the United Nations. While trying to defend all citizens of the world, SOCHUM must often work around the reluctance of nations to support its efforts. As a committee, it constantly strives to address the humanitarian issues it finds most relevant to the greatest scale of people, and to do so both at a very specific level and with as great a reach as possible. The problem of refugees simply has too great of a scope and too many pressing humanitarian issues not to remain relevant for years into the future



Background Information

It is nearly impossible to pinpoint when the first refugees emerged, but fairly straightforward to discover the first organized steps involved in giving them much-needed assistance. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (known as UNHCR) was established in 1951 as part of the Geneva Refugee Convention, ratified that year, to find places and support for the displaced persons who remained following World War II. A protocol was added in 1967 that amended the scope of the official definition of a refugee, allowing for support beyond those affected by the war. The protocol defined a refugee as a person who:



“owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

There are many people that have fled their homes who do not fall under this definition. The first of these are *internally displaced persons*, or people that are leaving for similar reasons to those of refugees but are still legally under the protection and jurisdiction of that country. *Asylum-seekers* even more closely resemble refugees, and they are refugees, but for a technicality. Asylum-seekers have crossed international borders for similar reasons and requesting identical assistance, but refugees do not become refugees until they have been officially approved by the nation. Their claims have not yet been evaluated. Finally, there are economic migrants who move to a new country not because of an imminent threat to their lives, but because they wish to enjoy better ones. Although none of the aforementioned people technically fall under the jurisdiction of the UNHCR, and these distinctions



must often be made in order for the UNHCR to remain within its financial and bureaucratic capacity, efforts are made to help these other people across the globe. In addition, the UNHCR will step in with aid and support in cases of natural disaster and other dramatic issues. Another United Nations organization also deals with refugees: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). As the name suggests, it is devoted entirely to camps and refugees that have arisen as a result of the prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An entire topic could be devoted just to that conflict, but for the sake of brevity, it will only be lightly touched upon in this particular document.



The humanitarian issues facing refugees in the past and present are largely similar and fairly obvious. Due to the sad truth that rural and impoverished areas tend to have increased socio-political strife, and that the surrounding rural, impoverished areas tend to be the ones that take in refugees, the status of most camps is pitiful despite the best efforts of the UNHCR. Inadequate food, water, and infrastructure are common problems. More subtle concerns include a lack of legal protection and the psychological damage inflicted upon people when they are forced to flee their homes, damage which of course remains untreated in such a crowded setting in which people are simply fighting to survive. More aid is clearly necessary for the camps.

There are three main durable solutions for refugees, for the intention is not to allow them to live out their lives in these crowded, unsanitary camps. They tend to end up staying in the camps for unhealthy durations of time, but this is decidedly not the aim of the UNHCR and other organizations devoting to the aid of refugees. Voluntary repatriation is the optimal solution—for the crisis to alleviate to an extent which would allow refugees to return to their natural homes. Often, however, refugees are unwilling to make this choice, and in recent years, most crises have become



drawn out affairs that force refugees to remain away for their own safety. The second option is local settlement, the decision to become a normal, working citizen within the country to which a refugee has fled. This option, while often the easiest for the refugee, puts the most strain on the host nation. The sustention of refugee camps poses its own difficulties to a host country even without the added economic strain of the support of a large quantity of new citizens, especially in areas with any sort of unemployment difficulties or an inadequate social welfare system. The final durable solution is to move refugees to a third, willing nation. This idea has potential, but the number of nations willing to take in huge quantities of refugees remains small.



Current Status by Region

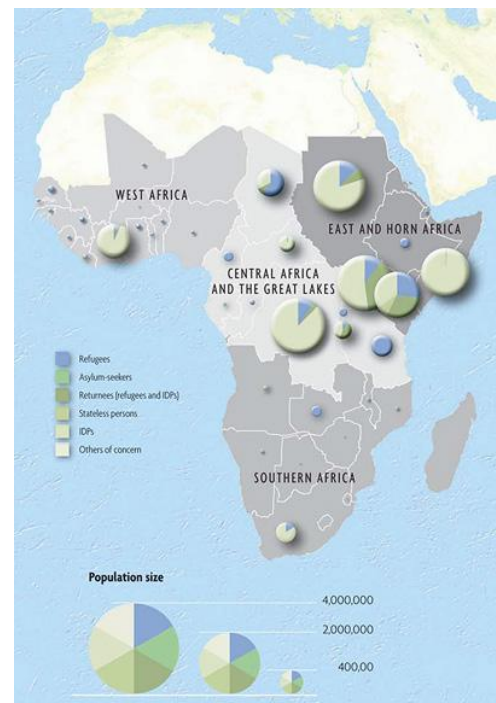
In 2007, the UNHCR issued a ten-point plan to illustrate where the needs of refugees lie now, over fifty years after the original convention and forty years after its protocol. These ten points are guidelines utilized by nations around the globe for the improvement of the lives of refugees.

1. Cooperation among key partners
2. Data collection and analysis
3. Protection-sensitive entry systems
4. Reception arrangements
5. Mechanisms for profiling and referral
6. Differentiated processes and procedures
7. Solutions for refugees
8. Addressing secondary movements
9. Return arrangements for non-refugees and alternative migration options
10. Information strategy.

This ten-point plan addresses many of the modern problems affecting refugees and displaced persons and offers a clear plan. Many nations use this plan as a specific set of guidelines for their own legislation. Beyond this all-encompassing plan, it is easiest to review the current status of the refugee crisis geographically, as the trends vary by region. The two areas with major refugee concerns are, unsurprisingly, Africa and Asia. The overarching theme, however, is the protraction of many of the refugee situations. This situation hurts both the host country and the refugees themselves, as the refugees exist in a perpetual state of limbo while the state must allow these people to simply live on their land, offering them what assistance they can without hurting their own citizens. Besides the damage that the situation does to both the host country and to the refugees, it



also causes many of the crises to fall from the public eye. Without public attention, any state in which popular opinion plays into budgetary decisions will have difficulty justifying sending copious amounts of aid. One of the major issues that must be addressed is how, in this age of instantaneous information and brief attention spans, one can get the attention, and therefore the aid, of the nations best able to give it. An exploration of the different regions, in which one discovers both the problem areas and the strongest domains, will offer further insight as to how the allocation of resources can best be determined.



I. Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is a well-known area of concern, and has several places for which this is true. As of 2009, there were 10 million people of concern in Africa, of which 2.1 million were refugees. Even more alarmingly, 98% of these people are in protracted refugee situations, in which they have been in a camp for an extended duration of time. There are a couple of heartening aspects to the situation in Africa, however. First of all, the overall number of refugees in the region is now trending downwards, a hopeful sign. Furthermore, several nations such as the United Republic of Tanzania are accepting citizenship applications from refugees, allowing them to resume normal lives. The major African crises are in Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the UNHCR's 2010 budget, the countries most in need of support for the refugees they already hold are Kenya (its Dadaab camp is specifically singled out as lacking in infrastructure and necessary



materials), Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (which is both taking in refugees and sending people out), and Ethiopia. African nations vary in their reception of refugees, but in general tend to be supportive of each other, despite their extreme poverty.

II. The Americas

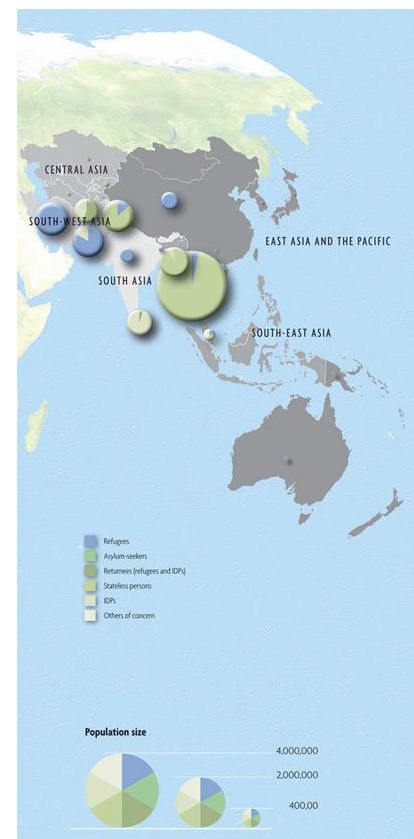
The Americas have only a couple of true trouble zones. Colombia has one of the highest internally displaced populations in the world due to its incredibly unstable government and high levels of violence. Honduras became an issue in 2009 due to the ousting of the President. Beyond this, the region of the Americas looks extremely promising, with a number of complex legislative efforts and an overall supportive base. It boasts the most specific plan of action to aid refugees: the Mexico Plan of Action (2005). Both Canada and the United States accept large numbers of refugees, and the United States is exploring ways to expand the number of migrants it can take within its borders. In Mexico and the Caribbean, migrant movement is unstable, but there are no true refugee situations. Most nations have relatively weak economies but have decent governmental stability. Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay have national commissions to aid refugees and migrants as necessary. Many of the poor areas of the region are getting a new influx of refugees from the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, placing added pressure upon already-shaky economies. Security in many areas also poses a problem to asylum-seekers. Nonetheless, the region as a whole has seen fairly solid results and can probably support more refugees.



III. *Asia and the Pacific*

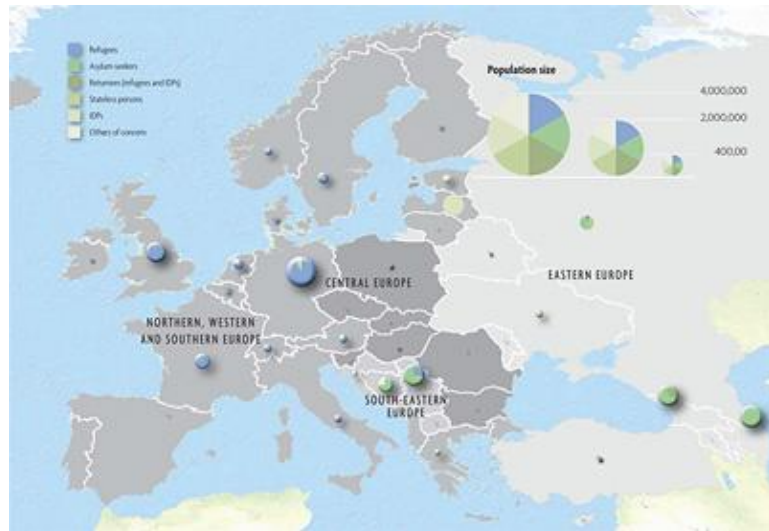
This region worsened significantly in 2009 from a humanitarian perspective. The United Nations cannot even access about half of Afghanistan due to the dramatic escalation of violence in many regions. In Pakistan, 2.5 million people fled their homes due to increasing destabilization. The Pakistani government has since taken control of the situation, but continued and prolonged displacement of these refugees is still anticipated. As the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan both host incredible numbers of Afghan refugees—refugees who, due to the renewed and increased violence, now reject all efforts at repatriation—Pakistan’s decline severely hurt the region’s attempts to aid refugees. Thailand also has seen a large decrease in space available for refugees, often rejecting or detaining migrants from Myanmar.

On a more positive note, Sri Lanka ended its civil war when peace was reached with the Tamil Tigers in 2009, allowing for the return of thousands of internally displaced persons. Japan has new and strong legislation regarding the care of refugees, and the prospects of China developing similar legislation appear promising. If any semblance of stability can be reached in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this region will begin to do well.



IV. Europe

Europe is a very diverse region in terms of refugee development. It has a fairly developed bureaucratic structure, including the European Council on Refugees and Exiles along with three overarching political bodies. A prevalent issue in Europe—in



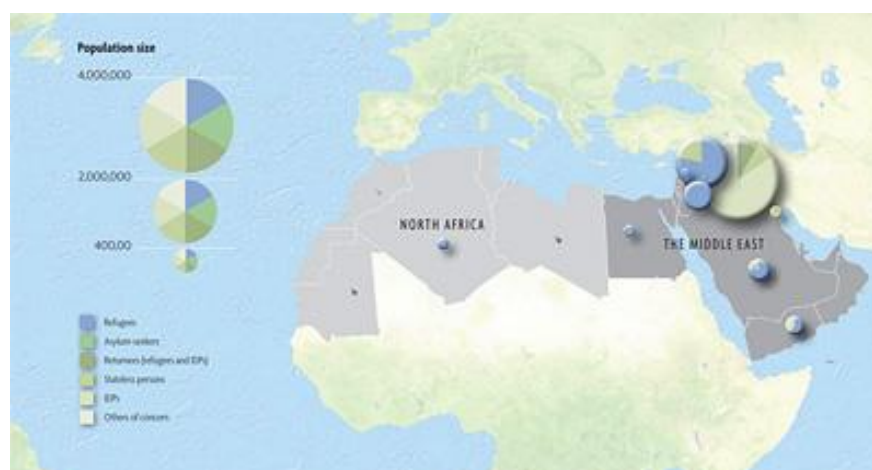
particular south-east Europe, the Baltic States, and the Russian Federation—is that of statelessness, as many countries have deep ethnic divisions not properly separated by the political boundaries drawn in the past. The major destabilizing factor in most of Europe is that of ethnic minorities that feel they need their own state, or assert that they are oppressed by a majority that they believe encroaches upon their territory. A notable example of this is Georgia, which has been battling with Russia. There are also an incredible number of displaced persons remaining from the conflict in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the many years that have passed. The UNHCR would like to see this conflict in particular resolved sooner rather than later. Many nations also do not yet have well-developed infrastructures for the acceptance of asylum-seekers, despite the many unifying forces present in Europe. The Red Cross is also incredibly active in Europe and offers plenty of support to the region's initiatives.



V. *Middle East and North Africa*

The obvious situation in this region is that of Israel and Palestine. With no end in sight, for the purposes of this committee's deliberation, the treatment of its refugees shall be left to the highly capable UNRWA.

The major issue in the region outside of Palestine is that of Iraqi refugees. There are 1.4 million displaced persons with few places to turn in the volatile Middle



East. Women and children have particularly suffered in this region—those who are displaced are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence with little intervention. The nations willing to give assistance and keep Iraqi refugees have been hit severely by the global financial crisis. Syria and Jordan, two huge supporters in the past, can no longer sustain their programs and camps without significant external aid. Iraq is not at all ready for the repatriation of its citizens, but many of them have voluntarily returned to regions that are no longer as dangerous, particularly in southern regions. Egypt accepts many refugees from all of the surrounding nations, but many of its asylum-seekers are truly seeking asylum in Israel. Israel cannot face this sort of burden while embroiled in its own conflict, and this relationship destabilizes the region and hurts Egypt's ability to provide support. Furthermore, Israel has taken steps to increase its intake of refugees where it can, another optimistic point. Yemen also took 150,000 displaced persons, largely from Somalia, but lost much of its ability to support when internal fighting began in 2009. Its traditional open-door policy is no longer



feasible. Many other camps in the region are not providing adequate food and water, much less appropriate security to those living in the camps. Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf were highlighted in the UNHCR report as particularly poor in quality.



Questions to Consider

1. What responsibility does a nation have to aid its neighbors?
2. What region of the world most urgently needs attention to alleviate its refugee issues?
3. How can one best elicit funds and space from unwilling nations?
4. Are there ways to strike the problem at the heart—namely, to lessen the number of refugees to begin with?
5. What are appropriate standards of care within camps? Are they being met?
6. What is the most pressing need of the refugees in the camps and how can SOCHUM facilitate its arrival?
7. What is the role of the United Nations and its committees in the internal affairs of individual countries?
8. Where is the line drawn between respect for sovereignty and duty to humanity? Is that metaphorical line currently in the right place?
9. Is it always wrong for a nation to deny refugees asylum?

Recommended Sources

1. The UNHCR website was INCREDIBLY USEFUL. Use it!
2. <http://www.un.org>
3. Google Scholar for official papers!
4. The Red Cross website, or other relevant NGOs/charities.



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