

Victoria Shanghai Academy Model United Nations XI

United Nations High Commissioners on Refugees (UNHCR)

Topic: Protecting Refugees from COVID-19

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Message from chairs:

Dear UNHCR delegates,

Welcome to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees council at VSAMUN XI. Whether it is your first, second or tenth conference, we hope to provide you a challenging yet rewarding experience during the conference. As chairs of this conference, we look forward to watching delegates improve public speaking skills and engage in fruitful discussions about this real world issue. It is expected that all delegates enter the conference with an enthusiastic attitude and eager to participate in debate. Delegates should prepare by writing position papers by introducing the topic background, outlining their countries' stances and proposing possible solutions. Position papers should be no longer than a page and a half but should at least be around a page long. While the chair report is a good starting point, delegates should research more into specifics about their own country before the conference. If any delegates have any questions, feel free to email us and we will try our best to answer as quickly as possible.

Looking forward to the conference!

Best wishes,

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Introduction to the UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees is a UN agency mandated to coordinate international efforts in protecting and aiding refugees across the globe. It was established on December 14, 1950 to support and safeguard the rights of stateless people, asylum seekers, and Europeans displaced after World War II. Since then, UNHCR has expanded its operations to help over 20 million refugees worldwide, playing a crucial role in major crises including the Syrian Crisis in 2011 and Afghanistan Crisis in 2021.

Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the standing committee meets three times a year to review UNHCR's activities, address concerns over the current refugee situation, and make decisions on existing refugee programs. UNHCR's main objective is to equip refugees with basic necessities (food, water, shelter etc.) and ensure all individuals can exercise their rights to flee their country and seek asylum in another. It aligns itself with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by striving for sustainable development, peace, and security.

History of the Topic

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened people's livelihoods and exacerbated conflicts, causing many people to flee their country. As of 2020, the number of displaced people has increased by 4% to a record high of almost 82.4 million people. Not only are refugees troubled by the asylum-seeking process and settlement challenges, vaccine inequity has left refugees vulnerable and unprotected from the virus.



Causes of influx of refugees

A large number of displaced people are fleeing from conflict or war. The Iraq War, conflicts in Afghanistan, and the War in Somalia have been some of the greatest producers of refugees fleeing conflict to seek peace and stability, but the biggest source of migrants by far has been the Syrian Civil War. Another occurrence that displaces many people is unfair persecution - many refugees from countries under harsh regimes, especially protesters and journalists, find themselves unable to remain in their countries safely. Also, an increasing number of refugees in recent years have not fled their countries from conflict, but instead to seek better opportunities for themselves and their children.

Conflict and refugee crises in several Greater Middle Eastern and African countries increased the total number of forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2014 to almost 60 million, the highest level since World War II. The routes that these migrants take to reach Europe (generally overland from the Middle Eastern region or by sea from North Africa) are perilous and have led to the loss of countless lives.

COVID-19 Protection and other issues

In most places, refugees are “high risk, low priority”. Many countries, especially less developed countries, have yet to secure sufficient funding and resources to purchase or produce enough vaccines for their citizens. This has led countries to exclude refugees from vaccine rollouts. Combined with the unhygienic, overcrowded, and enclosed living environments, as well as the lack of access to clean water and proper sanitation systems, refugees are at increased risk of COVID-19 infection as evidenced by the many large-scale outbreaks of COVID-19 at refugee camps in the past two years, due to the fact that social distancing is almost impossible.

The harsh living conditions have imposed a huge emotional burden on refugees, leading to their worsened mental health and well-being. The UNHCR reported a drastic increase in the number of refugees showing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress disorder. Without a proper support system to facilitate refugees’ mental recovery, they are subject to elevated risks of self-harm and suicide.

Apart from health and safety concerns, the pandemic has brought new challenges to refugees. The uncontrollable rise in food and housing prices has led to a major struggle amongst refugees



in fulfilling basic survival needs. In addition, there is a growing belief of refugees being the “carriers of COVID-19”, leading to rising anti-refugee sentiment and intensified discrimination towards them.

Definition of Key Terms

Refugee

A person who has fled their country of origin to avoid war, violence, or persecution

Asylum-seeker

A person seeking international protection but whose request has yet to be processed

Internally displaced person (IDP)

A person who is fleeing their homes but yet to cross their country’s borders

Vaccine equity

The equal distribution of vaccines across all countries

Expulsion of refugees

The act of withdrawing the right to reside in a country

Refoulement

The act of forcing a refugee or asylum seeker to return to their country of origin



Guiding questions

1. Should governments prioritise COVID-19 vaccinations for their citizens or refugees?
How can they balance these to parties to ensure equal access?
 - a. How can governments deal with domestic opposition towards refugees? For example, how can governments balance humanitarian obligations with domestic concerns?
2. Are MEDCs (more economically developed countries) obligated to provide funding for LEDCs hosting refugees?
 - a. How much is each MEDC required to donate? How would the funds be distributed? Who will ensure the funding is used correctly and not lost through corruption?
3. Should all governments accept all refugees who arrive in their country?
 - a. Should countries who do not have the financial capacity to provide equal opportunities for refugees continue to accept refugees? Should there be consequences for countries who repatriate refugees or countries who ignore their refugee population (eg. not providing equal opportunities)?
4. Should major vaccine producers such as the United States of America be required to provide COVID-19 vaccines for refugees?
 - a. How many doses should be provided? Should they be responsible for supplying vaccines for all citizens or only refugees?



Further Research

As there are many solutions to this problem, reading about past UN actions towards supporting refugees could be helpful, as well as research about outbreaks and vaccination rates in countries hosting refugees. Delegates should rely on trusted sources such as [UNHCR](#) or [WHO](#). Linked below are more resources delegates may use to assist them in their research:

<https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/conflict-and-refugees/>

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2020-0134/>

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/7/60dda08e4/refugee-health-challenges-remain-high-amid-covid-19.html>

<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/a-virus-that-respects-no-borders-protecting-refugees-and-migrants-during-covid-19>

<https://www.unhcr.org/jo/14917-a%E2%80%AFthird%E2%80%AFof-refugees-eligible-for-covid-19-vaccine-have-been-vaccinated-in-jordans-refugee-camps%E2%80%AF.html>

<https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/donate>

<https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-and-undocumented-migrants-must-be-vaccinated-ngos-warn/a-56664623>