

**Forum:** UN World Health Assembly (WHA)

**Issue:** Impact of COVID-19 on refugee camps

**Chair:** Patrick Ho, Deputy President

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## Introduction

Ever since the Wuhan outbreak in early 2020, COVID 19 has found its way to affect every corner of the world. To date, approximately 47 million COVID-19 cases have been reported to WHO, whereas around 1.2 million people have lost their lives. COVID-19 is beyond just a health crisis, but also an economic, humanitarian, and security crisis. On June 25th, the UN Secretary-General launched a report that contains the UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 in order to protect lives, preserve societies, and quickly recover. While some cities are gradually pulling themselves out of turmoil, refugees are having an especially difficult time without sufficient humanitarian aid and space to protect themselves from the pandemic. It is clear that there are two main concerns the United Nations and international community should address: health and equality.

Today, 79.5 million people (more than 1 percent of the world's population) have been militantly displaced around the globe with more than 25 million refugees in camps around the world. According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), 34 countries currently have up to 1 billion COVID-19 infections and 3.2 million deaths. Since Almost 90% of those refugees reside in underdeveloped countries that struggle with a lack of basic services and ability to properly adjust to the pandemic, their immune systems are more prone to higher rates of malnutrition and diseases, curtailing their chances of survival. UN officials have concluded that these camps are one of the most vulnerable areas to a second phase of the coronavirus as it can rapidly spread through crowds. Social distancing is virtually impossible due to the scarcity of open space and clean water for hygienic purposes. Other opposing forces, such as nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia, make health care harder to access. If the absence of medical care for refugees is perpetuated, COVID-19 will require more than just an instruction from the UN to end.

Health is not the only threat COVID 19 has inflicted upon countries and refugee camps. A UNHCR report released on September 3rd predicts that devastating effects of COVID-19 on refugee education will occur unless the international community takes measures against it immediately. The potential of the youths in refugee camps to excel in the future is threatened because of the situation they were unfortunately placed in. Based on 2019 data from twelve countries that host more than half of the

world's refugee children, the 77 percent gross enrollment at the primary school level has dropped to 31 percent in secondary and 3 percent in high-school levels. However, there was more progress with enrollment in secondary education rising up 2 percent with an influx of refugee children attending school because of the nation's financial support towards these refugee camps. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic now threatens to take a step back from these advances, distancing away from the hard work to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Many countries are slowly gaining the traction to recover from the plight of the pandemic. But while those nations have the resources to support themselves, refugees are left in stateless and fragile places desperate for aid and assistance. It is not simply humanitarian or medical aid since there are many factors that perpetuate their vulnerability. Financial support and infrastructure are necessary to ensure their quality of life is being regarded.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Refugee

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) defines individuals who have escaped war, violence, conflict or persecution from their home by crossing an international border and gravitating to another country. They often travel without sufficient clothes as they abandon their house, possessions, jobs and family in their home. More than 79.5 million people are refugees in the world in the attempt to flee from war, poverty, tyranny, and climate change.

### Asylum Seekers

An asylum seeker is a different type of refugee that has no official recognition as a refugee by the country the person fled to. These refugees face more trouble gaining assistance from nations or organizations as they are prone to external influences that prevent them from accessing basic needs and resources.

### Refugee Resettlement

There are currently more than 25 million refugees in camps around the world. Resettlement is to the migration of refugees from an asylum country to a country that agreed to granting their entry and subsequently providing them a settlement. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) is in charge of overseeing the resettlement mandated by its Statute and the UN General Assembly Resolutions.

## **1951 Refugee Convention**

The 1951 Refugee Convention is a key legal document that provides the cornerstone to the protection of refugees. 149 State parties congregated and defined the term 'refugee' to outline the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of States to protect them. The central idea of the legislation is to assert that refugees should not be forced to return to a country where there are dire threats to their life and freedom, making it a rule of customary international law. UNHCR will be enforcing this idea, serving its role as the 'guardian' for the refugees. Based on the legislation, it mandates that the nation states need to cooperate with UNHCR in upholding the rights of refugees.

## **Vaccines**

A biological substance injected in a person to enhance the immune system, which recognizes and eliminates pathogens, such as viruses. Developers around the world, such as the United States, Russia, and China, have been moving into the final phase. As the distribution initiates, refugees are going to be placed in the lowest priority since there is no official state in charge of protecting them, even though they are in need of the vaccines the most.

## **World Health Organization (WHO)**

The World Health Organization (WHO) is an agency in the United Nations specialized in international public safety. With 194 Member States, WHO is an union to achieve better health for everyone around the globe. It has combated diseases, such as influenza and HIV. In addition, they assist people in less developed nations that do not have the dependency to combat diseases on their own. WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on January 30th with Public Health Emergency of International Concern. This led to world-wide skepticism of their competence in terms of ensuring overall safety of people in every nation. Nevertheless, WHO will be responsible for distributing a completed vaccine in the near future along with other non-governmental(NGO) and nonprofit organizations(NPO).

## **Background Information**

### **History of Refugee**

From the beginning, the causes of refugee movements were religious and racial intolerance in their origin. Religious groups were forced to be exiled or conform to the official religion they were living in. The earliest example was Spain expelling Jews if they refused to convert to Christianity during the 15th century. Some causes for refugee movements began to develop throughout history that leaves refugees no choice but to escape.

## ***Political***

During the 1900s, political refugee migration were often caused by the development of governments with the executive power to suppress nonconformist minorities. In Europe, the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939 pushed more than 1 million Armenians to flee from Turkish Asia Minor, and several hundred thousand Spanish loyalists fled to France. The effects of the Spanish Civil War changed the balance of power in Europe, leading to the peace movement and ideas of anti-fascists governments fighting for democracy. Moving on to Asia, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 caused more than 2 million to Taiwan and Hong Kong (British colony). The rise of a tyrannical government built from the rise of communism drove millions of people from the place they used to call home. The ability to live freely is worth the travel of a thousand miles. The record of the refugee movement was quickly surpassed by similar political migration, such as the Korean War, the Hungarian Revolution, the Cuban revolution, and China's dominance over Tibet.

## ***Territorial***

After World War II and the defeat of Germany, the Potsdam Conference in 1945 allowed German minorities to migrate to a few European countries. With 12 million Germans left in a divided territory of Germany, this led to the split of east and west. In 1947, 18 million Hindus from Pakistan and Muslims from India started a migration after the partition of the Indian subcontinent, making it one of the biggest population transfers in history. In addition, the Palestine's partition in 1948 led to an entire population of Palestinian Arabs to transfer triggered by the military confrontation between Israel and bordering Arab countries. Reasons for territorial migration comes from war, threatening the livelihood of civilians living under a new regime or government.

## ***Barriers***

In the early 19th century, passports and visas were not mandatory to migrate from one country to another. Refugees' right to asylum was universally recognized. However, after the numerous waves of refugees, a problem posed for refugees with closed state frontiers emerging around the late 19th century. During the 1920s, ignorance towards human suffering started to grow as nations were inundated with unprecedented numbers of refugees, giving them the incentive to shut themselves away from the people in need.

## **Health and Hygiene**

The International Rescue Committee announced the risk of individuals in refugee camps facing Covid-19 disease spread because of crowded areas. The only way of countering outspread is to wash their hands, social-distancing, and masks, but these are the luxuries most refugees cannot obtain. In

reality, refugees have barely any access to clean water or soap. Small tents limit the chance to avoid densely populated areas. In fact, most families have to share a single mask when going outside. Covid-19 is not the only disease refugee camps face in the past.

### ***Malaria***

Refugee arrivals to the U.S. range from 35,000 to 100,000 per year. The number of newly arriving refugees originating in Africa rose from 9% to 39% from 1998 to 2005. African refugee arrivals have represented 30 percent-40 percent of all new arrivals annually since 2005. Malaria has emerged as a consequence of high prevalence, probable virulence and complex epidemiology. Malaria has plagued displaced populations in endemic areas, and this situation continues in many refugee settings. If refugees lack access to health programs in the host nation, many illnesses, including malaria and other parasitic infections, may be at risk.

### ***Hepatitis B***

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver that may result from a number of infectious and noninfectious causes. With as much as 2.2 million infections in the United States and approximately more than 786,000 deaths per year globally, chronic hepatitis B virus infection is a significant cause of preventable morbidity. In resource-limited nations, these deaths happen at high rates. HBsAg-positive refugees are not vaccinated against hepatitis B overseas and are told about the virus and prevention of transmission. In rare circumstances, refugees adversely affected by HBsAg receive up to two doses of hepatitis B vaccine abroad.

### ***Mental Health***

COVID-19's global spread is triggering a humanitarian nightmare in refugee camps in conflict regions. For example, over 350,000 survivors of terrorism from Iraq and Syria where they currently live in 20 refugee settlements. These are already traumatized populations are now dealing with new adversities that intensify psychological suffering and high suicide rates. Not only physical, but also mental healthcare and humanitarian actors are limited. Studies have found the deterioration of mental health of Yazidis in Iraq refugee camps after the COVID-19 outbreak. Health of refugees is not being upheld, causing camps to always face a threatening epidemic.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **Sudan**

The crisis in South Sudan has deteriorated to a national humanitarian emergency in the middle of rising conflict and worsening circumstances. The estimated number of refugees from South Sudan is now over 2 million, making it the largest refugee crisis in Africa and the third largest in the world. Unfortunately, 63 percent of refugees from South Sudan are under the age of 18. Women and children form the bulk of those leaving South Sudan, people who are perpetrators of terrorist crimes and sexual harassment. Around 800,000 South Sudanese refugees, almost half of all South Sudanese refugees, are staying in camps of Uganda and Sudan.

## Bangladesh

Bangladesh hosts mostly Muslim Rohingya refugees that have fled from the violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar since 2017. More than 850,000 refugees have to live in highly congested conditions in 34 refugee camps around Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee settlement. There are also host communities, which contains around 440,000 people. International Rescue Committee are concerned that people living in refugee camps are prone to Covid-19 due to the crowded conditions and devoid of sanitation. Recent statistics suggest that the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases, where there are 277 cases in the refugee camps and 4,635 cases in the host community. Currently, Covid-19 has caused 8 Rohingya refugee fatalities and 70 fatalities of host community members.

## Syria

Ever since 2011, the Syrian conflict has been pushing around 11 million Syrians from their homes, creating the largest refugee crisis in the world. The UN High Commission for Refugees is already preoccupied with 5,554,915 Syrian refugees in August 2020. Other unregistered refugees found their way living in neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and more. These refugees are considered Internally displaced persons. Due to crowds, poor hygiene, and few medical services, they are more vulnerable to the pandemic with barely any support from any organization.

## Turkey

With the surge of the largest refugee crisis in Syria, Turkey as its neighbor currently hosts around 3.6 million registered Syrians refugees. Around 98% of these refugees reside in urban areas alongside Turks, but still in overcrowded areas. Even as registered refugees, language barriers, lack of background information, and poverty created a blockage to healthcare and medical services Turkey was providing. These difficulties led to Turkey's 2016 deal with the EU to halt Syrians entering the EU from Turkey, where the EU will be providing funding for the refugees in Turkey by 2021.

## Lebanon

The Syrian Refugee Crisis led to Lebanon hosting around 1.5 million Syrian refugees, but only 900,000 of them are officially registered. Even as registered refugees, half of them have to live in tents or

other temporary structures. Ever since the financial crisis in 2019, the precarious economic situation in Lebanon is making refugees even more vulnerable to bad conditions. The outbreak of Covid-19 enhanced the instability as half of Syrian refugees are surviving on less than \$2.90 per person per day. The pandemic caused a huge destruction to the subsistence needed by a handful of refugees.

## Jordan

Jordan currently has 658,000 registered Syrian refugees, but an actual total of 1.3 million, explaining why most of them do not live in camps. As a matter of fact, those lucky enough to live in official camps only receive basic help from the Jordanian Government and other humanitarian agencies. It is definite they are better off than those outside camps that have to earn a living, despite Covid-19 limiting options. The UN confirmed in September that the virus had made its way to Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan with more than 50,000 Syrians. Among the 10,000 refugees, mainly women and children, people are trapped in the unofficial Rubkan camp, a treacherous military no-go area by the Syrian border. Due to new restrictions of the pandemic, humanitarian agencies have been denied entry to the camps and provide assistance.

## United States of America

The United States has one of the largest global resettlement programs, with UNHCR cooperating with U.S. governmental agencies and Non-government organizations. The collaborations gave them the ability to access the US. information to resettle refugees through spreading knowledge among partners and the public about refugees around the world. Their promotion of acceptance has thrived through the public, increasing willingness to accept more refugees. However, recent events of Covid-19 restricted their ability to help, putting the pressure on other countries refugees are more likely to migrate to.

## United Kingdom

Along with many other More Economically Developed Nations, the United Kingdom was able to make a contribution to refugees' struggle against Covid-19. The State said during July that the UK had spent 21 million to combat the Bangladesh outbreak of Covid-19. The Government dedicated an extra 47.5 million of UK funding to provide humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees and combatting Covid-19 in Bangladesh and natural catastrophes at a multinational conference in October.

## UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

UN Refugee Agency is a UN agency designated to help refugees. To further expand the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan, it launched \$255 million to push for counteracting measures against COVID-19 outbreaks within refugee communities. However, the United Nations made a decision to ban further travel for refugees from refugee resettlement, leaving them stranded in overcrowded crowds with a higher risk of getting infected. UNHCR has raised concerns on the severe consequences of COVID-19

has on nations' economy, from a deduction of income to the closure of social service. These are usually the factors that urge people to escape their home and become refugees, exacerbating the refugee crisis.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
December 14th, 1950	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created to help millions of Europeans after World War II.
July 28th, 1951	The 1951 Refugee Convention was passed after massive displacement of refugees from World War II. 26 states gathered to define refugees and ensure their protection under nations.
March 15th, 2011	Syrian Civil War started, leading to the Syrian Refugee Crisis.
December 31st, 2019	China announced the outbreak of Covid-19 cases in Wuhan.

## Relevant UN Resolutions and Treaties

- International migration and development, 21 December 2016, (A/RES/71/237)
- New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, 03 October 2016, (A/RES/71/1)
- High-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants, 30 June 2016, (A/RES/70/290)
- Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 21 October 2015, (A/RES/70/1)
- Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, 17 August 2015, (A/RES/69/313)
- Declaration of the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, 3 October 2013, (A/RES/68/4)

## Possible Solutions

**Nations states should relocate refugees to settlements with adequate maintenance for an appropriate amount of refugees to stay in.** Hygiene and sanitation are factors that refugee camps struggle with due to the influx caused by the refugee crisis. Millions of refugees must resort to cramped spaces amid migration, leaving them vulnerable to diseases along the way. If given enough management



and organization, many of these diseases may be curtailed, leading to a decrease of deaths. This solution poses the problem where the country has to set a higher budget for refugee camps. Since there are no international obligations to take these refugees in, racism and prejudice will urge nations to push or abandon them to direct more funding to save their own civilians. Delegates must find measures to incentive nations and emphasize how not assisting the refugees is only going to perpetuate the issue. Solvency can be found with more international cooperation and coordination to tackle the outspread of Covid-19.

**Another solution states can solve the incessant displacement problem that leads to disease spread by establishing a governed, safe passage for refugee migration.** This not only alleviates the Covid-19 problem, but also the refugee crisis. It is important to note that completely eliminating does not mean eliminating the chance that there will ever be disease lurking in refugee camps. If refugees are willing to go through illegal and treacherous ways for migration, government unregulated camps are becoming more welcoming to refugees. This solution required intense negotiations between nations as a more open passage brings in more asylum seekers looking for new homes. States are going to set limits in which refugees will once again use illegal passage again. Remember that when solving a problem, you can possibly worsen it as well.

**A more ambitious approach is to put a halt to refugee migration for a brief period of time with foreign military assistance to prevent illegal forms of immigration.** The disease will not go away if there is constantly a flow of people swarming into refugee camps. Although refugees choose to leave due to poverty and government instability, there are other problems one can face in foreign countries, such as racism and violence. To properly propose this idea in the committee, delegates present priorities for solving issues that can lead to another. It is important to do things slowly step by step, so it is possible to solve multiple problems at once. It can be argued that this solution is inhumane to refugees desperate of escaping from war and conflict, but their lives can be further endangered if given the opportunity to leave.

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