

Research Report

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Issue: Ensuring the safety and protection of asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in transit and reception centers.
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Introduction

Conflicts such as war, climate or poverty have forced millions of people around the world to leave their home country in search for safety. Among these millions are asylum seekers, refugees, and internationally displaced people. They face dangerous journeys as they cross countries with their families in search of safe shelter. Transit centers, created by the UN and other humanitarian organizations, give temporary support to refugees and aim to make the journey as easy as possible. However, transit centers are often where refugees face the most trouble. Conditions in transit centers are not ideal and refugees often face violence, psychological trauma, and unsanitary living conditions. It is unethical to claim to help refugees and instead subject them to the same trauma they are escaping from. Therefore, it is up to the UN member states to address these issues and ensure that the rights of refugees are protected in transit centers. Governments, international organizations and local communities must work together to come up with long-term solutions to this issue. In this session, delegates will carefully debate to analyze various resolutions to the topic with the ultimate goal of ensuring the safety and protection of asylum seekers, refugees, and IDPs in mind.

Definitions of key terms

Transit Centers

Transit centers are temporary facilities that host and provide basic services such as hygiene, food, and water to refugees and internally displaced persons during their journey to another country. Transit centers are usually placed near borders to accommodate the greatest number of refugees as they await their status being approved or safe passage into another country. Transit centers are managed by governments or international organizations such as the UNHCR.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD)

Refugee Status Determination, or RSD, is “the legal or administrative process by which governments or UNHCR determine whether a person seeking international protection is considered a refugee under international, regional or national law.” (UNHCR, 2020) RSD is a necessary process to help refugees understand their rights under international law. Individual states are responsible to conduct RSD, however UNHCR may step in if the state does not meet the requirements for an efficient national asylum procedure.

Internally Displaced Persons

An internally displaced person or IDP is “someone who is forced to leave their home but who remains within their country's borders”. IDPs are forced to leave their home to due circumstances such as war, persecution or other disasters and are considered refugees (although they do not fit

the traditional definition of a refugee). It is the job of the national government to award rights to IDPs and ensure that those rights are being respected. UNHCR has been supporting IDPs since the 1970s. (UNHCR, 2024)

Asylum

Asylum is “the protection granted by a state to someone who has left their home country as a political refugee”. Asylum seekers are refugees whose request for protection is currently pending or they have not yet requested asylum. UNHCR advocated for rights of asylum seekers to ensure that their voices are heard, they are presented the rights they deserve, and they can reach safety.

Refugee

Someone who, owing to well-founded 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, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term "the country of his nationality" shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national.

~1951 refugee convention

General overview

Before getting into the statistics, it is important to note that the troubles refugees face in transit and reception centers vary greatly from place to place and for different refugees. Every situation is different and most often information on the conditions in refugee centers is not publicly available. In spite of this, one can notice certain trends in the data that is publicly available.

First of all, the more developed, western countries appear to want to keep refugees out for the most part. Even though the Western world only takes in a small part of the world's refugees (UNHCR 2), only a few countries were willing to take in decent amounts of refugees. The reason Europe still took in fairly large amounts of refugees before the invasion of Ukraine, was mainly to pin on countries like Germany and Sweden, which took in a large number of refugees. Most

countries however took in very little refugees. (NRC) This reluctance to take in refugees from the Middle East and Africa seems to also have translated into how refugees are treated inside reception and transit centers. These are often overcrowded, as was the case in Ter Apel in 2022. However, most problems are not as visible as the people sleeping outside in Ter Apel. The many refugees that never even reach a reception center or are denied access to the legal help they need are largely undocumented. Many countries try to be strict on refugees to scare them off. In the case of Denmark, this proved effective, causing a lot of other countries to implement even stricter policies, causing a race to the bottom for refugees. (NRC)

This race to the bottom has also seen a new development in recent years, the outsourcing of refugees to other countries. In some cases, this entails sending refugees to other countries, like the UK-Rwanda deal, in other cases it comes down to paying countries to make sure that no refugees undertake the journey to Europe, like in the EU-Tunisia deal. Many human rights organizations are worried that these deals undermine the rights of asylum-seekers to await a fair trial. Also, there are many reports of these countries breaking the other rights of refugees. (OXFAM) Such as in Tunisia, where refugees are dropped in the desert without water or food. In other cases, tell of people being sold at the border to human traffickers and gangs who torture them for ransom money. (Lighthouse reports)

A lot of refugees however don't end up in Europe, or even attempt to go there. In 2023, 75 percent of refugees were hosted by low- and middle-income countries. The burden that refugees bring are not equally shared across the nations. The least developed countries in the world took in 21 percent of the world's refugees, whilst only having access to less than 1.4 percent of the global gross domestic product. (UNHCR 21) Of course, it would be more difficult for these countries to provide the conditions refugees need. This often results in large refugee camps. In these camps there are dangers resulting from poor infrastructure. Reliable sources of power are often absent and clean water is scarce. These conditions, combined with overcrowding creates dangerous situations where fires and diseases can spread quickly. Refugee camps can also be a breeding ground for violence due to little oversight from security or armed forces. (PCRF)

Another side of refugee safety that needs attention is the matter of refugee health. Even though refugee situations can vary greatly, a WHO study found that refugees are more likely to have poorer health than the host country. Mental health is usually low due to the legal difficulties they face and the difficult situations refugees encounter on their journey. Furthermore, refugees have a harder time than host countries accessing health care due to a variety of reasons, leading to diseases going undetected for longer. Combined with poor hygiene, diseases can spread quickly in refugee centers. Violence is often present, letting people feel unsafe. Due to gender-based violence, women can also face extra physical and mental illnesses.

It is important to note that every human has the right to apply for asylum. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” with the addition that: “This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.” Also, every country which signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 1967 Refugee Protocol must provide refugees with housing, education and work, so refugees can live an independent life. These are fundamental rights that every refugee deserves. Often however, these rights are not respected.

Major parties involved

UNHCR

The UN High Commissioner in charge of safeguarding the rights of refugees. They concern themselves with everything from humanitarian aid and gathering data to guiding national law. They are the UN organization which attempts to solve the needs of refugees as well as attempting to solve the refugee crisis as a whole.

Western countries

Whilst there are a few exceptions, the reluctance of these countries to take in refugees has created a race to the bottom in more and more brutal refugee policies in an attempt to scare asylum seekers away. Even though these countries have the best capabilities to take in refugees, they are very reluctant in taking in Middle Eastern and African refugees. They are a lot more kind to Ukrainian refugees.

Developing world

These countries can be split in two different categories: the countries who struggle to get together the resources to take care of refugees and the countries which receive money to keep refugees out of the more developed countries. The first category mainly causes danger towards refugees due to limited resources to take care of them, whilst the second category causes dangerous situations in an attempt to scare refugees off.

Humanitarian organizations

Where local governments fail to take care of refugees, Humanitarian organizations usually try to step in. However, given the number of situations which require humanitarian care, it can be difficult to see to the demand.

Timeline of Key Events

1950	UNHCR was founded.
1951	The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is adopted
1967	1967 refugee protocol is adopted
2011	Start of the Syrian refugee Crisis
2014	Start of EU-Tunisia Deal
2015	Escalation of the Mediterranean refugee crisis.
2016	Start of the EU-Turkey deal
2022	Ukrainian invasion

Previous attempts to solve the issue

As ensuring the safety of refugees in transit centers is an issue of utmost importance, there have been many previous attempts to solve it. The most notable are listed below.

1. 1951 refugee convention: The 1951 refugee convention officially defined a refugee and described the legal protections they are required to receive. It is the responsibility of the UNHCR to ensure that these documents are enforced. These documents also emphasize that no refugee should ever be forcibly returned to their country of origin and that certain groups of people, such as war criminals, cannot be identified as refugees (and thus given the protection that refugees are entitled to). (UNHCR, 2019)
2. International Organization for Migration programs: IOM launches many programs internationally to watch and protect the rights of refugees, particularly on borders of countries. *Resettlement assistance* is a program that gives refugees the chance to start life in places where they would previously have no chance. (International Organization for Migration, 2021)
3. Regional Protection Programmes: RPP's are established by EU countries in order to "enhance the protection capacity of the [transit] regions involved and to improve refugee protection through durable solutions (return, local integration or resettlement in a third country)." (Europa.eu, 2024) However, RPPs focus specifically on transit centers and not on the status of the refugee after they leave the reception center.
4. EU-Turkey deal: Signed in March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal provides €6 billion to Turkey in order to improve transit centers and other facilities for refugees. The deal was introduced after the increasing numbers of Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees attempting to escape to Turkey or Greece and instead losing their lives in the process due to the

treacherous journey. The EU attempted to close their borders, however after this had no effect, they put more pressure on Turkey to improve transit centers. The EU-Turkey deal is intended to be a short-term solution to the issue. (The IRC in the EU, 2023)

Possible solutions

This issue is a sensitive one and therefore requires careful deliberation between UN member states when implementing solutions.

1. World peace: The most effective solution is world peace as this eliminates the need for refugees altogether. However, this is not a realistic solution and other solutions should be examined instead.
2. Financial support: As seen by the EU-Turkey deal, financial support towards countries with a larger number of refugees can be helpful in regard to supporting their needs in transit centers. Countries can use this money towards increased security (such as security guards or surveillance cameras) to monitor the well-being of refugees or providing lawyers and other legal representation to refugees requesting asylum. Money can be given to LEDC's with high refugee populations by MEDC's with low refugee populations so that countries can accommodate the needs of refugees. Finances can be used to provide medicine, education and shelter to refugees.
3. Increasing the amount transit centers: Relating to financial support, MEDC's can contribute to creating more transit centers. A huge problem with the current transit centers is the overwhelming amount of refugees and increasing the amount of places they can safely inhabit would reduce this stress. This solution does have its drawbacks however as it is unethical to move refugees from one difficult situation to another. Therefore, UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations should be clear and communicate their solutions well to refugees.

Further reading

- Stated below is a link to a map which shows which countries signed what treaty (<https://rimap.unhcr.org/refugee-treaty-legislation-dashboard>)

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