### Introduction

#### History of the UNHCR

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1950 to deal with the refugee crisis that arose from the aftermath of the Second World War. In 1954, the UNHCR won a Nobel Peace Prize for its revolutionary work in Europe. In the past six centuries, its purview has expanded all over the world. In the 21st century, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and Asia have seen numerous efforts at relief and resolution from UNHCR. With a budget of over $6 billion, the UNHCR is ready and willing to aid displaced persons, wherever they originate from. The UNHCR uses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), as well as the 1951 Refugee Convention as foundations for its principles, and strives to work with sovereign states as well as regional organizations to craft nuanced and successful solutions to refugee crises, both old and new.¹

The 1951 Convention is the core document of the UNHCR. By its principles over 50 million lives have been saved. The majority of countries in the world are parties to either the 1951 Convention, or its 1967 Protocol, which changed several specifics pertaining to scope from the original Convention.

| Parties to only the 1951 Convention |
| Parties to only the 1967 Protocol |
| Parties to both |
| Non-members |

According to the Convention, the definition of a refugee is:

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Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group, and is unable or unwilling to avail him— or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.

Today, that definition has expanded to include people from all walks of life, who are fleeing from a wide variety of situations. Approximately 65.6 million people worldwide are displaced from their homes for various reasons; this equates to approximately 1 in every 113 people having fled from their home, or lost their nationality. Non-state actors, the governments of sovereign states themselves, aggressive government’s from neighboring countries, and even the very environment we all share endanger innocent people. The international climate surrounding migration and border control often affects refugees as well, when they are mistaken for traditional migrants. Often, this leads to anger and mistreatment by both governments and individuals.²

Not only are refugees a concern of the UNHCR, stateless people, who are usually refugees, are also a consideration.³ A stateless person is one who has no citizenship in any country, which deprives them of certain fundamental rights and privileges. A stateless person lacks the power to have a voice in the issues that concern them, lacks a system to fall back on in times of strife, and lacks a system to protect them from violence and misfortune. Most importantly, stateless people are deprived of the right to a nationality that is guaranteed to all in the UDHR.

Absolutely critical to the mandate of the UNHCR is the principle of non-refoulement, which:

Prohibits States from returning a refugee or asylum seeker to territories where there is a risk that his or her life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

All actions undertaken by the UNHCR must abide by this principle in order to ensure that all human lives are protected and all people receive the full extent of their fundamental human rights, outlined in the UDHR.

Current Role of the UNHCR

The UNHCR strives to aid displaced people in all aspects of life. Housing in refugee camps, supply of necessities such as food and water, medical care, and eventually, optimally, repatriation are all key goals of the UNHCR. The UNHCR is recognized as a world leader in refugee aid and humanitarian efforts, and in the modern tenuous global political climate, this role is more critical than ever.

³ [https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/](https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/)
Refugee camps also require maintenance and oversight, and the UNHCR is always working towards safer, cleaner, less crowded refugee housing for the 2.6 million people currently living in camps. They aim to do so in both their own camps, and to aid other organization's camps in achieving the same goals. As many refugees remain refugees for several years, keeping the camps as comfortable as possible is a difficult and critical goal. Partial goals such as electricity, education, and job training are all part of the overarching mission to save and improve lives for refugees.\(^4\) The UNHCR also works towards returning people to their homes once they are safely able to do so, or finding them new permanent homes if they are unable to return to their original homes. Simultaneously, the principle of non-refoulement continues to guide the body.

The past decade has seen most of the displaced persons in the world coming from the MENA region. Iraq, Syria, South Sudan, and Yemen have been plagued by economic instability, civil war, and terrorism from non-state actors such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. However displaced persons are also coming from relatively new crises in various regions.

**Your Role, as the UNHCR**

The UNHCR has a long history of helping those in need whose governments are unable to do so. As each new threat and subsequent crisis has developed, throughout history, the UNHCR has responded and adapted. Each new mass displacement has been a learning experience from which the organization itself and refugees later on have benefitted from.

In Myanmar, the legacy of political unrest and marginalization of the Muslim Rohingya minority dating back to the 1960s has reached a climax, with 626,000 Rohingya people fleeing their homes into neighboring countries, in just the 4 months since August of 2017. Bangladesh, among other countries are bearing the burden of the huge influx of displaced Rohingya people and families.\(^5\) The Rohingya people are not only displaced, they are also currently stateless, due to the refusal of the Myanmar government to grant citizenship to Rohingya individuals.\(^6\) Faced with persecution at the hands of their government, and by mistreatment in refugee camps in Bangladesh, the Rohingya Muslims are a priority for the UNHCR.

The issue of environmental refugees was not foreseen by those who drafted the Convention. As such, the language as it currently stands is not ideal for addressing the situation effectively. The traditional definition of “refugee” does not neatly encompass and describe the struggle faced by those who have been forced from their homes by both rapid and gradual meteorological phenomena.

Today, two new crises have arisen. Both pose new challenges. It is your duty to balance the past and the future when finding a solution for the present issues. It is important to look to the past, and both successes and failures, to learn lessons and form ideas. It is equally important to look to the future, and create innovative new language which will stand the test of time. Part of that process is taking a hard look at the way each country is responding to refugee issues, and fixing the flaws in policy. In November of 2017, High Commissioner Filippo Grandi pointed out

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\(^4\) [https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps](https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps)  
\(^5\) [https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/](https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/)  
that the wealthy States least affected by refugee flows tend to close their borders, and restrict access to asylum and actively discouraging entry of displaced persons. Conversely, countries adjacent to conflict zones keep their borders open, bearing the brunt of the crisis. This leads to an imbalance in the world, financially and socially. The body should seek to rectify this imbalance in the process of solving the two crises outlined in the topics, as this discrepancy is contributing to and exacerbating the global refugee crisis.

The Rohingya people face both refugee status and statelessness, both of which must be resolved to truly rescue them from their plight. Those fleeing from environmental changes must be added to the current definition of refugee, and be added to the existing frameworks for aid. They also need special consideration, given that their homes may never again be habitable.

As always, diplomacy and sovereignty must be held in the highest esteem during debate. Each country has the right to govern itself, and each delegate should take the needs, wants, and limits of every country present into consideration. That being said, each delegation should work towards a collaborative, thorough solution for both topics.

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Topic 1- The Growing Concern Over Environmental Refugees

History of Environmental Change

“Climate change is the defining challenge of our times: a challenge which interacts with and reinforces the other global megatrends such as population growth, urbanization, and growing food, water and energy insecurity. It is a challenge which is adding to the scale and complexity of human displacement; and a challenge that has important implications for the maintenance of international peace and security.”

-Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the UN, former High Commissioner of Refugees in address to UNSC in 2011

The planet has a millennia long history of gradual changes in climate and temperature. Throughout its history, there have been seven distinct cycles of glacial advance and retreat. These natural changes have been disrupted in the past several decades, as mankind's activity creates new patterns of carbon dioxide quantities in the atmosphere, global temperatures, and weather patterns. Although there are skeptics as to the reality of the anthropogenic origins of the recent drastic climate change, the general strong scientific consensus is that the changes are the result of human activity. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said in 2013 that, “scientists are 95% certain that humans are the ‘dominant cause’ of global warming since the 1950’s”.

The actions of the global community have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere at unprecedented rate; this has had significant, if yet completely understood, consequences. The global temperature has risen 2.0 degrees since the late 19th century, with the majority of the change occurring in the past 35 years. The warmest year on record was 2016, with every month except June being the warmest on record individually. Most of this surplus heat has been absorbed by the oceans, which endangers the delicate ecosystems and complex food webs which the entire world relies on. The increasing acidification of the ocean also compounds the issue. Ice sheets at both poles are shrinking, threatening coastal regions and islands with rising sea levels. The number of severe weather phenomena have increased and changed patterns. The hurricane season in the United States in 2017, which produced unprecedented storms as a result of shifting wind patterns from the equator up to the Arctic Circle. The changing climate has led to desertification of once arable areas, decreasing global food production capacity, and forcing people from their homes under threat of starvation. Additionally, once potable water has become salinized, rendering it undrinkable.

The tangible effects of the changing climate have created a new class of displaced persons, environmental refugees, who are:

10 https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/
12 http://www.globalization101.org/environmental-refugees/
13 https://research.cornell.edu/news-features/migration-forced-climate-change
“Persons displaced owing to environmental causes, notably land loss and degradation, and natural disaster.”

Unlike refugee crises which fall into the traditional definition, typically affect less developed countries with serious international and internal conflicts, environmental change and catastrophes can affect any country, at any time. Each state is vulnerable to the dangers of the environment. In a very unique way, environmental refugees are a truly global and universal issue, which no country can afford to remain silent on.


Previously, people displaced from their homes could qualify for refugee status if the natural disaster, such as drought, from which they fled could be linked to some situation of armed conflict. In modern times, this limited acceptance policy is no longer feasible. In many cases, even where there is no armed conflict, countries of refugee’s origin may not be able to protect against serious harm, which is imminent as a result of changing environments. Although harm from the environment does not qualify as persecution, it is as serious, and as impossible for everyday people to resist. Given that neither the endangered people themselves nor their governments can aid in surviving their changing environment, it is the responsibility of the UNHCR to protect these vulnerable lives. The UNHCR has taken a leadership role in safeguarding environmental refugees and assisting affected governments.

Between 2008 and 2015, the number of persons displaced by disasters rose to 203.4 million. This number is further increased by gradual climate change. People displaced for other reasons often find themselves in regions threatened by climate change wrought difficulties, adding yet more difficulty to the challenge of protecting them. Additionally, if their homes are destroyed by disasters or changing environments, repatriation may be impossible. Central and South America, along with Africa, have been particularly affected by this growing crisis.

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Potential Topics of Debate

To begin, a distinction must be made between people displaced by single instance disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, or famines, and people displaced by gradual environmental change, such as the Marshall Islands, which are essentially sinking as a result of rising sea levels. These two groups will need to be dealt with and accommodated differently, and different timelines and frameworks will need to be established.

A coherent and universal system of identifying countries at risk of displacement should be created. Both the level of endangerment, and the ability of each country to protect itself should be taken into account. For example, in 2011, some experts considered China to be most threatened by climate phenomena; this is counterbalanced by China’s robust economy and likely ability to support its own people in times of difficulty. Conversely, the Seychelles, which have a median income, are on the verge of extinction. These factors must all be considered when distributing aid, offering housing for displaced people, and creating long-term plans for dealing with the developing crisis.

Once countries have been categorized according to their level of need and their capacity for self-help, a system of aiding the countries must be put into place. Around the world, and in the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, the four step plan of disaster response is used to facilitate rapid, effective disaster aid. The steps are: Preparation, Response, Recovery, and Preparedness. A similar system could be created to help needy countries respond to climate change, both single instance and gradual. Thus far, the UNHCR has focused its efforts in climate change/displacement work in four key areas:

1. Field operations to avert, minimize and to address internal and cross-border disaster displacement
2. Legal advice, guidance and normative development at national, regional and international levels to support enhanced protection of the rights of people displaced in the context of disasters and climate change.
3. Policy coherence to ensure that issues of disaster displacement are effectively mainstreamed across other relevant policy arenas
4. Research and knowledge production to fill gaps that underpin this operational and policy work

This strategy should be utilized in future planning and in language crafted during debate. Economic stability, international conflicts and regional disputes, special populations, and the possibility of impossible repatriation must all be carefully considered. The merits and detractors direct aid, financial aid, the opening of borders or new refugee camps, and other solutions must be weighed when crafting resolutions. Growing concerns over food and water insecurity as a result of climate change must also be considered. This often occurs in the most vulnerable areas, which are frequently also where environmental refugees either originate from, or flee to. Displaced

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18 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/which-nations-most-risk-climate-change/
people living in refugee camps in regions where food and water are precious commodities will require special attention.

The UNHCR is firmly committed to the principle of non-refoulement. This is especially relevant with regards to environmental refugees; in many places repatriation will not be feasible ever again, or not for many years following a single instance disaster. Finding new homes for these people, as well as dealing with governments whose people and land have disappeared, will necessitate strategic, long-term oriented action.

The issue of climate change and environmental change is constantly evolving. A good resolution will contain contingency plans and will be adaptable to the new considerations that develop in the future. Language created should be as dynamic as the issue itself.

Questions to Consider when Researching

1. Has your country experienced the effects of climate change or direct disasters? If so, how have you dealt with it?
2. Has your country interacted with other countries to aid them in dealing with climate displacement and environmental refugees? Are there programs you can extrapolate from in debate?
3. Is your country willing to take in environmental refugees? If not, is it willing to give money or other aid?
4. How can the previous programs created for “traditional” refugees be used and modified to accommodate environmental refugees?
Topic 2- The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

History of Myanmar and the Crisis

The country of Myanmar has a long, checkered history of internal conflict and interference from foreign countries. In 1852, Myanmar, then Burma, was annexed following the Anglo-Burmese war. Almost 100 years later, in 1942, Burma was occupied and then liberated by Britain in 1945. It was not until 1948 that Burma gained its independence under Prime Minister U Nu. Since the 1960s, Myanmar has experienced many years of conflict, unjust treatment of its people, and government turmoil. Religious, political, and economic tensions have brought significant disparity to the people of Myanmar. 1962 marked a drastic time in Myanmese history, when U Nu underwent a coup d’état led by General Ne Win, and was ousted as Prime Minister. In 1981, the Presidency of Ne Win was relinquished to San Yu. This began the presence of high military involvement and junta rule over Myanmese citizen after converting to a one party system, where the Socialist Program Party was the prominent party from 1962-2011.

Under his leadership in 1982 any person of non-indigenous background was reclassified as “associate citizens”, barring them from public office. Under this law, Rohingya are not citizens, and are essentially stateless. After thousands of people died in anti-government riots in 1988, martial law was declared by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). This was followed by thousands of arrests and the name change from “Burma” to “Myanmar”. In 1997 Myanmar was admitted to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

As a result of international backlash and social unrest within Myanmar, a transition period ensued in 2011. Regimes through this time period were accused of both committing human rights violations and ignoring election results, as done in 1990. In the beginning months of 2011, the State Peace and Development Council party was dissolved by Than Shwe, and the start of a civilian inspired government subsequently followed. Reforms both in both public policy and the economics have occurred frequently between 2011 and present day, and economic sanctions have been lifted by the European Union and the United States. This marks a progressive time in Myanmar. There was initial success as economic growth followed through foreign direct investment, making the Myanmese Kyat available to the world’s market, and increased tourism.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) attempted to formally urge Myanmar to cease persecution of minority groups, but the resolution was vetoed by China and Russia in 2007. Additionally, the International Committee of the Red Cross accused the Myanmar government of abusing the people’s rights.

Since the 1970s the Rohingya people have been migrating primarily towards the Rakhine State. As a group of practicing Muslims in the heavily Buddhist country of Myanmar, these people have faced systematic persecution by the government and its citizens since 1962. The blatant persecution of the Rohingya population has been condemned and a topic of discussion in the United Nations for years, however, in 2013 the Myanmese government rejected a UN resolution that would grant the Rohingya citizenship. Unrest and turmoil such as this have caused tensions to rise between the Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar.

Similar to the displacement of refugees in the Arab World, the Rohingya are being persecuted and forced out of Myanmar and are migrating to Bangladesh and other Southeast Asian countries. The violent treatment of the Rohingya people mainly occurs in the Rakhine State, which has been a home for these native Muslim people for many generations. Since 2017, over half a million of these people have been forced out of Myanmar and into Bangladesh. Humanitarian aid and access to the Rohingya is prohibited in Myanmar through government regulation, resulting in mass migration out of Myanmar. During the 2014 census, Rohingya were not counted, and in 2015 they were not allowed to vote in the first democratic elections since the military government ended, nor were they allowed to run as candidates.

Current State of Affairs

The developing atrocities in Myanmar require urgent attention from the UN as a whole, but especially from the UNHCR. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict told the Security Council that the reports of sexual atrocities in “heartbreaking and horrific.” Fundamental human rights are being abused and neglected in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. A cycle of violence and deterioration is looming on the horizon of the international response to this crisis. A rapid, decisive, and comprehensive solution is absolutely critical. The

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crisis is still relatively new and developing, and the opportunity to prevent another refugee situation on the level of Syria in rapidly fading.

In 2017, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated:

“Last year I warned that the pattern of gross violations of the human rights of the Rohingya suggested a widespread or systematic attack against the community, possibly amounting to crimes against humanity, if so established by a court of law. Because Myanmar has refused access to human rights investigators the current situation cannot yet be fully assessed, but the situation seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

This clearly demonstrates the urgency and egregiousness of the situation. The people in refugee camps are suffering under deplorable conditions. Abuse, sexual exploitation, and crime are an unfortunate reality. Recent serious weather phenomena have damaged the camps and exacerbated an already existing crisis of resources, medical care, and human rights violations. With aid not available inside of Myanmar, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have had to focus aid directly outside of the border, in states that have accepted refugees. Aid includes, among other things, the access to basic human rights, health education, protection of women and children. International involvement and attention reached new heights in 2017. For the first time since 1989, involvement and a call to action was brought to the attention of the Security Council through a written letter by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Bilateral agreements such as military training offered by the United Kingdom to the Myanmese Army had been suspended in 2017 as a result of the humanitarian crisis. Internationally, there have also been calls for economic sanctions to be placed on Myanmar by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, however the need for humanitarian action is pressing as the government continues to suppress these people.

Areas to be Addressed in Debate

The Rohingya crisis, while political and hotly contested, is first and foremost a humanitarian crisis. The people fleeing from their homes are facing starvation, illness, injury, and an uncertain future. The people require donations of food, medicine, clean water, and basic necessities. As of October 2017, international contributors have donated over $344 million to humanitarian assistance. This outpouring of concern is laudable, but due to the actions of the Myanmar government, the aid is not reaching the people who need it most. The Myanmar government began blocking all aid from UN agencies from being distributed, following an attack

https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-rohingya-emergency/aid-groups-struggle-to-improve-dire-
conditions-for-rohingya-refugees-idUSKBN1CZ2NC
emergency-staff-deployed.html
refugee-crisis.html
by militants in the northern Rakhine state. The UN was not the only agency to have its aid distribution halted by the government. The immediate reinstatement of aid distribution is critical to the fate of the Rohingya people. This includes navigating diplomatic talks with the government of Myanmar.

The urgency of the developing situation should be kept in mind when crafting language. The importance of reliable funding, cooperation, and diplomatic relationships with the government of Myanmar are all critical considerations. Many agencies around the world have a stake in the fate of the Rohingya people, and are willing to work together for the greater good.

The importance of repatriation for the displaced victims cannot be overstated, as the Rohingya want to eventually return to their ancestral home. Repatriation, however, must not be forced as being in the midst of such a humanitarian crisis can potentially harm the Rohingya people far worse than remaining displaced. This situation highlights the importance to adhering to the principle of non-refoulement. Methods of repatriation must be meticulously thought out. Potential premature repatriation at this stage brings unnecessary fear to the already attacked and fragile refugees that have endured weeks of traveling to enter a Muslim country, where they feel more comfortable. Not only should methods of repatriation be carefully considered, but also methods of preventing mass migration out of Myanmar.

**Questions to Consider when Researching:**

1. What sort of aid, if any, has your country given to Myanmar and/or other similar refugee situations? If not, is there aid your country could begin giving?

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2. Does your country support the Myanmar government? Is your country willing to engage in diplomatic talks?
3. Does involvement in this conflict break the idea of sovereignty claimed by the Myanmar government?
4. With aid not allowed to go into Myanmar, where should, if any, aid be given and in what forms?
5. Does your country have any experience with refugee crises that you can contribute to the discussion of possible solutions