



**United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees**

Protecting and Empowering
Refugee Children

AbbyMUN 2023



PRIME MINISTER • PREMIER MINISTRE

November 25, 2023

Dear Friends:

I am pleased to extend my warmest greetings to everyone taking part in the 2023 Abbotsford Model United Nations Conference.

This conference offers delegates a wonderful opportunity to experience international diplomacy firsthand and to gain deeper insights into pressing issues facing the world today. Through their research and preparation, students will learn more about the policies and positions of different countries on a wide variety of topics as they engage in debates and discussions with their peers.

I would like to thank the organizers for putting together a stimulating and rewarding program for everyone involved. I would also like to commend the students taking part for their hard work in preparing for these deliberations. I am certain that you will benefit greatly from this opportunity to lead, negotiate and collaborate, and that you will come away inspired to create positive change as informed and engaged global citizens.

Please accept my best wishes for a memorable and rewarding experience.

Sincerely,

The Rt. Hon. Justin P. J. Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada



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Director's Letter

Dear Honourable Delegates,

My name is Ruonan Zhao, and I would like to extend a warm welcome to you for joining the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. As a junior student from R.E. Mountain Secondary School, this will be my first year engaging in the non-spectator sport of Model UN. Serving alongside me will be your Chair Adarsh Sekhon, and Assistant Director Alisha Renning. As your Dais team, we sincerely wish that you all have a memorable and meaningful experience at AbbyMUN 2023 this year.

Model UN has been one of the most defining experiences of my high school journey, teaching me the essential skills of leadership and public speaking, as well as inciting long-lasting friendships. The ability to negotiate, engage in diplomacy, and debate gained through Model UN are extremely valuable, throughout high school and extending onto future endeavours.

To all the new delegates in this committee, I encourage you all to actively participate and do not worry of making "mistakes". We hope to foster friendly and productive debates, where every delegate can engage and express their stances. I understand the dauntingness that you may feel, giving your first speech that may only last a few seconds. But by choosing to start your MUN journey here, I am confident that you will experience rapid growth in every aspect.

As a major difficulty faced by refugee host countries as well as the countries in conflict, children are extremely vulnerable and often unprotected. These traumatic events experienced by these children often carry throughout their growth and into their adulthood. In this committee, we will be discussing ways to empower refugee children; ensuring that their rights are protected, we would be able to build a better and brighter world for the future generation.

I, along with the rest of the Dais team wishes you luck in preparation for Abbotsford Model UN 2023 and look forward to meeting you. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at unhcr.ABBYMUN@gmail.com.

Ruonan Zhao

Director of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Committee
Abbotsford Model UN 2023

Committee Description

Established on December 14, 1950, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the United Nations (UN) agency whose primary purpose is the protection of the welfare and rights of refugees. To address the high number of displaced Europeans after World War II, the UNHCR was created by the United Nations General Assembly. Although the UN originally only gave the committee a three-year mandate to complete its work and then disband, one year later, on July 28, 1951, the UN adopted a legal foundation and basic statute, the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to guide the UNHCR's work and help refugees worldwide. Expanding the scope of the committee further, UNHCR extended its reach to Africa, Asia, and Latin America in response to the displacing violence of ethnic cleansing, organized crime, and armed groups.

The majority of UNHCR's resources are dedicated to field operations that address the needs of forcibly displaced persons in various situations, including 26 million refugees, 45.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 4.2 million stateless people, and 4.2 million asylum seekers. Working in over 130 countries, the UNHCR aims to assist those forced to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, natural disasters, and more. The UNHCR broadened the definition of refugee and found better ways to care for individuals in dangerous or difficult situations. The committee aims to overcome the challenges when nations target civilians, countries close their borders to refugees, and socio-economical concerns for both home and host nations.

Due to the nature of refugee crisis issues, most of UNHCR's operations are on-field. Managing from a series of regional offices, branch offices, and sub-offices, the worldwide operation has become highly complex. The operations must ensure the safety of the staff members in those highly dangerous situations, and the logistics behind the delivery of humanitarian aids, including foods, healthcare supplies etc. The UNHCR falls under the UN Programmes and Funds, reporting annually to both the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Continuously increasing its budget throughout the years, the UNHCR had a final budget of \$10.714 billion, remaining a prominent player on a global scale. With over 82 million people in the world forcibly displaced from their homes due to various reasons - political, environmental, cultural etc. - the work of UNHCR is more important than ever.

Topic Overview

Often one of the most vulnerable groups of the refugee population, children are extremely susceptible to both physical and mental damages. Especially with unaccompanied or separated children (UASC), they do not have adequate protection from their parents or family, leading to a

myriad of challenges. A prominent challenge that they face is mental disorders and stress. A research in 2017 shows that only a third of the children show average developmentally appropriate emotional hardships, while the rest demonstrate more pronounced emotional difficulties. In addition to emotional difficulties, 42.1% of children experience difficulties in socialization and establishing age-appropriate relationships with their peers. It is imperative that solutions are implemented in order to allow better and easier integration of refugee children into their new communities, especially those separated from their families.

Furthermore, refugee children often face difficulties implementing and possessing their rights. In all different aspects, whether the current safety and health, or their future growth and integration into society, refugee children often face disadvantages. It is important for governments to integrate refugee children into national child protection systems, invest in empowering and upskilling refugee youth, and ensure that the voices of youth and refugee-led organizations are amplified.

Apart from the physical disadvantages and dangers, there is also a multitude of discrimination and barriers that they encounter. For example, racism and xenophobia is often prevalent as they move into a new country. Providing targeted support to children and youth is extremely important in intervening at an early stage of integration and in an early stage of their development. A positive and supportive resettlement environment will be particularly important for those children and youth who have been exposed to trauma in the course of their refugee experiences.

Timeline

1939-1945 – The Second World War displaces millions of people, including children, throughout the duration and aftermath of its conflict, marking the origins of the modern major refugee crisis of the 20th century.

14 December 1950 – The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was founded to protect the rights, alongside well-being and security of refugees, therethrough marking a critical paradigm shift in the international community's approach toward addressing the needs of displaced refugees, including access to healthcare and asylum.

1967 – The enactment of the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees enlarges the scope and protections of the 1951 Refugee Convention to more refugees, including children, through removing former geographical and temporal restrictions.

1979 - The UNHCR plays a critical role in responding to the Indochina refugee crisis, resulting in the successful resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom were children.

June 1991-2000 – The conflicts in the Balkans region leads to a large influx of refugees from Southern Europe, including children. The UNHCR and other international organisations work to provide humanitarian assistance and aid.

September 2001 – In the immediate aftermath of the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan, a massive wave of Afghan refugees, including children, flee and seek refuge in neighbouring countries while the UNHCR and international community provides humanitarian aid and assistance.

2011 - present – Syrian Refugee Crisis – The ongoing conflict and devastation of the Syrian Civil War leads to one of the largest refugee crises in recent history, with millions of Syrians displaced and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

2017 – present – A brutal and violent crackdown by the Myanmar military leads to the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims, nearly a million of whom flee to Bangladesh. The UNHCR and other organisations work to secure the rights and safety of the Rohingya refugees.

13 July 2018 – The Global Compact for Migration is passed, providing a comprehensive approach to international migration that covers all its dimensions. The agreement consists of several objectives designed to better enhance migration machinery and further empower refugees.

2020 - present – The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacts refugees’ access to asylum as numerous countries partially or fully close their borders, and the pandemic has also impacted refugees’ socio economic wellbeing, by further constricting their employment opportunities and access to healthcare.

February 2022 - present – Military conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, and elsewhere in the world continue to displace millions of people and further increase the global influx of refugees. The UNHCR and international community continue to enhance and develop the necessary machinery for responding to these ongoing refugee crises.

Historical Analysis

Throughout the tumultuous course of recent human affairs, the number of people forced to flee their homes in search of sanctity across foreign borders due to war, violence, and the threat of persecution has risen at an alarming rate. The situation is seen to be yet more dire upon examining that of the 108.4 million forcibly displaced people by the end of 2022, an estimated 43.3 million were vulnerable young children under the age of eighteen.

While the United Nations has made substantial progress through its machinery toward protecting and empowering refugees over the past seventy something years, challenges persist and there exists room for improvement in the face of the many inefficiencies and mistakes made throughout this endeavour. Understanding the historical context of the global refugee crisis is paramount in effectively dealing with these multifaceted complexities.

Origins of the Refugee Crisis in the Post WWII Era:

The roots of the modern refugee crisis can be definitively traced back to World War II, the aftermath of which led to the displacement of an estimated 20 to 40 million people. The surplus of displaced individuals prompted the international community to expend its resources toward developing mechanisms to protect and support refugees. The early response, however, was marked with inefficiencies and inadequacies stemming from poor judgement, and which ranged from inadequate healthcare, overcrowded refugee camps, and a general lack of access to essential services.

The creation of the United Nations in 1945 brought with it a shift in precedence toward addressing the refugee crisis as observed in the subsequent establishment of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to provide assistance to post-war displaced populations. The agency directed a multitude of relief efforts through administering various displaced person camps and voluntary welfare agencies, though the extraneous financial strain caused the agency to run out of funds and it was dissolved in 1947 to be replaced by its successor, the International Refugee Organization (IRO), which in turn eventually led to the establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1951

Key UN Milestones:

The establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) marked a turning point and major paradigm shift in the international approach toward the refugee crisis. The 1954 Convention on the “Status of Stateless Persons” was a key international convention

which in addition to providing a definitive legal definition for stateless individuals, provided a minimum set of human rights for refugees, including education rights, employment and housing rights, travel rights, and access to healthcare. This was subsequently complemented by the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which as suggested in its name, provided a comprehensive international framework designed to prevent statelessness through various safeguards in nationality laws to prevent statelessness at birth and later in life. Within the international effort toward combating the refugee crisis, there have been several developments toward addressing the specific issue of protecting child refugees. A significant milestone in this endeavour was the adoption of the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees which enlarged the definition of a refugee to encompass a broader range of circumstances that included children and prompted the international community's commitment to their protection.

Additionally, the 1989 adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which supplied an international framework for safeguarding the rights and general well-being of all children, regardless of their migration status. In spite of the commendable efforts expended by the UN and the International community toward improving the situation of refugees, a number of refugee crises throughout the late 20th century and early 21st century exposed many of the numerous inadequacies and shortcomings in the machinery toward handling this issue.

Humanitarian Crises of the Late 20th Century:

The latter half of this century witnessed several humanitarian crises which led to mass displacement and substantially strained the international community's ability to provide adequate care for refugees' wellbeing. Particularly, the Yugoslav wars of 1991 to 2001 and their accompanying aftermath caused large population movements of around 3.7 to 4 million people throughout Southeastern Europe. A substantial fraction of the resultant refugees were children who were subjected to severe hardships due to the lack of sufficient infrastructure, education, and healthcare as a consequence of the political complexities of the region that hindered the efficiency of the international community's response.

A similar such situation was the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, which forced the displacement of approximately one million Rwandans, a significant fraction of whom were children. These refugee children, having been subjected to violence, exploitation, and death of family members, suffered immense psychological trauma and difficulties rebuilding their lives in neighbouring countries, and while the international response was swift, it was riddled with inefficiencies and insufficiencies toward effectively addressing the complex, multidimensional experience of trauma experienced by children.

Refugee Crises in the 21st Century:

The present century too has its share of several catastrophic refugee crises. Arguably one of the most defining refugee challenges of the 21st century is the conflict in Syria, which has led to the displacement of almost 6.8 million Syrians, with about 5.4 million living as refugees in neighbouring countries, a significant number being children. Having suffered many losses and trauma, refugee children experience a myriad of challenges that are only exacerbated by the lack of access to quality education, adequate healthcare, and psychosocial support. While substantial effort has been inputted by the international community toward safeguarding these refugees' well-being, there exist a number of systemic inefficiencies and complexities in dealing with such a nuanced political landscape. As a result, neighbouring host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon have struggled to continuously accommodate the growing influx of refugees, placing substantial strains on their resources and services.

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis, on the other hand, is another catastrophic event of mass persecution that compelled nearly one million Rohingya to flee Myanmar and seek refuge in Bangladesh. The complexities of the geopolitical landscape of the region, alongside the restricted cooperation among neighbouring countries and international communities, has greatly hindered the international community's efforts to resolve the crisis.

Current Situation

The global refugee crisis presents an urgent humanitarian challenge, with millions of people forcibly displaced from their homes. Among the most vulnerable in this crisis are refugee children. These children face unique vulnerabilities that threaten their physical safety, access to education, healthcare, and psychological well-being. Against this backdrop, several critical factors shape the current situation regarding the protection and empowerment of refugee children.

First and foremost, international legal instruments play a pivotal role in safeguarding the rights of refugee children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 1951 Refugee Convention are central to providing a legal framework for the rights and protections of these children. The CRC, adopted in 1989, enshrines the rights of all children, regardless of their immigration status, emphasizing the need to safeguard their well-being, and access to education, and healthcare.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and a multitude of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a crucial role in providing essential support to refugee children. These organizations ensure that these children have access to basic necessities

such as shelter, food, and healthcare. UNHCR, in particular, plays a central role in coordinating the international response to refugee crises and protecting the rights of refugees, including children. However, despite the vital work being done, refugee children continue to encounter challenges that impede their well-being.

One of the significant challenges that refugee children face is access to essential services. Language barriers, discrimination, and bureaucratic hurdles often obstruct their ability to receive the support and protection they need. In many instances, these children are faced with adversity, and in some cases, even hostility from host communities, making their access to services even more difficult.

The impact of conflict and displacement on the psychological and emotional well-being of refugee children is profound. Many have experienced violence, loss of loved ones, and traumatic events, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health. Psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress are prevalent among these children, creating an urgent need for specialized mental health support.

Child labor and exploitation are significant concerns among refugee children. Some are forced into labor at a young age, leaving them without the opportunity to receive an education or enjoy a childhood free from labor and exploitation. The need to address this issue and provide protective measures is paramount.

Access to education is a fundamental right for all children, including those who are refugees. However, refugee children often face insurmountable barriers to education. These barriers may include a lack of resources, language barriers, overcrowded schools in refugee camps, and discrimination. Ensuring access to quality education for refugee children is not only a matter of fulfilling their rights but also a critical step in breaking the cycle of poverty and dependence on humanitarian aid.

Psychosocial support for refugee children is often inadequate, despite the overwhelming need. The trauma and emotional turmoil experienced by these children require specialized care to help them heal and recover. Yet, the availability of psychosocial support services remains limited, leaving many refugee children without the help they need to overcome the psychological scars of conflict and displacement.

Furthermore, refugee children are at risk of child trafficking and smuggling. These vulnerable children are often targeted by traffickers who exploit their dire circumstances. This adds another layer of danger and insecurity to their lives, necessitating measures to combat child trafficking and smuggling.

Past Involvement

The protection and empowerment of refugee children have been at the forefront of international efforts for several decades. It is essential to examine the historical perspective to understand the progress and challenges associated with safeguarding the rights and well-being of these vulnerable children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989, has played a central role in shaping the rights and protections afforded to children, including those who are refugees. The CRC sets out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of every child, emphasizing the need to safeguard their well-being. This comprehensive treaty has been ratified by the vast majority of countries, making it one of the most widely accepted international human rights treaties.

Historically, there have been numerous refugee crises that prompted the international community to take action to address the needs of refugee children. The world has witnessed conflicts and displacement on a large scale, such as the Balkans conflict in the 1990s, the Rwandan genocide, and more recently, the Syrian civil war. In each of these crises, international organizations, governments, and humanitarian actors worked to provide assistance and protection to refugee children. These past experiences offer important lessons for addressing the needs of refugee children in the present and the future.

Humanitarian initiatives and programs have been launched in the past to protect and empower refugee children. For example, the “No Lost Generation” initiative, launched in response to the Syrian crisis, aimed to provide education and psychosocial support to Syrian children and youth affected by conflict. This initiative, along with many others, has been instrumental in ensuring the well-being of refugee children and providing them with the support needed to rebuild their lives.

Lessons have been learned from both the challenges and successes of the past. It has become evident that addressing the needs of refugee children requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach. Governments, international organizations, NGOs, and local communities must work together to ensure that refugee children are protected, empowered, and given the opportunity to rebuild their lives.

Bloc Positions

Bloc 1: Humanitarian Supporters:

(Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Spain)

This bloc consists of Canada and Nordic countries, renowned for their history of readily supplying humanitarian aid and protection to refugees. Their primary focus is directed toward upholding the moral and ethical duty of aiding displaced individuals while simultaneously advocating for further international cooperation toward effectively handling the refugee crisis, recognizing the critical need for a fair and equitable global distribution of responsibilities across nations. Furthermore, this bloc's stance emphasises on the employment of various mechanisms directed toward providing the necessary support and integration opportunities for refugees. Instances of such machinery include The Safe Third Country Agreement between Canada and the United States, which outlines a fair asylum process for refugees, alongside Sweden's Temporary Law on Asylum and the Possibility of Family Reunification, which are structured to ensure the upkeep of refugees' health and wellbeing. Overall, members of this bloc are likely to continue advocating for further advancing machinery for facilitating integration and improving refugees' standard of living while simultaneously advocating for further international collaborative action toward combating the present refugee crises.

*Bloc 2: Balanced National Security with Humanitarian aid:
(United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, South Africa)*

Composing this bloc are powerful nations such as the United States and the European Union countries, characterised by their historical contributions to humanitarian principles and providing asylum. However, they are presently divided through a complex web of debates and issues concerning the balance of the two opposing drives of compassion and ensuring security. Concerned with border security and economic strain, countries such as the United States have grappled between balancing the two counteracting imperatives of maintaining their image as a haven for refuge while simultaneously addressing critical security concerns and tightening border restrictions. Such inter political tension is displayed through the counteracting implementations of machinery such as the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which displays the bloc's resolve toward creating a unified, expanded approach to asylum policies, in direct contrast to border control frameworks such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), designed to tighten and impose stricter border security regulations. Overall, members of this bloc will likely continue striving to advance machinery and mechanisms in a manner that sets a stable equilibrium between the imperative for border security and the imperative for upholding their humanitarian commitments.

*Bloc 3: Prioritising National Sovereignty:
(China, Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia)*

This bloc is composed of countries such as China and India that have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and prioritise regional responses to refugee challenges over global responses. These members' primary concerns are centered around issues of sovereignty, internal security, and the potential repercussions of hosting refugees. China, for instance, with its immense population of 1.4 billion has accepted only 526 refugees in the last ten years, reflecting its concerns toward maintaining stability and preventing potential social and economic challenges resulting from hosting a large number of refugees. India, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia are likewise cautious in their approaches toward accepting refugees, prioritising the security of their borders and internal stability over offering asylum. Particularly, the members of this bloc embrace regional solutions and regional cooperation over international response, meaning rather than relying solely on global or international support mechanisms, these nations prefer to focus on developing and implementing policies and strategies on the regional level of the countries related to and in close proximity of the nations affected by refugee issues. Thus, these nations are likely to work alongside neighbouring countries to provide resources and develop structured response mechanisms to refugee crises but are less likely to readily supply direct asylum and assistance within their borders.

Potential Solutions

With the state of vulnerability and lack of humanitarian assistance that are prevalent to the refugee children, it is imperative that the international community intervene to improve their status and uphold the basic human rights they deserve. As these trauma most likely would carry throughout their life, the transition between danger and safety is one that must be made accessible to these children.

Social Programs

When these refugee children face isolation and lack of connection to the new environment, social programs that allow these children to become more involved in recreational and educational activities with other children can greatly increase their socialization and integration into the foreign environment. With the lack of knowledge of their surroundings, and often facing language barriers, these children require external opportunities to encourage their participation. These programs can include language training, sports, art activities etc. with their peers to create a sense of community and belonging for these children. Especially focusing on the mental health of these children, host countries should develop ways to allow a smooth transition for the children to heal from their past traumas.

Child Protection Systems

Strengthening national child protection systems and services is extremely important in working with government and other actors to increase the non-discriminatory access of refugee children to national child protection systems, expand the capacity of these services to respond to the increasing number of children, and improve the quality of these services in line with international standards. Working with each country to increase child protection systems in order to facilitate family-based care for refugee children, effectively assists those who are separated from their parents or in need of alternative care arrangements due to abuse or neglect. Especially in countries with underdeveloped legal systems regarding refugee protection, it is crucial to ensure that the rights and basic needs of these children are met.

Legal Frameworks

Due to the lack of protection for refugee children, they are often up to exploitation, such as child labour and illegal trafficking. For example, reports show that refugee children attempting journeys from the Horn of Africa to Saudi Arabia via Yemen face serious risks of trafficking and exploitation– with girls sometimes forced into “marriage” and otherwise subject to sexual violence. Furthermore, an assessment by UNICEF, conducted in April 2013, found that 44 percent of school age Syrian refugee children in the Jordan Valley were working. The lack of legal protection and enforcement is a prominent problem, especially in developing countries. It is up to the international community to ensure that these countries uphold international standards on childrens’ rights and are held accountable to the implementation, especially as refugee children lack the sources of advocacy and attention.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the international community strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to better protect the rights of refugee children, particularly in the context of protracted conflicts and displacement?
2. What are the key obstacles to ensuring access to quality education for refugee children, and how can these challenges be effectively addressed?
3. What innovative solutions and strategies can be employed to combat child trafficking and smuggling in the context of refugee crises?
4. How can psychosocial support programs be scaled up and integrated into humanitarian responses to address the trauma and mental health needs of refugee children effectively?

5. What role can technology and digital tools play in enhancing the well-being and empowerment of refugee children, especially in terms of education and psychosocial support?
6. How can countries and international organizations better collaborate to ensure comprehensive support and protection for refugee children, while also addressing the specific needs of girls, boys, and LGBTQ+ children?
7. In what ways can Model UN participants contribute to global efforts to protect and empower refugee children, and how can they raise awareness and advocate for positive change in their communities?

Further Resources

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