General Assembly, First Committee: 
Disarmament and International Security 
Background Guide

As one of the six main committees of the United Nations General Assembly, the First Committee (DISEC) deals with issues relating to disarmament, global challenges and threats to international peace and security and seeks to solve these challenges in the international security regime. With all UN member states maintaining a presence in the committee, DISEC is among the largest committees in the United Nations and works closely with United Nations Disarmament Commission and the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament.

I: Improving Cooperation in Airline Safety Policies

As the ease and affordability of international air travel continues to improve, the skies above many parts of the world continue to become increasingly congested; with commercial planes, militaries, and other spacecraft often operating in close proximity to each other. As millions take to the skies each day, consolidating and coordinating international policies and safety practices relating to air transportation is becoming increasingly important. This is particularly important when considering the risk of international conflict, or escalation through acts of terror or the targeting of airliners as targets of war. With recent incidents of airport bombings in Belgium, Turkey, and the United States; undisclosed missile tests from North Korea; and the downing of a Malaysian jet over Ukraine, the safety of our skies is directly tied to the challenges of international security.

The issue of ensuring the safety of the world’s skies has been a concern since the inception of the United Nations. Seeing firsthand how the sky and planes can be used as weapons to wreak havoc across the globe, The United Nations established the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in 1944 as a specialized agency under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council to “manage the administration and governance of the Convention on International Civil Aviation” or the Chicago Convention. Working with 191 member states and industry groups, the primary responsibility of the ICAO is to “reach consensus on international civil aviation Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) and policies in support of a safe, efficient, secure, economically sustainable and environmentally responsible civil aviation sector.”

Used by member states and airline operators to ensure that operations conform to global norms, the SARPs developed by the ICAO ensure that over 100,000 flights can

1 International Civil Aviation Organization, “About ICAO”.
2 Ibid.
operate in safety each day.⁴ Furthermore, in addition to its role as a consensus builder for SARPs, the ICAO is also holds a number of other responsibilities including the coordination of capacity building assistance for member states, developing global multilateral plans for strategic progress of safety standards, monitoring and reporting on air transport performance statistics, and auditing state procedures and policies regarding safety and security of air travel.⁴

With over 100,000 flights transporting approximately 2,586,582 passengers daily,⁵ ensuring the safety of air travel is becoming a particularly important issue for international security. With recent incidents including attacks at airports in Belgium and Turkey, a plane shot down over Ukraine, a Russian plane bombed over Sinai, and the bombing of a plane in Somalia, “the global nature of aviation puts everyone at the same level of risk from potential terrorism.”⁶ Due to the increasing threat of terrorist acts against commercial airliners, there is a considerable push in the international community to collaboratively develop and enforce stronger safety precautions. In July 2017, the Counter-Terrorism Committee, a subsidiary body of the Security Council, hosted a special meeting on “Terrorist threats to civil aviation”⁷, which sought to provide government representatives a chance to discuss enhanced security measures “such as explosive detection and new cargo rules, as well as new challenges, such as cybercrime and ‘porous airport perimeters’.”⁸

In addition to the work done by the ICAO, the Security Council has also given considerable attention to the issue of airline safety, first addressing the issue in Resolution 2309 (2016), which “urged governments to ensure that effective, risk-based measures are taken to protect airports, for example, to strengthen security screening procedures and utilize technology to detect explosives and other threats.”⁹ Additionally, the Council further recognized the needs of security infrastructure as an important factor to preventing terrorist threats against civil aviation in Resolution 2341 (2017).¹⁰ Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to addressing the threat of terrorism for civil aviation, however, is the capacity for information sharing. According to Jean-Paul Laborde, Executive Director of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, it is vitally important for countries to collect and share “advance passenger information (API) to detect the departure from, entry into, or transit through their territories of individuals on the Al-Qaida sanctions list.”¹¹ This, however, is complicated considering that “only 57 countries are capable of implementing and sharing such

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³ International Civil Aviation Organization, “About ICAO”.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Federal Aviation Administration, “Air Traffic by the Numbers”.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹ Ibid.
information with INTERPOL, which has 68 million entries;” representing a considerable challenge to the ability to collect and share data necessary for the protection of civil aviation.

In addition to terrorist threat, unannounced military testing may also pose a threat to civil aviation. With a recent acceleration in its missile tests, North Korea poses a considerable threat to civil aviation, not necessarily due to the direct targeting of civilian aircraft, but rather due to the possibility of an accidental collision. On 28 July 2017, the Japanese Self Defense Forces picked observed an unannounced missile test from North Korea. Landing 93 miles north of Okushiri Island in the Sea of Japan, the missile had narrowly missed a passing Air France jet with 332 people onboard. According to flight radar and the Japanese military, Air France Flight 293 had passed directly through the missile splash zone five minutes prior to its impact with the water, and at the time of its impact, the plane was only approximately 60 miles north. This, however, is not uncommon, while the ICAO states that all governments provide warning of such tests to ensure the safety of passing civilian aircraft, it has frequently been reported that North Korea fails to issue such warnings, posing a significant risk to civilian aviation in one of the busiest airspaces in the world.

While the threats posed by terrorism and unannounced military tests constitute significant threats to airline safety, another grave area of concern for international airline safety is managing the risk of global epidemics. With the speed at which individuals can move across the globe due to the ease of global air travel, it has become increasingly clear that the spread of infectious diseases is becoming a primary concern for international security of civilian aviation. Because of the speed at which people can travel internationally, it is increasingly possible for an individual infected with a dangerous illness to board a plane in one country and depart in another all before showing any symptoms; infecting hundreds, if not thousands of others in the process. With diseases such as Ebola, SARS, and MERS-CoV becoming increasingly common, the ability to detect and monitor individuals infected with such diseases is essential to the safety of international air travel. Furthermore, because of the rate of infection, the spread of these diseases can have disastrous consequences for national and international security.

With the increasing number of people that travel international through civil aviation, international cooperation and communication is becoming increasingly important to maintaining the safety and security of the world’s skies. With threats from terrorism, global epidemics, and undisclosed military testing on the rise, promoting an effective strategy to ensure air safety is a top priority in the goal to maintain international security.

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
Questions to Consider: How is international civilian aviation linked to other issues of global security? What strategies are necessary to ensuring effective international communication regarding travel safety? How can the General assembly work with other bodies to advance the strategic mission of international air safety?

II. The Impact of Climate Change on Global Security

Though often overlooked, global climate, and regional events are directly tied to national, regional, and global security issues. Through draughts that can place pressure on food sources and cause conflict over water, to the mass movement of people from areas of natural disaster, the effects of climate create a new set of challenges for the international community in terms of maintaining global peace and security. Furthermore, with a growing global population, and the ease at which information, goods, and people can cross international boundaries, addressing the global security risks posed by climate change is becoming a vital part of international security discussions and global policy. As climate change knows no boundaries, addressing its implications must truly be a global cooperative priority.

When evaluating the global security risks posed by climate change, understanding the dynamics of global population is particularly important. Over the past century, the global population has quadrupled, and while the overall growth rate has slowed in the post-World War II era, the world population is projected to hit 11.2 billion by the year 2100. While this figure is staggering in itself, when considering the potential risks posed by an increasingly changing global climate, the related issues become increasingly severe. These can often include the risk of famine, water conflict, terror, political instability, human displacement, natural disasters, and interstate war.

Because of the immense issues posed by climate change in terms of national and global security, the issue has been an important topic under consideration by the United Nations for many years. Formally establishing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 to “assess on a comprehensive, objective, open and transparent basis the scientific, technical and socio-economic information,” necessary to understand and address the issues of climate change around the world, the UN has devoted considerable resources to understanding the consequential issues of climate change despite its inability to establish a clear plan of action to address these challenges. More recently, in 2016 representatives from 195 countries signed Paris Climate Accord after nine years of negotiations, representing a significant global step with a goal to keep the global temperature increase this century below

19 Ibid.
20 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “History,” Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2017
1.5 degrees Celsius despite the exclusion of Nicaragua and Syria and the recent withdrawal by the United States.

Perhaps representing the most obvious danger posed by climate change on global stability and security is rising sea levels. A global rise in sea level could lead to drastic effects in the daily lives of communities all around the world. In many densely populated countries of South Asia, such as India, Bangladesh, China, and Vietnam, even a modest rise in sea level could prove to be catastrophic to food sources in these more impoverished regions. Furthermore, neighboring countries could expect new waves of climate refugees, or those “uprooted by climate change,” due to food shortages and the loss of livable land in coastal areas. By 2100, it is estimated that 72 million-187 million people could be displaced around the world due to climate change, with the greatest effects in coastal areas. In some countries, however, the effects of rising sea levels have already been felt. In the Maldives, a small archipelago nation in the Indian Ocean, the government has already begun to search for a relocation area to eventually move its 380,000 residents before the rising sea levels overtake the islands. With an estimated 10 percent of the world’s population living less than ten meters above sea level, it is imperative that governments start preparing for the massive global migration that could eventually occur over the next century.

One of the international community’s greatest concerns in regards to the consequences of climate change is the devastating effect that it will have on the international economy. Globally, GDP per capita could be 23% lower than its natural projection in 2100 if profound climate change persists. This economic outlook results from a lower agricultural output and higher reconstruction costs of devastation by natural disasters. Warming of the planet could potentially shift the global balance of power, as many Northern countries would experience longer growing seasons and an increase in usable land for development. These consequences could further devastate prospects of developing nations in tropical regions. Already the warmest countries on the planet, tropical nations, such as Haiti or the Central African Republic, would experience some of the harshest consequences of global warming. With heat in tropical regions potentially becoming unbearable to human settlement and mass migrations of people, resulting in economic shifts, it has been projected that agricultural yields in developing

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22 Curtis, Kimberly, “Climate Refugees,’ Explained,” UN Dispatch, 24 Apr, 2017
26 Curtis, Kimberly, “Climate Refugees,’ Explained,” UN Dispatch, 24 Apr, 2017
countries could be reduced by nearly 50% over the next 35 years; an issue that could directly result in devastating famines in the world’s fastest growing region by population.\textsuperscript{29}

As resources necessary for life become scarce, the risk of conflict for control of those resources is also a significant concern for global security. As the international community has seen in Syria, civil war can often become a consequence of failures in production and agricultural output due to climate change. A report by the U.S. Department of Defense concluded that the severe 2006-2011 drought in Syria contributed to grave agricultural challenges, which directly contributed to the political and social unrest of 2011.\textsuperscript{30} As economic prospects became grim, the Syrian population became more susceptible to victimization by ISIS and rebel groups. Similarly, in the Lake Chad region of Africa where 80% of the locals’ economic livelihood depends on Lake Chad,\textsuperscript{31} Boko Haram has gained influence as the lake has started shrinking. Regional vulnerability manifests itself as the livelihoods of Lake Chad locals begin to change, creating a healthy environment for Boko Haram to gain influence, establish power, and control natural resources. The Lake Chad regional vulnerability concern is only the beginning of what could be a century’s worth of drastic increases in political instability.

Climate change, above all else, creates instability, with the potential for national economies to fail as a result of higher sea levels and warmer climates, which could in turn displace millions of people around the world. The largest refugee crisis in history could be brewing as the livelihoods and homes of those in coastal regions are threatened. National economies would be unfit to handle the economic consequences of climate change and the weakest of them could fall victim to violent terrorist organizations looking to take advantage of struggling governments. The international community has a responsibility to ensure that all people are protected from the harsh effects of climate change. Though the climate change crisis and its consequences for international security have been thoroughly addressed by the United Nations, a plan of action to properly handle the long-lasting effects is necessary and overdue.

**Questions to consider:** Why is it necessary for the General Assembly to develop a plan of action now to address the possibility of security consequences as a result of climate change in the future? What appears to be the most imminent threat to global security with regards to worsening climate change? How can the Syrian Civil War serve as a starting point for international discussion on the development of a refugee plan?

\textsuperscript{29} Martin, Richard, “Climate Change: Why the Tropical Poor Will Suffer Most,” MIT Technology Review, 17 Jun, 2015
\textsuperscript{31} Geiling, Natasha, “Climate change will fuel terrorism, report warns,” ThinkProgress, 20 Apr, 2017