The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 following the Second World War to aid the millions of Europeans who had lost their homes. Seventy years later, the organization is still hard at work protecting and assisting refugees globally. By the end of 2019, almost 80 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide and 45 million were internally displaced. The UNHCR focuses on areas involving protection, shelter, advocacy, health, safeguarding individuals, and providing a global needs assessment. UNHCR has more than 16,000 staff members, with 87 percent of them based in the field helping the most vulnerable people uprooted by wars and persecution.

I. Maritime Movements and Integration Opportunities for Refugees, with a Case Study of Greece

Statement of the Issue:

Refugees and migrants attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea have been losing their lives at an alarming rate. In 2018, an estimated 2,275 people died or went missing despite the total number of refugees and migrants arriving to Europe being the lowest number (139,000) in five years. Policy shifts by some European States have left large numbers of people stranded at sea for days on end. NGO boats and crew are also facing growing restrictions on their search and rescue operations. The United Nations has expressed its deep concern regarding the number of boats that are full of vulnerable women, men, and children who are unable to come ashore and do not have access to urgently needed food, water, and medical assistance. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, believes that deterring movements of people by endangering life is ineffective and violates basic human rights, the law of the sea, and the principles of customary international law by which all States are equally bound. In a joint statement with IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNODC (United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime), UNHCR reaffirmed their support to states to provide immediate assistance to asylum seekers and refugees, as well as a strengthening of border response capacity to irregular movements. These three agencies are also calling on states not directly impacted to offer support to states that do not proceed with rescue and disembarkation.\(^3\)

June 1st began the government-arranged exit of some 9,000 recognized refugees from Greece’s reception system, and 11,000 more refugees will have to transit from assistance for asylum seekers to general social welfare. Greece’s reception system is facing a shortage of places, as over 31,000 women, men, and children live in five island reception centers with capacity for fewer than 6,000.\(^4\)

**History:**

One year after the establishment of the UNHCR, the United Nations Convention to the Status of Refugees was adopted. It defined the term ‘refugee’ and outlined the rights of the displaced, as well as the legal obligations of States to protect them.\(^5\) Following aid to the displaced Europeans after the Second World War, the decolonization of Africa in the 1960s represented the next large wave of refugees and was the first time that the continent experienced a refugee crisis needing UNHCR intervention.\(^6\)

The state of the 21st century has seen the UNHCR help with major refugee crises in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Despite the UN’s groundbreaking work in adopting the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention which established freedom-of-navigation rights, maritime movements with refugees have continued to remain a global conflict.\(^7\) Perhaps the most notable case centers around the Bay of Bengal in 2015, where the UN estimated that crossing the Bay was three times more deadly than the Mediterranean for migrants and refugees. The UNHCR conducted a report claiming that in the first six months of 2015, 31,000 Rohnigya and Bangladeshis departed from the Bay on smugglers’ boats, with over 1,100 people estimated to have died.\(^8\) The Bali Declaration was adopted in 2016 in response to the growing complexity of irregular migration challenges, specifically through maritime movements leading to loss of life at sea.\(^9\) Later in 2016, the UN General Assembly hosted a high-level summit aimed at addressing the large movements of refugees and migrants. The goal was to create a more responsible, predictable system and to strengthen governance of international migration.\(^10\)

In 2015 and early 2016, nearly 1 million refugees and migrants arrived in Greece following humanitarian crises in nearby areas filled with war and destruction. When the influx began increasing again, starting in the second half of 2017, the government began to take full responsibility for Greece’s refugee response.\(^11\) In March of 2020, Turkey announced that it
would no longer stop refugees from trying to cross its borders into Europe, revoking the deal struck with the EU four years earlier. Greece has responded with a host of inhumane measures that violate EU and international law, as security forces have fired tear gas and repelled dinghies trying to reach Greece’s shores. Protests erupted in refugee camps and across the island of Lesvos, which serves as a holding station for refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

Analysis:

Approximately 3,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Greece by land and sea since March, a significant drop, yet the number of recorded pushbacks at sea is rising. While the UNHCR recognizes that Greece has the legitimate right to control its borders and manage irregular migration, it must also uphold international human rights and respect refugee protection standards. Certain practices must guarantee the rights of refugees so that they are not turned away at Greece’s border.12

It is important to note that a new law adopted in March 2020 reduced the grace period allowed for refugees from six months to 30 days to make the transition from basic support to independent living. The goal of this law is to ensure that more resources and spaces are available for refugees, as Greece’s reception system is facing a shortage of places. However, UNHCR strongly believes that assistance for refugees is ending prematurely, and has been urging Greece to increase its national reception capacity at sites, apartments, and hotels. Forcing people to leave their accommodation without a safety net is likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and lead to increased homelessness. Most of the affected refugees already have significant socioeconomic challenges of their own, including a limited access to income, families with school-aged children, single parents, or survivors of violence. UNHCR has stated that shifting the problem from the islands to the mainland is not a solution. A more phased approach should be applied, including a higher threshold to extend assistance to the displaced and vulnerable people who have no other options.

Successful refugee integration requires striking the balance between refugees becoming self-sufficient and giving back to their host society with effective access to national schemes and integration programs. These opportunities range from language classes, vocational training, and access to meaningful employment. Refugees are also eligible for other national schemes including guaranteed income and housing support. However, many of these benefits do not come to fruition as refugees often face structural barriers in accessing support.

The successful inclusion of refugees have been extremely hindered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Safety measures aimed at reducing its spread have created additional
challenges by limiting the ability of people to move and find work or accommodation. However, those who have been forced to flee conflict and persecution should not be denied safety and protection under these unforeseen circumstances.13

Conclusion:

The ongoing refugee crisis has regressed further due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential that the United Nations and the international community come together in support of refugees, and recognize that opportunities for assimilation should be considered fundamental to all regardless of the current situation. It should also be noted that refugees are more likely to contract COVID-19 if they are to remain grouped together in limbo without a definite place to go. The laws of the sea should also be protected and enforced to ensure fewer refugee tragedies from maritime movements.

Questions:

1. How can the international community better monitor international waters to ensure fewer refugee tragedies?
2. Would it be more effective for the European Union and the United Nations to adopt the same legislation regarding refugees, instead of the EU passing legislation for specific countries (Turkey)?
3. How can the UNHCR aid states to reduce the public health crisis and ensure adequate spaces for the standard two week quarantine?
Resources


“UNHCR Calls on Greece to Investigate Pushbacks at Sea and Land Borders with Turkey.”
II. Impact of COVID-19 on Refugee Camps

Statement of the Issue:

On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 has been particularly devastating for refugees and displaced people around the world. As some of the world’s most vulnerable, refugees and displaced people already live in conditions that are more susceptible to infectious disease. Refugee camps are typically overcrowded, lack basic sanitation facilities, and access to medical care. The global nature of the pandemic has hindered the international aid community’s capacity to provide pandemic assistance to refugees, as their attention and resources are currently consumed with combatting the virus in their respective states. Eighty percent of the world’s refugees and internally displaced persons are hosted by low and middle income nations, putting considerable strain on nations’ existing resources and infrastructure. In this vacuum, NGOs and other international institutions and organizations have the potential to provide resources to mitigate some impacts of the virus.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has recognized the threat of COVID-19 to refugee camps and has called for 745 million USD to assist priority countries with large refugee populations to prevent and mitigate damage from COVID-19. In addition, UNHCR has scaled up their work in response to COVID-19 by providing water, medical care, and hygiene materials; monitoring the spread of the virus; and supporting communication efforts to offer guidance on public health matters, such as hand washing and social distancing.

History:

COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, first emerged in Wuhan, China in late 2019. The new strain of coronavirus is a respiratory illness, characterized by shortness of breath, cough, fever, et cetera, that is easily spread from close person to person contact. Since China reported its first cases to the World Health Organization (WHO), authorities in 214 countries and territories have reported around 10.8 million COVID-19 cases and at least 518,000 deaths, as of June 2020. COVID-19 growth rates are now the highest in low-income countries, many of which host a large proportion of refugees and internally displaced people. According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), people living in conflict zones such as Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, will be most impacted due to weakened health care systems resulting from years of conflict. Furthermore, many refugees and displaced people have underlying health issues that make them more susceptible to contagious illness.
Communicable disease control in refugee camps has presented a number of challenges for UNHCR operations. UNHCR laid out a framework for outbreak prevention and mitigation in their 2011 *Epidemic Preparedness and Response in Refugee Camp Settings* publication. The prevention measures heavily focus on coordination between state agencies and refugee camps and assessment of the existing healthcare apparatus. Refugee camps have weathered previous outbreaks including SARS, measles, and Ebola, although none have been to the same degree as COVID-19.

Refugees and displaced people have largely been neglected from states’ coronavirus relief efforts. In many countries, existing legal and administrative barriers prevent refugees from accessing or claiming the health care services that are afforded to the citizens of the host countries. In conflict areas, national governments may not have political control over all areas and thus, many vulnerable populations are left without any sort of protection. A number of international organizations have stepped up their relief efforts in order to compensate for the many shortcomings on the part of state-directed pandemic response. In March 2020, UNHCR revised their initial request for $33 million to $255 million, in response to the worsening public health crisis. Many of the relief activities focus on immediate interventions to prevent infections, including strengthening primary and secondary health care and WASH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene) services; supporting education systems; strengthening risk communication and community engagement; and, ramping up cash assistance. Additionally, the IRC is providing immediate relief to vulnerable populations by providing health care services, delivering food and medicine, and sharing live coronavirus information through their online platforms, among other aid activities.

**Analysis:**

In many cases around the world, prioritizing refugee concerns is a highly political issue that manifests in an outpouring of xenophobic or nationalistic sentiments. Matteo Salvini, right-wing leader of Italy’s Lega Nord party, has blamed the transmission of coronavirus to Italy on the African migrants. Similarly, politicians, including Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and U.S. President Donald Trump, have made the association between the virus and illegal immigration. This type of scapegoating prevents the international community from working toward constructive efforts at pandemic relief for all. The isolation and stigmatization also makes it increasingly difficult for at-risk migrants and refugees to obtain the health care they need.

Despite the political rhetoric surrounding decisions, a right to protection is the baseline for several major international conventions. The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human
Rights guarantees all humans the right to health, while the Geneva Conventions guarantees access to health care during armed conflict. The international community must redetermine that members will be held accountable for honoring their commitments to human rights, despite the changing circumstances. Furthermore, countries that are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention will have to make exceptions to travel bans or inevitably renege on their commitment against turning refugees away. At a point in time when the global amount of refugees and displaced people is unprecedented, states will need to reaffirm their commitment to upholding international law or will need to revise laws to include refugees and refugee camps into the agenda.

The most comprehensive response to COVID-19 would likely happen as a result of a high degree of involvement of international humanitarian NGOs and a level of coordination between public and private sectors. International organizations such as the United Nations play an important role in coordinating multilateral relief efforts. Short term relief efforts including widespread testing services and expanded care for infected people can be implemented shortly with the appropriate funding and resources. Long term efforts should involve investing in quality health care infrastructure and developing a pandemic response plan that takes into account the rights and needs of a nation’s refugee population.

Conclusion:

COVID-19 has undoubtedly impacted millions around the world, as individuals in both wealthy and low-income nations have needed to adjust to the new realities of life. Without a vaccine, governments around the world have struggled to implement widespread testing and appropriate medical care for the virus. As cases are likely to continue to soar, refugees and displaced people are certainly at heightened risk, due to the nature of life in refugee camps. Limited resources, unhygienic living spaces, and a host of administrative barriers relating to legal status are all factors that contribute to poor public health conditions in refugee camps. Because many nations are unable or unwilling to assist in coronavirus relief efforts, international institutions and NGOs have a big role to play in coordinating a multilateral relief strategy. If not out of simple humanitarian-based concern for fellow human beings, the international system should also recognize the importance of public health in refugee camps in national security, economic prosperity, and overall public health.

Questions:
1. Should international laws and conventions be honored in all cases, or should they allow for exceptions?
2. To what extent should the host country be held responsible for the wellbeing of refugee and displaced people populations?
3. How does the public health of refugee camps impact the broader public health environment of the host country?
4. What kind of rate of infection and transmission of COVID-19 is occurring in refugee camps? How can this be decreased or lessened?
Resources


