United Nations Human Rights Council

Background Guide

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Council History

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was first created on 15 March 2006 and replaced the committee previously known as the Commission on Human Rights. The Council consists of 47 member states, which are elected by the UN General Assembly based on the countries’ efforts to promote ethical human rights. The mission of the UNHCR is threefold: saving lives, promoting self-sustainability, and facilitating return to home for refugees. The High Commission’s ultimate goal is ideally repatriation (helping refugees return to their original home countries), but this is often impossible for various political, social, or environmental reasons. In those cases, the UNHCR faces two options: local integration in the initial country of asylum, or resettlement to a third country. The Council has established many procedures and mechanisms to meet its goals set forth by the General Assembly, such as the Universal Periodic Review mechanism, the Advisory Committee, the Complaint Procedure, and the UN Special Procedures. All of these are able to help the committee work toward the goal of assessing the human rights policies and violations within all member states in the most objective way possible and by protecting human rights around the globe.
Statement of the Issue

The Human Rights Council recognizes that the consequences of climate change are extremely serious, including the concerns for refugees and other peoples. It continues to be a struggle to sustain crops and livestock in conditions that have become too hot or dry, or too cold or wet. This threatens the livelihoods of many and exacerbates food insecurity. Freshwater is being contaminated by incoming seawater. Additionally, there is an increase in major natural disasters that are physically forcing people to leave their homes for safety, such as cyclones and typhoons. Furthermore, rising sea levels are detrimental to the survival of small islands. Homes are destroyed by rising tides and an increase in environmental disasters due to climate change. Many people who do not have the resources to adapt to the changing climates are forced to leave their homes and become refugees in other nations. “In 2018, the World Bank estimated that three regions (Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia) will generate 143 million more climate migrants by 2050. In 2017, 68.5 million people were forcibly displaced, more than at any point in human history. While it is difficult to estimate, approximately one-third of these (22.5 million to 24 million people) were forced to move by “sudden onset” weather events—flooding, forest fires after droughts, and intensified storms,” (Podesta, 2019).

The topic of this committee is to assist those displaced by climate-related natural disasters as well as the countries that may host these refugees.

History of the Topic

Since the 19th-century, scientists have explored the possibility of the effects of carbon dioxide on the global temperature. In today's world, their theorizing has become a very real issue for many people all over the planet. In the past, the Human Rights Council (HRC) has had a role in providing legal advice to enhance the protections for climate refugees, promoting policy, research, as well as field-based activities to address disaster displacement. As the
number of people displaced by extreme weather events has grown, the HRC has attempted to address the needs and vulnerabilities of those who are forced to cross borders in search of refuge.

The Global Compact on Refugees, adopted in December 2018, addresses some of the concerns of climate refugees but the phrase “climate refugee” still does not exist in international law. However, there is a rapidly growing number of people that are forced to leave their homes as a result of climate change and rising sea-levels. Small islands are hit the worst by these climate displacements. “Predictions range from 20 million to 200 million of environmental refugees by 2050,” and “The countries that host the greatest number of refugees and displaced persons are, in fact, in the Global South (Turkey, Pakistan, and Lebanon were the top three hosts of refugees in 2015) - countries that can barely support their own populations,” (Atapattu, 2018). The lack of definitions and jurisdiction around a growing issue is creating a disastrous legal landscape for those seeking shelter, as climate change refugees do not fall under the current definition to obtain refugee status because they are not fleeing for political safety or running from violence.

There have been some government proposals that have aided climate change refugees, however, none of them have directly addressed the movement of people across borders due to climate change. For example, there has been The Nansen Initiative, by the governments of Switzerland and Norway, The Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement proposed by Displacement Solutions in the UN, and the Draft Convention on the International Status of Environmentally-Displaced Persons proposed by the University of Limoges. Although these are positive moves, all of these initiatives have their restrictions, such as what defines environmental disasters. In March 2017, there was a task force developed for addressing climate displacement and has been helpful in identifying the gaps in the legal system when it comes to environmentally displaced people.
Analysis

With the rising concern surrounding the growing numbers of people displaced by disasters, environmental degradation, and climate change, the need for change becomes imminent. While measures have been adopted by some, the problem of resources and ability to assist displaced people remains. Delegates should start by creating definitions to be used in international law: what defines climate change refugees and what qualifies enough of a problem to need help? Why should countries be motivated to help them and take on the additional burden of governing larger populations and using more resources? In addition, it must be thought of how the surrounding countries will get the extra support and materials necessary to support this influx of immigrants. Some governments have deemphasized or opposed climate-friendly approaches, but the current security implications of the migration crisis might prompt a re-examination of those policies. There is potential support, particularly in the security community, for reducing the conditions that accelerate international migration (Podesta, 2019). The international body should also recognize how much responsibility is on us, as opposed to individual national governments, to support these migrants when it is necessary to do so. The UNHRC must come up with an all-encompassing plan that addresses all of these questions as well as the questions in the QARMA section.

Conclusion

As the situation worsens every day, delegates need to come up with solutions for both the temporary settlement and permanent resettlement of refugees, as well as ways to reduce the magnitude of the issue. The current global law is underdeveloped and not focused upon in this time of emergency. It is ideal to create jurisdiction and laws around climate change refugees now while it is still early. Each country in this committee has its own unique ideas on a comprehensive solution that will cover a broad range of issues within this issue of climate change refugees.
Questions a Resolution Must Answer:

1. Should the countries immediately surrounding areas affected by climate-related disasters be responsible for accommodating more refugees than other states? If so, why?

2. Where does the burden of financial responsibility for the welfare of refugees stand? Should individual nations take charge, or should international institutions and organizations?

3. What kind of security operations, immigration vetting, and review are necessary to ensure none of the refugees pose a potential security compromise to the welcoming communities?

4. Should the international community move toward recognizing “climate refugees” as separate from other refugees? How could this be done?

5. Should refugee status and approval be decided by the local communities that welcome them or by an international body?

6. What qualifies an individual for climate change refugee status? Must they experience a sudden, major natural disaster?

7. What are some potential organizations (NGOs, World Bank, etc.) that can help in this situation?
Sources:


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