

Presidents Letter for UNHCR St. Bonaventure High School Conference 2016

My name is Victoria Soler and I would like to welcome you to the St. Bonaventure University Model United Nations Conference of 2016! I am looking forward to serving as president of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I have been an active participant of Model United Nations at this university for over a year and a half during which I served as both delegate at the conferences that we attend as a club, and as a chair during our last High School Conference. My experience last year assures me that this year will be even more successful and enjoyable!

It is my strong conviction that what makes Model UN so much fun are the willingness, excitement, and participation of the countries (students) attending this conference. I ask that you research your topics well in advance, and to be confident and articulate in voicing your country's stance on any topic. In addition to being well informed of the topics I have assigned, you should also be knowledgeable of the rules and procedures of Model United Nations. Knowing the simple rules and procedures would not only boost your score but will actually impress other delegates (and your advisors!). It will be noted if a delegate participates often and knows the rules necessary to participate in Model United Nations. I look forward to seeing you this Spring!

Topics for UNHCR St. Bonaventure High School Conference 2016

I. Protecting the Civil, Political, and Socioeconomic Rights of Refugees

In any refugee crisis, and particularly in prolonged refugee crises, people forced to migrate may encounter difficulties in accessing basic amenities and enjoying basic rights. Those needs and rights may be material, such as food, water, medicine, and shelter or non-material such as civil and religious rights. Even when they have resettled permanently in a new country, refugees encounter barriers to these rights, all of which are guaranteed under international law.

Refugees, many of whom have already endured human rights abuses, may be subject to suffering again while living in refugee camps. Crowded conditions, shortages of food and water, and poor sanitation can lead to a deterioration of health, diseases and despair. Further, the challenges for women and girls in refugee camps are exacerbated by the prevalence of sexual violence; many women report having been raped while doing survival work, such as collecting firewood.

Similarly, when refugees cannot return to their home countries within a reasonable period of time, and are resettled in a third country, they may still face legal difficulties in attaining public benefits and suffer from discrimination in schools and places of employment, along with language and cultural barriers. International law protects the civil, political, and socioeconomic rights of all people including refugees and displaced populations. Unfortunately, as a vulnerable population, they are at risk of having these rights violated. Therefore, it is within the mandate of the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), other UN agencies and national governments to take measures to protect the rights of refugees. The recent Syrian refugees' crisis clearly illustrates this situation. This is a crisis that needs to be examined in details and fully understood. Doing so will enhance our understanding of the multifaceted issues that all refugees experience. This is also an ongoing and urgent crisis that has affected many countries, especially in Europe and the Middle East.

Questions

1. What steps can UNHCR take to protect refugees' rights while living in camps?
2. How can governments and NGOs work to ensure that refugees have access to justice, health, and employment, among other rights?
3. What can be done to protect refugees from exploitation and discrimination while they are waiting for resettlement or after they have been resettled?
4. What sorts of coordination efforts are necessary to ensure that each Member State hosting refugees have the capacity to protect and ensure their rights as articulated in the Refugee Convention, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR?
5. Ask similar questions regarding the Syrian refugee crisis.

Asylum Procedures

Access to asylum, and the processes in which potential refugees seek asylum, vary globally. The UNHCR seeks to improve the processes countries use to grant asylum to refugees. As the UNHCR notes:

The terms asylum-seeker and refugee are often confused: an asylum-seeker is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated. National asylum systems are there to decide which asylum-seekers actually qualify for international protection. Those judged through proper procedures not to be refugees, nor to be in need of any other form of international protection, can be sent back to their home countries. The efficiency of the asylum system is key. If the asylum system is both fast and fair, then people who know they are not refugees have little incentive to make a claim in the first place, thereby benefitting both the host country and the refugees for whom the system is intended.

Therefore, this topic will address those people who are not refugees but those who are trying to become identified as a refugee through a specific country's asylum process. While it may be impossible to deal with significant surges of asylum-seekers, improving current practices is desperately needed.

As one would expect, the UNHCR has provided international guidance on this issue. Published in March 2010, UNHCR's research branch compiled a 134-page document full of recommendations countries can follow to improve intake of asylum-seekers and evaluation processes, based on analysis of European Union law.

Looking at actual documents passed by the General Assembly, one must return to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This document defines who can be considered a refugee, rights that refugees should be guaranteed, and a basic outline of procedures that should be followed to admitting and identifying persons as refugees. Of course, this document is a bit dated, so streamlining procedures and providing new recommendations is a paramount priority of the UNHCR Executive Committee. The UN currently estimates that there are 43 million persons that have been forced from their homes due to violence or persecution; of them, only 15 million are designated as refugees. This means that the other 28 million are in desperate need of faster, more efficient processes to help protect them from suffering harm or death, and the UNHCR has the opportunity to be at the forefront of this topic.

Questions

1. How can the current asylum procedures be improved?
2. Should countries be mandated to provide asylum for refugees?
3. How can the treatment of asylum-seekers be regulated by the UNHCR?
4. Does your country have significant numbers of asylum-seekers?

Strengthening the Role of NGO's in Assisting Refugees

One of the main ideas behind the United Nations is for states to work together as one united international community to achieve common goals as opposed to consistently resisting one another. But coordination and cooperation should not be limited to only 'states.' Non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should also play an important role, especially in this age of globalization. The UNHCR has established partnerships with approximately 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent and Medecins Sans Frontieres. In a report issued in mid-2013, UNHCR reported that work to strengthen relations with these NGOs continues to be done at a satisfactory rate.

While the UNHCR has made great strides over the decades to improve and establish relationships with NGOs, there still remain issues regarding interagency communication and the UNHCR's abilities to communicate with its partner NGOs. Definitive steps need to be taken, and perhaps guidance written, to ensure that communication with such organizations is done properly and efficiently.

Questions

1. How can the UNHCR better improve its relationships with NGOs and other partners to better improve the care given to refugees?
2. What could be done to facilitate coordination between NGOs and the UNHCR?
3. What could UN member states do to improve such coordination?
4. Does your country prefer to work only through formal UN agencies?
5. Do you see many benefits in encouraging cooperation between the UN agencies and NGOs?