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**First session**

Agenda item  
16 March 2024

**Protecting Refugees from  
Human Trafficking**

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**Note by the Secretary-General**

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the UNHCR the topic synopsis entitled “Protecting Refugees from Human Trafficking”.  
(UNHCR/NOV/SYN/IIF/01.1).



## Protecting Refugees from Human Trafficking

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### Section I—Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated by the United Nations to lead and coordinate international action for the world-wide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems.

UNHCR's primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. UNHCR strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state, or to return home voluntarily. By assisting refugees to return to their own country or to settle in another country, UNHCR also seeks lasting solutions to their plight.

### Section II—Background Information

Whether because it has been underreported, or simply occurs too frequently, or exists largely decriminalized, instances of human trafficking have significantly increased in recent years – a terrifying reality that not only threatens essential human rights, but also begs the question of how it occurs with such volume. The United Nations formally defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.” Thus, traffickers actively search out vulnerable persons to exploit; among the most vulnerable members of the global community are refugees, those who have left or been forced out of their communities by civil war, economic hardship, environmental degradation, natural disaster, persecution, and other tragedies. The United Nations, in 2022 released a statistic regarding the connection between Western European refugees and the trafficked individuals. Between 2002 and 2019, the numbers of trafficked persons and refugees in Ukraine quadrupled by 2016. This connection is due to the vulnerable state of refugees and victims of war. The UNHCR goes on to say that “Many persons fleeing conflict, violence or persecution are also compelled to move irregularly to seek protection.” Unfortunately, protection usually is found amongst traffickers and members of the trafficking industry.

Historically, human traffickers thrive in times of conflict and economic hardship, where displaced individuals struggle to meet their most basic needs. Displaced persons who have sought refuge in neighboring territories are isolated financially, often linguistically and culturally, and often face discrimination in the places where they have sought refuge. Traffickers excel in coercing vulnerable individuals and families with promises of safe passage, gainful employment, and so on. Once lured by promises of money, shelter, and safe treatment, vulnerable populations find themselves in an ever cascading spiral of circumstances they cannot easily escape from. Travel and identity documents, when they are available to the displaced persons fleeing conflict, are often confiscated and held by the traffickers. Trafficked individuals are then coerced into ransom schemes or even forced into soliciting or luring others into the same trap. In many cases, this human rights abuse occurs with full knowledge by law enforcement and judicial authorities, and in the worst cases, these abuses are perpetrated by those very individuals. Thai Sea Slavery, for example, relies heavily on forged ship registries and lackadaisical enforcement of existing laws regarding trafficking. Investigative journalism in 2015 by the Guardian, who broke the story globally, revealed one police officer who was both responsible for the lack of

enforcement of anti-trafficking laws, as well as the brokering of slave labor to various ship captains who also paid protection money to him. Corruption at multiple levels of government and law enforcement coupled with the disincentivization of reporting abuses by victims makes this a particularly insidious problem. In cases of refugees, their often ambiguous legal status in the adopted country exacerbates the issue.

## **Section III—UN Involvement**

Due to the number of conflicts and the corresponding volume of refugees, the United Nations has called for action in halting these abuses. It was brought to the General Assembly's attention in 2009 that issues of human trafficking are not addressed by refugee support protocols, namely the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons from 2022 suggests 5 possible initiatives that mainly revolve around humanitarian support for refugees in hopes that they would be able to resist traffickers' lures and coercion. The report urges international organizations to approach counter-trafficking efforts systematically and with an eye toward prevention of the circumstances initially driving the humanitarian crisis.

The United Nations has struggled with issues of enforcement for the prevention of human trafficking. A global initiative on ending human trafficking begins with municipal, local, and regional justice systems and law enforcement; however, issues of corruption, collusion with traffickers, and outright prejudice make the issue substantially more difficult to address. In addition, areas with political instability are already operating at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to manage enforcement. Complicated bureaucracy, budgetary constraints, and ambiguity in the law are considerations as to why so few convictions are won against human traffickers. The scale of the problem far outstrips the ability of all but the most robust justice systems to prosecute it.

## **Section IV—Possible Solutions**

Aside from addressing the larger issues driving the refugee crisis, the safety of refugees is tantamount. This goal may be most easily accomplished via a cooperative effort, via a specific body of designated international teams. With the support of countries whose law enforcement and justice systems are robust, countries can partner in regional groups with the goal of freeing refugees who have already been, or at risk of being trafficked.

Insulating refugees from human traffickers is just the beginning for solving this complex issue. Delegates may wish to include longer term solutions which involve humanitarian care for displaced persons.

Prevention is also a key part of this issue. Saving refugees from vulnerable situations before they are even found by traffickers is imperative. Countries who wish to support this cause might consider offering financial assistance, refugee camps that are well guarded and protected by the federal military, and medical assistance to families in need.

## **Section V—Bloc Positions**

African: The largest refugee population has consistently been in Africa. Likewise, the human trafficking rates reflect it. It is estimated that three out of four African refugees fall victim to the human trafficking

industry. The Global Report of Trafficking in Persons from 2016 stated that 73% of these cases are concentrated in West Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Between the consistent tribal wars occurring, refugees are displaced almost daily. Traffickers who find them in the midst of seeking refuge take advantage of their vulnerable state, that is, by “promising” safety.

Asia-Pacific: The Asia-Pacific Bloc is notably susceptible to human trafficking as the industry has been reported to thrive under Southeast Asia, particularly in India. Where the cases are so common and unreported, the punishment is often overlooked. Even dating back to the British colonial rule over India, sexual exploitation was so common that it quickly became a part of the female industry and overshadowed the abuse and trafficking happening behind the closed doors. Over the years, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime has addressed the issue with various protocols against the “Smuggling of Migrants.” Human trafficking of economically vulnerable migrants is particularly prevalent in Yemen and United Arab Emirates as well.

Eastern European: At the height of the Russia-Ukraine war, about 16,209 Ukrainian refugees underwent some form of human trafficking. Heavy support from the United States government eased a portion of this suffering but the ongoing war has continued to put Ukrainians at risk. The Eastern European Bloc, however, in general, has a firm stance against human trafficking and has implemented various protocols to tackle the situation. Refugees, however, are largely unprotected by these.

Latin American and Caribbean: Human trafficking of refugees and migrants is a serious concern for this block. Venezuela, as a result of its economic situation, has seen a dramatic rise in the number of human trafficking cases; similarly, countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala have suffered a greater than average number of cases.

Western European and Others: Despite the favorable status of many WEOG member states as developed nations with robust law enforcement protocols and justice systems, human trafficking of vulnerable populations still occurs. Refugees who settle in WEOG member nations in larger displaced persons communities may then become susceptible to human trafficking schemes as they attempt to bring friends and loved ones over as well. As with other regions, there are an appreciable number of cases which go unreported. A refugee’s complicated legal status in the new country coupled with language barriers with the justice system further exacerbate the issue.

## **Section VI—Questions That Should Be Taken Into Consideration**

Why are refugees more vulnerable to human trafficking than other populations?

How are refugees displaced and what does it take to relocate them safely?

Who are the most common refugees around the world today and what could they be at risk for?

How does geography play a role in getting refugees to safe places?

How do human trafficking industries operate despite government attempts to shut them down?

## Section VI—Helpful Sites and Resources

Report—UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—Refugee Protection and Human Trafficking: Selected Legal Reference Materials

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR01](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR01) (Shortened URL from unhcr.org)

Database—UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)—Electronic Evidence Hub

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR02](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR02) (Shortened URL from unodc.org)

Framework—UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—Guidelines on International Protection No. 12

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR03](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR03) (Shortened URL from refworld.org)

Overview—UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—Trafficking in Persons

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR04](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR04) (Shortened URL from unhcr.org)

Press Release—UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)—Targeted by Traffickers: Ukrainian Refugees at High Risk of Exploitation

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR05](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR05) (Shortened URL from unodc.org)

Article—Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime—Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Latin America’s struggle to tackle human trafficking

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR06](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR06) (Shortened URL from globalinitiative.net)

Article—UN International Organization of Migration, Regional Office for Central, North America, and the Caribbean—Why Does Vulnerability to Human Trafficking Increase in Disaster Situations?

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR07](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR07) (Shortened URL from iom.int)

Report—UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)—Global Report of Trafficking in Persons, 2022

[bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR08](https://bit.ly/IIMUN2024-UNHCR08) (Shortened URL from unodc.org)

Potential search terms: Human Trafficking of Refugees, Human Trafficking Vulnerable Populations, Exploitation of Refugees, Protecting Rights of Refugees