

KNIGHTS MODEL UNITED NATIONS INVITATIONAL CONFERENCE

U.N. HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES: MEDITERRANEAN REFUGEE CRISIS



DECEMBER 2, 2023

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Hello, delegates! My name is Selene Wang, and I am delighted to be your chair for this year's committee on the Mediterranean refugee crisis. I am a junior at The Bishop's School, and I have been doing MUN since 7th grade. If you attended KnightsMUN last year, you may remember me as the chair for the Joint Crisis Committee: The Troubles for the Irish side. I love participating in various MUN conferences, such as Triton MUN, NCRC MUN, TnT MUN, and Columbia MUN Conference and Exposition (CMUNCE), and I am super excited for this year's Knights MUN!

I've been engaged in refugee-related issues ever since participating in a UNHCR committee during 9th grade, and what particularly interests me about the Mediterranean refugee crisis is that it asks us to consider how countries should address the human rights of refugees while balancing their own geopolitical interests. Even though we may not be able to solve the political, religious, and cultural conflicts that underlie the constant instability in Africa and the Middle East, we can protect the people who have been forced to migrate as a result and protect their basic human right to safety and well-being. It is also important to remember that the conflicts we see in the developing world are not just the result of the countries themselves, but also the lasting legacy of colonialism, raising questions about the responsibilities European powers owe to their former colonies.

I look forward to your creative solutions and seeing you on December 2nd! If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at selene.wang.25@bishops.com. For general position paper guidelines, please see the Position Paper tab on www.knightsmun.com.

I. BACKGROUND

According to the UNHCR, refugees are defined as “persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution,” whose conditions in their home countries are so dangerous and intolerable that they are forced to seek sanctuary in other countries.¹ In contrast, migrants are defined as persons who choose to move not because of the direct threat of death, but for better living and economic conditions.² The individuals crossing the Mediterranean are often composed of a mix of both groups. For this reason, both groups will be considered under the scope of this committee, and delegates should create solutions to address the human rights of both groups. For the remainder of the “Background” section, I will be referring to both groups collectively as “migrants” for concision.

The continuous violence of various conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, such as the Syrian Civil War, the Yemeni Civil War, the Somali Civil War, and the war in Afghanistan has led to a mass migration of refugees across the Mediterranean to Europe, primarily from former European colonies.³ The worsening economic situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine has increased migration as well. For example, in Sierra Leone, where the per capita GDP was \$461 in 2022, rising cost of living has led to country-wide protests. Climate change has further exacerbated the situation, causing severe malnutrition in countries like Niger and near famine in Somalia.⁴

¹ UNHCR, "UNHCR viewpoint: 'Refugee' or 'migrant' – Which is right?," UNHCR | USA, last modified July 11, 2016, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/stories/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-or-migrant-which-right>.

² UNHCR, "UNHCR viewpoint," UNHCR | USA.

³ Sana Noor Haq, Caolán Magee, and Barbie Latza Nadeau, "Europe's Migration Policies in Chaos as Arrivals Surge," CNN, last modified April 16, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/16/europe/europe-migration-chaos-boat-arrivals-intl/>.

⁴ Sally Hayden, "Welcome to Europe, Where Mass Death Has Become Normal," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/16/opinion/europe-tunisia-migration.html>.

Between January and September 2023, about 186,000 migrants arrived in Southern Europe, escaping persecution and poverty in their home countries. Italy alone has received over 130,000 migrants, 83% more people than during the same period last year.⁵ The increase in the number of migrants crossing into Europe is accompanied by an increasing death toll. Since 2014, more than 27,800 people have died or disappeared in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea on overcrowded and unsafe vessels.⁶ In 2023 alone, over 2,500 people have lost their lives, a 67% increase from last year's death toll of 1,680.⁷

The migrants who cross the Mediterranean start their crossing in North Africa, where ruthless smugglers charge high fees to cram migrants into overcrowded and shoddily-constructed vessels, prone to capsizing. One of the worst disasters occurred off the coast of Greece in June 2023. Collectively paying over \$3.5 million dollars, these refugees were crammed into a boat, the *Adriana*, with limited food and water, and when the boat's engine broke down, Greek authorities refused to rescue the boat, and instead sent a group of armed men from the Greek Coast Guard to surveil it.⁸ Running out of food and water and drifting aimlessly, they capsized a few days later. Out of approximately 705 people aboard, only 104 survived.⁹

This incident not only reflects the horrible conditions that migrants face in their journey to reach safety but also shows the lack of response or aid that European countries and North African countries have provided to these migrants. After over one million refugees, mostly from Syria, arrived in Europe from 2015 to 2016, public opinion turned against migrants, as many

⁵ Emma Bowman, "More than 2,500 Migrants Crossing the Mediterranean Died or Went Missing This Year," NPR, last modified September 29, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/29/1202560292/migrants-mediterranean-deaths-2023>.

⁶ Bowman, "More than," NPR.

⁷ Bowman, "More than," NPR.

⁸ Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Karam Shoumali, "Everyone Knew the Migrant Ship Was Doomed. No One Helped.," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/01/world/europe/greece-migrant-ship.html>.

⁹ Hayden, "Welcome to Europe."

began viewing migrants as “threats” to European cultures, which led European countries to restrict their migration policies.¹⁰ European countries bordering the Mediterranean have directly attempted to stop crossings. Greece has on numerous occasions refused to provide aid to migrant vessels, and in April 2023, the Greek Coast Guard even kidnapped and abandoned migrants in the middle of the Aegean Sea.¹¹ Meanwhile, Italy has collaborated with the Libyan Coast Guard to forcibly send migrant boats back to Libya, and Malta has repeatedly declined distress calls from migrant boats within their rescue zone.¹² Other European countries have passed more restrictive laws on immigration. In July, the United Kingdom passed a law eliminating asylum for any migrants who passed through a country where they did not face direct persecution, which essentially removes the right to asylum for most migrants.¹³

In July of 2023, as a result of the deadly *Adriana* shipwreck, the European Union struck a deal with the North African country of Tunisia.¹⁴ In exchange for economic aid to its struggling economy, Tunisia promised to tighten its border control and reduce smuggling. The result of this deal has been increasingly harsh treatment of migrants in Tunisia, on top of the existing discrimination against migrants in the country. In fact, since July, Tunisia has dumped thousands of migrants in the deserts on its border, with limited food and water, and it has allegedly

¹⁰ Monika Pronczuk, "In a Bid to Curb Migrants, Europe Strikes a Deal with Tunisia," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/17/world/europe/eu-tunisia-migrant-deal.html>

¹¹ Sarah Kerr et al., "Greece Says It Doesn't Ditch Migrants at Sea. It Was Caught in the Act.," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/19/world/europe/greece-migrants-abandoned.html>.

¹² "Migrants : Enquête Sur Le Rôle De L'Europe Dans Le Piège Libyen," video, 16:45, YouTube, posted by Le Monde, October 31, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jw2oBwslipY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jw2oBwslipY;).; Reade Levinson, "Migrant's drowning in Mediterranean prompts criticism of Malta's rescue policies," Reuters, last modified October 17, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/migrants-drowning-mediterranean-prompts-criticism-maltas-rescue-policies-2023-10-17/>.

¹³ UNHCR, "UK Illegal Migration Bill: UN Refugee Agency and UN Human Rights Office warn of profound impact on human rights and international refugee protection system," UNHCR, last modified July 18, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/uk-illegal-migration-bill-un-refugee-agency-and-un-human-rights-office-warn>.

¹⁴ Monika Pronczuk, "In a Bid to Curb Migrants, Europe Strikes a Deal with Tunisia," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/17/world/europe/eu-tunisia-migrant-deal.html>.

damaged boats and beat migrants.¹⁵ However, in October 2023, due to tensions between the European Union and Tunisia, the Tunisian government returned 60 million euros of the aid given, so the future of this deal may still be up for debate.¹⁶

II. UN ACTIONS

The United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention established the international basis for refugee protection and established the principle of non-refoulement, where a refugee should not be returned to a country where they may face persecution, which means that refugees should be eligible for asylum in another country.¹⁷ It further states that every refugee is entitled to decent work, housing, education, and access to the justice system.¹⁸ Migrants are not entitled to the same level of protection as refugees, as a country is legally allowed to deport a migrant. Nevertheless, according to the U.N., the country still has the responsibility to guarantee the basic human rights of migrants, such as access to food, water, shelter, and healthcare, and should detain migrants without giving them judicial safeguards.¹⁹

So far, the U.N. and the UNHCR have provided aid to refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean and have called for more decisive action from European nations, but have not enacted any large-scale policy changes. After the capsizing in July off the coast of Greece, the UNHCR provided hygiene kits, interpretation services, and counseling services for the survivors and continues to provide aid to migrants sheltering in Europe, particularly in Italy, Greece, and

¹⁵ Vivian Yee, "Europe Pushed Tunisia to Keep Migrants Away. The Result Is Harsh.," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/20/world/africa/tunisia-african-migrants.html>.

¹⁶ Gregorio Sorgi, "Tunisia hands back €60M of EU funding as migrant deal tensions soar," Politico, last modified October 11, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/tunisia-hands-back-60-m-eu-funding-migration-deal/>.

¹⁷ UNHCR, "The 1951 Refugee Convention," UNHCR | USA, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>.

¹⁸ UNHCR, "The 1951," UNHCR | USA.

¹⁹ United Nations, "Migrants - UN Action," United Nations | Fight Racism, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/migrants>.

Spain.²⁰ The UNHCR has consistently called for European countries to rescue migrants in danger, criticized Libya's human rights violations against migrants, and has also spoken out against the U.K.'s new illegal immigration law.²¹ However, the U.N. has yet to enact any significant resolutions in regard to the Mediterranean situation.

III. QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Note that if your country does not have a direct position on this issue, please research their position on refugees and migrants in general and make an educated prediction regarding their position in this committee. As you research your countries' stance on the committee and brainstorm solutions, consider these questions:

1. How can the U.N. and the international community ensure safe passage of migrants and reduce deaths in Mediterranean crossings?
2. In addition to aid, how can the U.N. take action to protect refugees in Europe and in North Africa?
3. To what extent do North African countries bear responsibility for providing asylum?
4. To what extent do European countries bear responsibility for providing asylum for migrants? And, to what extent do European countries bear responsibility for the well-being of their former colonies? What does your country think?
5. How should individual countries protect refugees? Should there be a stronger focus on aid or on resettlement? How should refugees be resettled?

²⁰ International Organization for Migration, "IOM and UNHCR Call for Decisive Action Following Mediterranean Tragedy," UN Migration, last modified June 16, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-and-unhcr-call-decisive-action-following-mediterranean-tragedy>.

²¹ United Nations, "Conflicts, Disasters Driving More Migrants to Risk Mediterranean Crossing, Briefers Warn Security Council Ahead of Libya Mandate Decision," United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, last modified September 28, 2023, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15427.doc.htm>.; UNHCR, "UK Illegal," UNHCR.

6. How can your country balance its geopolitical interest and public opinion while also addressing the humanitarian concerns of the migrants?

IV. HELPFUL RESOURCES

- <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>
- <https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/migrants>
- <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/29/1202560292/migrants-mediterranean-deaths-2023>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66478091>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/01/world/europe/greece-migrant-ship.html>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/17/world/europe/eu-tunisia-migrant-deal.html>
- <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/16/europe/europe-migration-chaos-boat-arrivals-intl/>

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