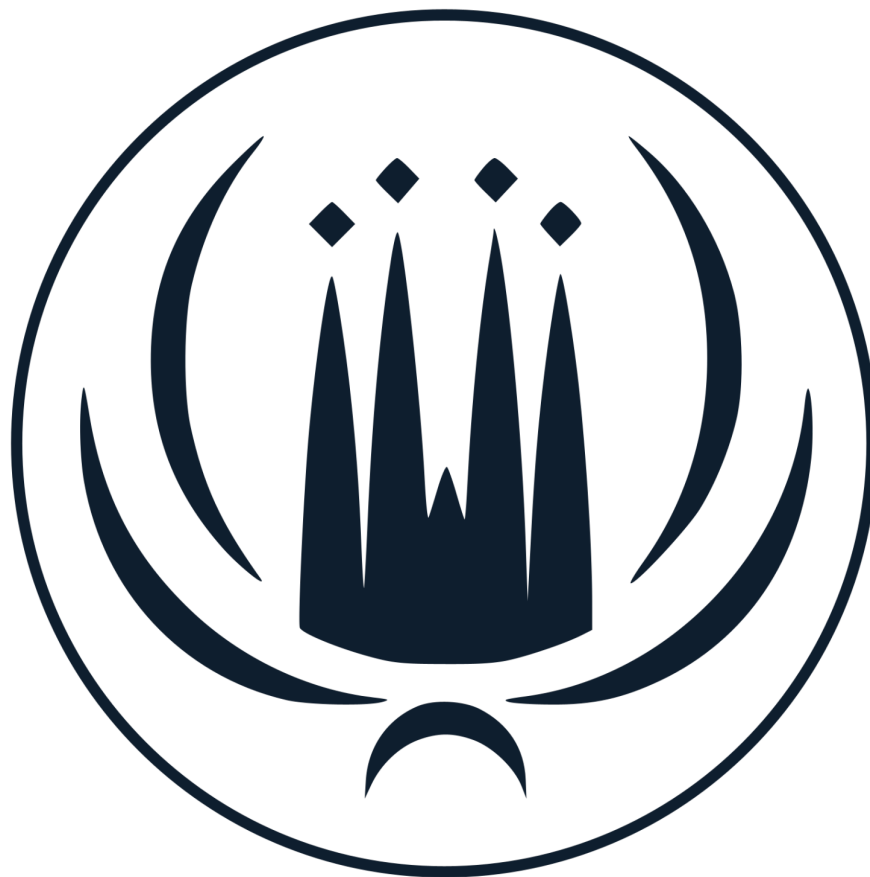




UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

BCNMUN 2025

Beyond Sovereignty:
Strengthening Global Alliances in a Divided World

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Topic: The Impact of Border Militarization and Shifting Geopolitical Policies on Refugee Protection and Humanitarian Aid.

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Introduction

The issue of border militarization and its influence on refugee protection and humanitarian aid stems from a complex intersection between security concerns, migration pressures, an ever evolving political landscape and its priorities. Historically, refugee movements on a large-scale, such as the ones caused by wars in the Balkans, Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, have been met with international frameworks that organize and emphasize protection and asylum. However, with increasing concerns over terrorism, transnational crime, and irregular migration, the 21st century has seen stricter border controls across multiple nations.

A large portion of the issue lies within the rigid tension between national sovereignty and security, and international humanitarian obligations. Recent border militarization, in all its different incarnations such as: physical barriers, increased surveillance, and armed forces, is conducted for the purpose of aiming to deter irregular amounts of migration. However, it often culminates in a heightened risk for refugees due to the fact that it restricts access to asylum procedures. On top of that, geopolitical policies are shifting, such as the externalization of border management and conditional aid agreements, altering how and where humanitarian aid can be provided.

The implications are far-reaching, refugees are facing a greater physical danger and are suffering through longer periods of prolonged displacement. There are fewer legal pathways open to protection and in the meantime, humanitarian agencies encounter new operational and ethical challenges. The situation has placed the balance between state security and humanitarian principles under scrutiny and choices need to be made over which one to prioritize more over the other. It's boiled down to a question that has been proven to be unequivocally difficult for states and parties to solve: to what extent should states compromise their own sovereignty in order to facilitate humanitarian protection?

We see the repercussions within these cases exemplified in events that happen in recent history. For example, the Border Crisis in 2021 between Belarus and Poland caused a lot of havoc as an influx of migrants, mainly from the Middle East, began to get pushed into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia by the Belarusian government. Despite Belarus denying being involved with the crisis, it was seen as a retort to the European Union-Belarusian relations deteriorating in the buildup to the crisis. The event put all eyes on the concept of a migrant crisis and the crossroads of state and local protection and maintenance vs humanitarian needs. It resulted in a large population of immigrants getting tossed around the border, serving as a wakeup call for the world.

Definition of Key Terms

Border Militarization

The process of increasing military personnel, surveillance technology, and stronger infrastructure along national borders. It's often justified as a means of security but can restrict and hinder asylum access and efforts, which increases risk for refugees.

Externalization of Borders

A policy approach where states shift border control responsibilities to other countries via agreements or funding. This is a tactic used by the EU, US and others to prevent migrants and refugees from reaching their borders.

Humanitarian Aid

Assistance provided to people in crisis situations covering basic human needs and resources such as food, shelter, and healthcare. It's usually coordinated by international organizations such as UN agencies and NGOs.

Refugee Protection

The legal humanitarian framework designed to ensure the safety and dignity of people fleeing from areas of conflict in which they are susceptible to persecution or harm. Based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, it includes the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement which means they can not be forced to return to their home country as long as they are still in danger.

Pushback Policies

A Pushback Policy refers to a state forcibly returning migrants and asylum-seekers to their country of origin or another country without allowing them to access legal processes' such as asylum procedures. Most of the instances where these practices are taking place are considered violations of international law, including the principle of non-refoulement.

Background Information

Historical Background Information

The militarization of borders has roots in the mid to late 20th century, but accelerated dramatically in the post Cold-war era and after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. Before the 1990s, border management was a more administrative process which focused on immigration control via customs. With the rising concerns in terrorism and transnational crime that came after the 9/11 attacks, the process shifted towards a rather large focus on border security.

Multiple governments, specifically the United States and others spanning the European Union, began sending out military personnel, equipping modern and technologically advanced surveillance systems, and physical barriers in order to mitigate irregular migration. For example, Operation Gatekeeper was a protocol initiated by the U.S. in 1994, which combined an increase of patrol guards and surveillance systems being set up on the U.S.-Mexico border. Additionally, fences were erected to aid the protocol's goal of deterring migration.

Militarization intensified after 9/11, as previously mentioned, especially within the USA as the Department of Homeland Security was introduced in 2002. Other similar security-driven policies were also initiated in Europa, Australia and Asia. These security measures were justified as necessary for countries' national safety and the effort towards combating crime by world leaders and legislators. However, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN High Commissioner of Refugees, along with a large group of people, criticized these policies stating that they increasingly obstruct refugees' right to seek asylum and place them into very dangerous situations.

Current Situation in the World

Today, border militarization is a defining feature of migration governance, directly impacting refugee protection and humanitarian aid. Several recent developments serve to demonstrate the urgency of

the issue, such as the restricted aid access case in Thailand. In August of 2025, Thailand cut food and medical aid to over 100,000 Myanmar refugees seeking refuge from the ongoing situation in their country. Funding shortages caused Thailand's government to fully pull the plug, leaving many without essential supplies. Externalization of borders has also been a key factor in the issue, with the EU continuing to fund migration control agreements with other countries such as Libya and Tunisia. This is raising concerns over human rights abuses and blocked access to asylum.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States of America

The US-Mexico border is one of the most militarized borders in the world which features walls, drones and even armed guards. Migrants and asylum seekers coming up from Latin America are heavily affected by this militarized border as it makes refugee input into the country much more difficult.

European Union

The Mediterranean Sea and Balkan routes are the places which are most affected by border militarization and strengthening of migration controls. Refugees from the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia are the most affected by this.

Thailand

The Thai-Myanmar border hosts over 100,000 refugees in camps. Thailand allows refugees to stay in these designated camps but they don't grant them full legal refugee status or resettlement rights which makes their situation harsher. With the funding cuts in 2025, there has been significantly worsened food and medical shortages for these refugees.

Bangladesh

Cox's Bazar is the largest refugee settlement in the world with nearly one million Rohingya refugees. These Rohingya refugees are fleeing persecution in Myanmar and are crossing the Bangladesh border.

Turkey

Turkey hosts the largest refugee population in the world, with over 3 million refugees registered coming in from Syria according to the UN Refugee Agency. Turkey has heavily militarized portions of the southern border in Syria, building walls and installing surveillance systems.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The UNHCR has a global presence in refugee-hosting states such as Bangladesh, Jordan, Uganda and Thailand. They've faced major funding shortfalls, making it harder to deliver food, shelter and medical care to displaced populations.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The IOM works in migration hotspots across Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. They balance between humanitarian responsibilities and assisting governments in border control policies, with sometimes drawing criticism for legitimizing restrictive migration measures.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
October 1, 1994	Launch of Operation Gatekeeper The US implemented Operation Gatekeeper in California along the US-Mexico border. The initiative introduced high fences, infrared cameras and increased patrols, marking one of the first large-scale militarization efforts at a national border.
March 1, 1996	Passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act The IIRIRA was passed by the US Congress, placing stricter penalties for illegal arrivals and overstaying visas, increasing detention and deportations as well as constructing more physical barriers along the Southern US border. The act limited social services for illegal migrants.
November 25, 2002	Creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks

in New York, the US formally established the Department of Homeland Security. The move consolidated 22 agencies including ones focusing on immigration and customs enforcement.

September 4, 2015

European Refugee Crisis

On this date, EU officials reported over 5,000 refugees per day arriving in Greece, marking the peak of the European refugee crisis. By the end of the year, over one million refugees, primarily coming from the Middle East and Afghanistan, had entered Europe. The crisis pushed the European Union toward externalization agreements with other countries and stricter border control.

March 7, 2016

European Union Statement with Turkey

Dealing with an usually high number of irregular arrivals, the EU signed a statement along with Turkey to limit crossings into Greece and deport new irregular migrants to Turkey in exchange for financial aid and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. The agreement became a landmark for EU efforts at mitigating and controlling the recent irregular flow of migration.

December 17, 2018

Adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees

The UNGA formally endorsed the Global Compact on Refugees. This non-binding agreement aimed to strengthen refugee protection, improve burden-sharing and support host communities. Some countries such as the US or Hungary have refused to adopt it.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

1951 Refugee Convention & 1967 Protocol

Adopted in Geneva, this treaty defined the term refugee and established legal obligations of states to protect those fleeing persecution. The 1967 protocol, adopted in New York, removed the geographical and temporal limits of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991)

A resolution that strengthened the coordination of international humanitarian emergency assistance. The resolution responded to fragmented relief efforts that occurred in crises like the Gulf War, highlighting the need for more stable coordination from the United Nations. It created the Emergency Relief Coordinator role, which is tasked with organizing and mobilizing resources and facilitating access for affected areas.

Global Compact on Refugees (2018)

Endorsed by the UNGA, the compact provided a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing in refugee protection. It builds on the principles of the 1951 Refugee Convention and seeks to enhance the predictability and equity of global support for refugees and host communities through concrete commitments. It encourages stakeholders to facilitate durable solutions; such as reparations, local integration and resettlement.

UN Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018)

This resolution explicitly recognized the link between armed conflict and food insecurity.

UN General Assembly Resolution 76/233 (2021) – Protection of Migrants

This resolution reaffirmed the human rights of migrants, urged states to combat discrimination and xenophobia, and called for safe, orderly and regular migration pathways while respecting state sovereignty.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The UNHCR Humanitarian Corridors Initiatives, with support from NGOs and some states, has attempted to establish humanitarian corridors to allow safe passage for refugees in conflict zones. While

successful in some isolated cases, most efforts faced opposition from host or transit countries, which cited security concerns and limited their effectiveness.

The EU Search and Rescue Missions, Operation Sophia, (2015–2020) were launched to combat human smuggling in the Mediterranean. Operation Sophia also conducted research and rescue missions. Political disagreements among EU members over burden-sharing and migration policy led to the operation's suspension in 2020.

Failed UN Draft Resolution on Safe Access for Humanitarian Aid in Syria (2014) was a resolution considered by the Security Council in 2014 to allow greater cross-border humanitarian access during the Syrian Civil War. It was vetoed by Russia and China, illustrating how geopolitical divisions can block global efforts to secure aid access.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening International Burden-Sharing

A foundational solution is for wealthier states to not only take in more refugees through resettlement quotas but also expand financial, logistical and technical contributions to host countries and UN agencies, providing a safety net for tons of people to rely on. This approach responds directly to the inequities of geography, where low to middle income nations often host an amount of refugees that exceeds their maximum capacity. More predictable annual financial contributions and emergency funding windows for humanitarian agencies can help close gaps in protection during influxes of people in neighboring states.

Establishing Legally Protected Humanitarian Corridors

Another solution could be establishing legally protected humanitarian corridors by mandating and monitoring existing humanitarian corridors under UN supervision to ensure refugees have safe routes out of conflict zones. These corridors could be enforced via UN peacekeeping operations or regional coalitions. The idea would be for them to be equipped with medical care and robust anti-trafficking protections in order to ensure the peoples' safety. Transparent and guaranteed Safe passage, rather than infrequent ad hoc agreements, will be able to save lives and maintain the right to seek asylum for refugees without exposing them to further danger.

Reforming Border Governance for Humanitarian Protection

Modern border governance should embrace smart borders that utilize technology to enhance security and guarantee humanitarian principles are upheld. Independent monitors, either appointed by international organizations or by local civil societies, are able to ensure migrants are not pushed away illegally or subjected to abuse. Regular training for border officials in international law and public reporting on border practices are necessary reforms that could be made under this solution. By balancing security with human rights, border reforms will encourage and produce a safer and more organized migration system for all refugees alike.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation and Local Leadership

Enhancing regional cooperation is crucial in putting the pieces together to solve the issue. Supporting regional organizations (such as the African Union, OAS, or ASEAN) to create joint refugee protection frameworks can offer more stability. Such regional leaderships can foster flexible solutions that reduce reliance on external actors, encouraging harmonized standards for refugee rights and enable more coordinated humanitarian efforts.

Decriminalizing Humanitarian Assistance

Passing UN resolutions and amending national laws to decriminalize humanitarian assistance at borders is a vital way to ensure NGOs and volunteers can safely and legally deliver aid. Protection for aid workers strengthens adherence to international humanitarian law and helps maintain support for those in movement, especially during political crises or mass immigration events.

Recognizing Climate Displacement as Grounds for Protection

With climate-driven displacements growing in modern times, expanded UNHCR mandates or new protocols that build on the 1951 Refugee Convention could recognize environmental migration as grounds for asylum. Incorporating climate resilience, funding for adaptation, and legal recognition of climate migrants as refugees, would all contribute to making international protection more inclusive and would serve as a huge step for preparing for a future in which climate crises are much more common, responding to the increasingly complex realities of forced immigration.

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