

## **Welcome Delegates to PANGEA 2020 and the United Nations General Assembly**

The UN General Assembly, established through the UN Charter in 1945, is the primary deliberative body of the United Nations. As one of the six primary bodies of the UN, it is the only one in which all 193 Member States are represented impartially and objectively, with the Holy See and the State of Palestine participating as Non-Member Observer States. Currently, the General Assembly convenes the third week in September, and decides its final meeting date, typically in December. As former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, noted, there is a continuous need to reflect every Member State's perspective, and thus most of the focus must be on reaching consensus.

For this conference, the topics for discussion are:

- I. Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of Natural Disasters**
- II. Addressing the Palestinian Right of Return**

### **I. Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of Natural Disasters**

According to the International Disaster Database (EM-DAT), between 1994 and 2013, over 6,800 natural disasters were recorded worldwide, which claimed about 1.35 million lives, or about 68,000 lives per year.<sup>1</sup> For data purposes, *natural disasters* include floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, landslides, draughts, cold waves, heat waves, avalanches, wave surges (including tsunamis and tidal waves), wind storms (such as cyclones, hurricanes, storms, tornadoes, tropical storms, typhoons and winter storms), wildfires, insect infestation, and epidemics of cholera, diarrhea, meningitis, dengue fever, and malaria. "Relief" is defined by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as rapid, life-saving emergency

<sup>1</sup> ReliefWeb, "The human cost of natural disasters 2015: a global perspective"  
<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/human-cost-natural-disasters-2015-global-perspective>

humanitarian assistance, including search and rescue, emergency food assistance, water, sanitation, and emergency shelter.<sup>2</sup>

While all Member States are vulnerable to some forms of natural disasters, not all are able to respond quickly or to make adaptive measures to reduce the likelihood of death, displacement, or severe economic consequences. A ten-year plan, the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), utilized during the period between 2005 -2015, had 168 members in agreement. It had five primary components:

- a. Ensuring that disaster-risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation;
- b. Identifying, assessing and monitoring disaster risks and enhance early warning;
- c. Utilizing knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels;
- d. Reducing underlying risk factors; and
- e. Strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.<sup>3</sup>

Member States will often step in and offer humanitarian aid, providing food, funds, clothing, labor, and other resources when a natural disaster strikes. But recovery from such events is often expensive and slow. Natural disasters are not preventable, or controllable, and their consequences are far-reaching and difficult to prepare for in a budget. Thus, it is critical to ensure that there is a strong plan in place, in every Member State, to relieve those impacted. Difficult questions include: What kind of aid is needed for specific types of disasters? What agencies can help with these relief efforts? How can a sustainable program be created that allow for immediate humanitarian relief for such disasters?

<sup>2</sup> United States Agency for International Development, <https://www.usaid.gov>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, <http://www.unisdr.org>

## II. Addressing the Palestinian Right of Return

The right of return is a principle in international law which posits that everyone has a right to voluntarily return or re-enter their country of origin or citizenship. This is not a right clearly defined by treaty, but a principle included in many UN resolutions to date, and referred to by many documents defining human rights law. With millions of people in the global community displaced, by man-made as well as natural disasters, there is an increasing focus on this legal principle and its application in national law. Particular interest is on a particular group of people, the Palestinians, who share a cultural identity, although the displacement of most occurred more than a generation ago, beginning with the 1948 war initiated with the emergence of the State of Israel from the British Mandate of Palestine. More than 700,000 Palestinians fled their homes in this war, with several hundred thousand more fleeing (some for the second time, having tried to return) in the 1967 war between Israel and its neighboring states, who supported the rights of the Palestinians to the land.

Palestinian refugees and their descendants constitute one of the largest and longest-standing unresolved refugee crises in the world, the about 7.5 million refugees, and an additional 720,000 internally displaced persons. More than a million of these refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) exist in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and the occupied Palestinian territory (Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem). The right of return was incorporated in the UNGA resolution 194, passed in 1948, affirming the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and to obtain restitution and compensation. This right was affirmed multiple times by the UN, in resolutions including Resolution 2535, 393, 2452, 3236, which articulated the right of the Palestine refugees' right to return to their homes and lands in Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

Under international law, it is illegal for a State to deny refugees of a particular race, color, national or ethnic origin the right to return to their homes. But Israeli law now bars Palestinian refugees from returning to their home is what

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/israelpalestine/>

is now Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, sanctions mass denationalization targeting Palestinian refugees (Nationality Law) and authorizes confiscation and destruction of Palestinian private property and land-holdings (Absentee Property Law and Land Acquisition Law).<sup>5</sup>

Many Member States have, in their past, displaced populations, allowed the confiscation of property belonging by or inhabited by indigenous peoples, and refused to allow those peoples to return and reclaim their lands or properties. Thus, the idea of a “right of return” is popular, but not universally held, or applied fully internally or externally. It is difficult for State which has evolved from the confiscation of property from indigenous peoples to strongly condemn the actions of the State of Israel today. The Palestinian people continue to be promised a right of return, and/or compensation for lost holdings, but little direct action, beyond words, has occurred to resolve the problem.

<sup>5</sup> <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf>;  
<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-an-absence-of-morality-in-jerusalem-1.5275594>;  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4322513?seq=1>