



Border Force sails towards people in a small boat, Dover, UK
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IS THE UK MEETING ITS INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE REFUGEE CONVENTION? AGE 16-19



A human rights education session on asylum and refugees for use with young people aged 16-19



INTRODUCTION

In this session students will learn about the rights and protections given to people seeking asylum and refugees under the UN Refugee Convention. They will explore examples of UK asylum policy and ask whether the government is meeting its international legal obligations to refugees.

This is part of our set of Refugee Rights teaching resource materials.

Aims of the pack

- To gain an understanding of refugee rights and protections under the UN Refugee Convention
- To analyse the UK government's approach to refugees through case studies
- To consider if the UK is meeting its legal responsibilities under the UN Refugee Convention
- To discuss actions to make refugees and people seeking asylum feel more welcome

You will need

Access to the internet to watch two video clips: *When You Don't Exist* (2 minutes 10 seconds) on Amnesty International's **YouTube** channel (search title) *70 years of the Refugee Convention – a lifesaving document* (2 minutes 10 seconds)

Handouts: The UN Refugee Convention 1951 Fact Sheet (one per pair)
UK Immigration Policy: Case Studies (one per pair)

Guidance for teachers can be downloaded [here](#)

INTRODUCTION

15 minutes

Terminology

Ask students for their definitions of:

- Refugee
- Asylum seeker
- Internally displaced person
- Migrant

Clarify any misconceptions using the following definitions.

Who is a refugee?

A person forced to seek safety in another country from persecution in their own. Persecution can be any serious human rights violation such as torture or arbitrary detention, including the impact of war, that is due to religion, political beliefs, race or such things as sexual orientation or gender identity. Refugees have a right to international protection.

Who is an asylum seeker (person seeking asylum)?

A person who asks for asylum (protection) in another country. The authorities in that country may operate a system to determine whether the person seeking asylum is a refugee. The full rights of a refugee may be delayed to the point at which it is determined the person is a refugee.

Who is an internally displaced person?

A person who has fled their home, for example to escape conflict, violence, or environmental and human-made disasters, but has not crossed an international border to find safety. Their protection is the responsibility of their government.

Who is a migrant?

A person who has moved to another country intending to stay for a prolonged period. This may be to work, study or join family members. Visitors – such as people taking a holiday – are not migrants. Many people who migrate do so as a matter of choice. But for some people the decision to cross a border may be less than voluntary – for example if dire economic circumstances require them to move to find work to support themselves and their family.

Ask students to discuss what they know about refugees and their rights. How do they see refugees portrayed in the media? Take a few responses. Talk about how some media coverage of refugees can reinforce myths, stereotypes, and inaccuracies about refugees.

Film: When You Don't Exist

Play the clip *When You Don't Exist* on Amnesty International's YouTube channel (search title). Ask students to note down anything surprising.

Discussion questions

What is their reaction to the clip?
Do they have any questions about what they have seen?
Why were people forced to flee London?
What conditions and treatment did they find?
How did watching it make them feel?

Explain that in the UK refugees have legal rights which the government has signed up to. Why should governments welcome refugees and people seeking asylum?



Refugee children disembark at
Tilbury Docks, UK, 1945
© IWM

Task 1

THE UN REFUGEE CONVENTION

10 minutes

Open the discussion by asking: What rights do and don't refugees have? Take feedback.

Explain that there are international rules on the protection of refugees. The right 'to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution' is a fundamental human right protected in international law.

In 1951, the UK and many other countries signed the UN Refugee Convention. Those who signed agreed upon the legal right of people to flee and not to be sent back to their home country if they faced threats to their life or freedom there.

The class will now explore this Convention and consider whether the UK government is meeting its legal obligations towards refugees.

Key points

- The 1951 **Refugee Convention** and its 1967 Protocol defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights refugees should receive without discrimination and the international standards for their protection from the states who are signatories to the Convention.
- At the heart of the Convention is recognition that refugees – that is people fleeing persecution – have a legal right to cross borders to seek asylum (protection) without asking for permission first (for instance, obtaining a travel visa).
- The UK is signed up to the Convention. It is one of (to date) 146 countries who have made a legal agreement to protect refugees and guarantee the rights of refugees to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution.
- One of the basic principles of the Convention is non-refoulement, described in Article 33. It means people who have escaped persecution must not be sent back to their country if this puts them at risk.
- Other rights contained in the Convention include the right to decent working conditions, housing, property, the right to education, the right to access justice, the right to freedom of movement and the right to social protection.
- An important principle underlying the Convention is that all countries must share responsibility for providing asylum to refugees. This is intended to avoid the possibility that some countries leave others to receive and protect disproportionately large populations of refugees.

Watch a video

Play the clip *70 years of the Refugee Convention – a lifesaving document* by the UNCHR, the United Nations Refugee Agency.

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Ask students to note down what the Convention is and how states should implement it to support refugees.

Alternatively, hand out the UN Refugee Convention fact sheet to students to read.

Discussion questions

Are they surprised that refugee rights are enshrined in law?

Do the media ever highlight refugees' legal rights to protection? Why or why not?

What are their views on this?

Do they think politicians are living up to their legal obligations towards refugees?

Any examples?

Task 2

DIALOGUE ACTIVITY

20 minutes

Is the UK meeting its international legal obligations under the Refugee Convention?

Explain that the class will explore this question through a dialogue activity. This will be a reciprocal exchange of opinions and perspectives, allowing everyone to have their say, with a focus on learning, collaborating, and finding agreement. It is not about winning arguments or a debate.

Divide the class into groups of four and ask them to split into pairs. Hand out a different case study to each pair to read. Give them 10 minutes to write down a few different viewpoints to the question: **Is the UK meeting its international legal obligations under the Refugee Convention?**

They will need to be able to explain the reasons behind each of the viewpoints and the issues they raise.

Give each pair five minutes to share their different viewpoints in their group. Remind them this is a sharing activity and not a debate, therefore it does not aim to prove one viewpoint, rather explore a variety of views on the statement.

While listening, each pair can note down important points to talk about afterwards. They can also share their own thoughts on what they've heard.

Once both pairs have explained their viewpoints, they need to reach a conclusion about whether the UK government is or isn't meeting its legal obligations towards refugees.

Then ask each group of four to reflect upon their discussion and write down the most important things they have learned.

If time allows, take one idea to explore as a class and give students five more minutes to share their views on it.

Take feedback from each group. What was their conclusion and why?

Finally...

TAKE ACTION

10 minutes

Tell students to imagine they are the Prime Minister and must devise an action plan to make the UK a more welcoming place for refugees.

They should think about specific actions linked to law, government policy, public opinion, the media.

In pairs, ask students to share their plans with each other then choose one action they think would have maximum impact.

If time allows, write some of the chosen actions on the board and ask students to select one they can act on.

Extension

Students can:

1. Draw a map of their local area and label it to show a person new to the area where they can go and what they can do. For each place, they can add a guidebook entry and a picture.
2. Contact their MP, telling them what they have learned. Has the MP spoken about refugees and people seeking asylum before? Ask what they are doing to support them in the area.
3. Listen to an episode of *Asylum Speakers with Jaz O'Hara: Stories of migration*. Available on Apple, Spotify, Deezer.

THE UN REFUGEE CONVENTION 1951 FACT SHEET

FOR THE
STUDENT



The signing of the Refugee Convention in 1951
© Arni/UN Archives

What is the 1951 Refugee Convention?

The UN Convention is a set of guidelines, rights and laws to protect the human rights of anyone forced to flee conflict and ensure they are treated fairly.

It defines who is a refugee, what rights they have and what obligations states have to them when they arrive.

The Convention was amended in 1967 to apply to all people fleeing persecution. It was originally limited to people fleeing events occurring before 1 January 1951 and within Europe (in particular the Holocaust and the aftermath of World War 2).

Why was it created?

The Convention was a response to the significant increase in refugees who were forcibly displaced from their homes because of the First and Second World Wars.

Which countries are party to the Convention?

It was originally signed by 28 countries, including the UK, in Geneva in July 1951. Today there are 146 countries who have agreed to be bound by it.

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What rights do refugees have under the Convention?

The rights that refugees have under the 1951 Refugee Convention include:

- The right not to be returned to a country where they face threats to their lives or freedom (Article 33- non-refoulement)

This bans countries from expelling or returning a refugee against their will to a territory where they fear threats to life or freedom.

- The right not to be expelled from their new country, except under certain, strictly defined conditions (Article 32)
- The right not to be punished for irregular entry into the territory of a contracting State (Article 31)
- The right to decent working conditions (Articles 17 to 19 and 24)
- The right to housing and property, including intellectual property (Articles 13, 14 and 21)
- The right to education (Article 22)
- The right to freedom of religion (Article 4)
- The right to access to justice (Article 16)
- The right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26 and Article 31(2))
- The right to be issued civil, identity and travel documents (Articles 12, 27 and 28)
- The right to social protection (Articles 23 and 24 (2-4)).

Can someone be excluded?

The Convention only protects people who meet the criteria for refugee status. It does not apply to people who have:

- committed a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity;
- committed a serious non-political crime outside their country of refuge prior to the admission to that country as a refugee; or
- they are guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Definition of refugee

According to the Convention, a refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

With the development of international human rights law, the Convention says it should now be applied without discrimination as to sex, age, disability, sexuality, or other prohibited grounds of discrimination.

Source and more info: [unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention)

UK IMMIGRATION POLICY: CASE STUDIES

FOR THE
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Bibby Stockholm
© Graham Hunt/Alamy Live News

Case study 1: Bibby Stockholm

The Bibby Stockholm is a three-storey barge moored at Portland in Dorset. It is being used by the UK government to house men seeking asylum from a variety of countries.

The Home Office say it is an alternative to using expensive hotel accommodation for those waiting for the outcome of their asylum applications. It was initially intended to house about 500 men. As of November 2023, 135 people seeking asylum were living there. They are not offered a choice about whether they are sent there.

The accommodation is described by the government as ‘basic and functional’. Most bedrooms have two single beds, a shower, window, TV, desk and storage. The facilities onsite include a canteen, laundry room, gym, access to a nurse on board, TV, a space for games, a computer room and a multi-faith room.

Those on board do not have a curfew but are asked to sign in and out of the barge when they leave and return. If they are late returning, the 24-hour security team will call them to find out where they are.

The local Conservative MP Chris Loder asked to see a safety report, concerned each room originally designed for one person hadn’t been scaled up properly. In August 2023, the Fire Brigades Union also raised fire safety issues including narrow fire exits and overcrowding, and subsequent improvements were made.

In November 2023, it was decided that fewer people would be housed on the barge with 425 being set as the maximum. Based on this new figure, campaigners said this could work out at 10 per cent more expensive than hotels.

In February 2024, a committee of MPs visited the barge. The committee’s chair Diana Johnson stated that they saw many people having to share small, cramped cabins, originally designed for one person, with up to six people. Some people were sharing with people they did not know and who spoke a different language from them. She told the Home Office that these crowded conditions were clearly contributing to a decline in mental health for some of the residents, and they could amount to violations of the human rights of people seeking asylum.

Until the Home Office took over the barge it was used to accommodate about 220 people, such as offshore oil workers, with one person per cabin.

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UK Border Force Patrol Vessel,
Portsmouth harbour, 2022
© David Robinson/Alamy Stock Photo

Case study 2: The Rwanda asylum scheme

In April 2022, under the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the UK government introduced the Rwanda scheme: to send people who arrive in the UK by 'unlawful means' and then claim asylum to Rwanda, where the Rwandan government would decide their asylum claims. If their claims were successful, they would be granted asylum in Rwanda, not the UK. The government said this was to address increasing numbers of people making dangerous journeys to the UK, such as crossing the English Channel in small boats. Refugee organisations criticised the plan as cruel and expensive, and raised concerns about the East African state's poor human rights record. The first flight to Rwanda scheduled for June 2022 was cancelled at the last minute after legal challenges.

On 15 November 2023, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the policy was unlawful because Rwanda was not a safe country to which to remove people who were seeking asylum. The court pointed to defects in Rwanda's asylum processing system. A primary issue was *non-refoulement*: if people were sent to Rwanda, they could be forcibly returned to countries from which they had fled, where they could face persecution.

In response to the judgement, the government agreed a new treaty with Rwanda, with more assurances that those expelled would be safe. It followed up with its Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, legislation to override the Supreme Court – and prohibit the UK courts from ever again ruling Rwanda to be unsafe: they would have to ignore any facts or evidence that suggested otherwise.

In April 2024, the Bill became an Act of Parliament and is now law with flights to Rwanda (at the time of writing) to begin in July 2024, if Prime Minister Rishi Sunak wins the election on 4 July.

The Act will permit people to claim they will be harmed for reasons specific to them. But that fails to protect people who are at risk because they belong to a particular group – a religious or ethnic group, for example. It excludes any consideration of the risk that someone may be moved on from Rwanda to another country – somewhere they could once again be persecuted.

Campaigners including Amnesty International say the Act is in breach of UK and international law. The UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, has also consistently made it clear that the policy is contrary to international asylum law.