

UNHRC

BACKGROUND GUIDE





Council Mandate:

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is the principal intergovernmental body within the United Nations system responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. Established in 2006, the Council addresses human rights violations, develops international norms, responds to emerging global challenges, and provides recommendations to the UN General Assembly. Through resolutions, special procedures, investigations, and international cooperation, the UNHRC seeks to ensure that human dignity, equality, and freedom are upheld without discrimination.

In this council, delegates are tasked with addressing contemporary human rights challenges that arise from environmental instability and rapid technological advancement, balancing state sovereignty, security concerns, and the protection of fundamental freedoms.



Introduction to the Agenda

The modern human rights landscape is increasingly shaped by forces beyond traditional political conflict. Climate change has intensified displacement, exposing vulnerable populations to exploitation, poverty, and legal invisibility. Simultaneously, rapid advancements in digital surveillance technologies have transformed governance and security, while creating unprecedented risks to privacy, freedom of expression, and civil liberties.

The UNHRC must respond to these evolving challenges by strengthening international protections, ensuring accountability, and adapting existing human rights frameworks to address new forms of harm. Both agenda items require a careful balance between state interests and the protection of individual rights in an interconnected world.



Issue 1: Safeguarding Climate-Displaced Populations Caught in the Center of Environmental Turmoil

Issue Overview

Climate change has emerged as a major driver of human displacement. Rising sea levels, desertification, extreme weather events, and ecosystem collapse have forced millions to leave their homes, often without crossing international borders. These individuals—commonly referred to as climate-displaced persons—frequently fall outside the legal definition of refugees under international law, leaving them without clear protection or recognition.

Climate-displaced populations face heightened risks of food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, gender-based violence, trafficking, and denial of basic services.



Developing nations and small island states are disproportionately affected, despite contributing least to global emissions. The absence of binding international frameworks has resulted in inconsistent responses, temporary solutions, and limited accountability.

Historical Background

- 1951 Refugee Convention: Does not recognise climate or environmental factors as grounds for refugee status.
- 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: Offer protection for internally displaced persons, including those displaced by natural disasters, but are non-binding.
- Paris Agreement (2015): Acknowledged climate displacement through the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage.
- Teitiota v. New Zealand (2020): UN Human Rights Committee recognised that climate change may threaten the right to life, setting an important legal precedent.



Despite growing recognition, international law has yet to formally codify protections for climate-displaced persons.

Key Human Rights Concerns

- Right to life, housing, food, and water
- Legal recognition and protection status
- Statelessness and loss of nationality
- Access to healthcare, education, and employment
- Burden-sharing between developed and developing states

Guiding Questions

1. Should climate displacement be formally recognised under international human rights or refugee law?
2. How can the UNHRC strengthen protections without infringing on state sovereignty?
3. What responsibilities do high-emission countries bear toward affected populations?
4. How can funding and relocation mechanisms be made equitable and sustainable?



Bibliography & Useful Links

- UNHCR – Climate Change and Disaster Displacement: <https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC): <https://www.internal-displacement.org>
- UN Environment Programme (UNEP) – Climate & Human Rights: <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/environmental-rights-and-governance>
- UN Human Rights Committee – Teitiota v. New Zealand: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/ccpr>
- IPCC Sixth Assessment Report: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/>



Issue 2: Preventing the Abusive Use of Digital Surveillance Technologies

Issue Overview

Digital surveillance technologies—including facial recognition systems, mass data collection, spyware, and artificial intelligence-driven monitoring—are increasingly used by states and private actors. While such tools can support national security, crime prevention, and public service delivery, their misuse poses serious threats to privacy, freedom of expression, and democratic participation.

In many cases, surveillance technologies have been deployed without transparency, oversight, or legal safeguards, disproportionately targeting journalists, activists, political opponents, and minority communities. The rapid export of surveillance tools to authoritarian regimes has further intensified concerns over transnational human rights violations.



Historical Background

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Article 12 protects individuals from arbitrary interference with privacy.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): Reinforces rights to privacy, expression, and association.
- Edward Snowden Revelations (2013): Exposed mass surveillance practices and triggered global debate.
- UN Special Rapporteur Reports on Privacy: Highlight risks posed by AI and digital monitoring technologies.

Technological innovation has far outpaced regulatory frameworks, creating significant gaps in accountability and enforcement.

Key Human Rights Concerns

- Right to privacy and data protection
- Freedom of expression and assembly
- Discrimination and algorithmic bias
- Lack of consent, transparency, and oversight
- Cross-border surveillance and data sharing



Guiding Questions

1. How can states balance national security with individual privacy rights?
2. Should there be international regulations on the export and use of surveillance technologies?
3. What role should private technology companies play in ensuring human rights compliance?
4. How can accountability and transparency mechanisms be enforced globally?

Bibliography & Useful Links

- Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – Digital Surveillance:
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/digital-space>
- UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy:
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-privacy>
- Amnesty International – Surveillance and Human Rights: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/surveillance/>



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- Human Rights Watch – Digital Surveillance:
<https://www.hrw.org/topic/technology-and-rights>
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

ALL THE BEST!

