

IHRP Final Report
UNHCR – Pretoria, South Africa
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I spent nine weeks as a Protection Intern with the Pretoria office (South Africa) of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The work I did was incredibly rewarding, as I finally experienced practical implementation of international law. While the work I did was varied, my main tasks consisted of interviews with persons of concern (POCs) and follow-up case management, supporting workshops, seminars and meetings between UNHCR and external actors, and completing research and writing assignments.

During the internship, I was responsible for interviews with persons of concern to discuss their protection needs. On Mondays and Tuesdays, the office holds interviews for refugees and asylum-seekers who have never previously been interviewed by UNHCR. After observing interviews by staff from different departments in UNHCR – Protection, Resettlement, and the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Unit – I conducted intake interviews on my own. The normal intake interview generally consists of asking the refugee or asylum-seeker why they left their country of origin and what their problems are in South Africa. Conducting intakes was challenging and also rewarding in that I sat face-to-face with refugees and asylum seekers and tried to understand their problems, but then in real time had to assess their situation and give advice, and the stories were at times heartbreaking. I also conducted interviews at the Lindela Holding Facility (South Africa's deportation centre) for Ethiopian nationals who had recently been arrested and detained.

Refugees and asylum-seekers that have been interviewed can also email the office at a specific email set up solely for those beneficiaries. If a case (whether from an intake interview or as written in an email) raised certain protection concerns, particular follow up was required for that file. Answering these emails also involved assessing the POC's issues, and determining whether their case should be referred to a different unit internally (e.g. RSD or Resettlement (RST)), or whether they should get in touch with one of our external implementing partners (e.g. Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR)), or need to be called in for a more in-depth interview.

I appreciated the opportunity to speak with refugees and asylum-seekers in person. Most were from Somalia, DRC, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Burundi, or Zimbabwe. Only through listening to their stories of persecution, transit to South Africa, and the issues they continue to have in South Africa, did I really come to understand the challenges that refugees and asylum-seekers, from these regions, face. It was an invaluable way to gain knowledge about the conflicts in those countries, what it means to be a refugee or asylum-seeker in South Africa and in Africa generally, and to see how international refugee law is practiced/implemented in the country. While South Africa has, on paper, accorded generous rights to refugees and asylum-seekers, in practice, those groups still face immense challenges to integration in the country. For example, it is difficult for them to find good jobs with only their refugee or asylum-seeker permit, and they still face

significant xenophobia from South Africans, even sometimes, devastatingly, when trying to access the public health care system.

Another aspect of the internship was to assist and attend meetings and workshops between the UNHCR and external actors. For example, the day after I began my internship, I accompanied the Protection Team to the Lindela Holding Facility where the Unit conducted a workshop for Department of Home Affairs Immigration Officials. It was a great introduction to the UNCHR in Pretoria, as I listened to presentations from Margaret Atieno, the Senior Protection Officer in Pretoria, and Bianca Robertson, the Associate Protection Officer (and my principal supervisor), explain the UNCHR's role in South Africa and the legal framework in place in relation to refugees and asylum seekers.

Attending meetings between the UNHCR and other actors was fascinating in that it demonstrated how the UNCHR must present itself to external actors. Another very interesting meeting I attended was a consultation (led by the UNHCR, with the help of LHR and the International Organization for Migration) with a group of ethnically diverse refugees (from Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and DRC mainly), regarding how humanitarian actors can better assist vulnerable groups in conflict situations. The subsequent report I helped draft, in which I analyzed and combined the consultation data from groups in Cape Town and Musina, on top of the results from Pretoria, will be used for the UN's 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.

I also completed written assignments as requested. For example, for the RSD Unit, I worked on updating their 2014 report on asylum-seekers and refugees in southern Africa, which is a summary of all the countries in southern Africa, with details on the composition of the asylum-seeking and refugee populations, and an overview of the legal framework in each country. While previously for internal use only, the RSD unit will publish the report publicly once this update is completed. For the Protection Unit, I drafted the Standard Operating Procedure document used by UNHCR to define their relationship with the Lindela Holding Facility. The document outlines the role and responsibility of both parties, regarding what are supposed to be weekly visits by Protection staff to screen for any persons of concern at Lindela.

My experience in Pretoria was very educational. I gained procedural knowledge of the process that asylum-seekers and refugees go through when they seek status in South Africa, and how it actually operates in practice. I gained substantive knowledge about the countries from which most refugees in South Africa come from, and the challenges those populations tend to face in the country. For example, Somalis are excellent business people, and tend to set up successful shops in South Africa. However, they face constant looting and violent xenophobic attacks from South African nationals. I also improved my interview skills, through observing many different interview styles, and finally conducting interviews on my own during intakes and at the deportation center.

Lastly, I feel very fortunate to have been able to work with the staff in the Pretoria office. My supervisors were excellent teachers with an impressive amount of experience and knowledge that they were more than willing to impart. The interns also very much

supported each other and maintained a remarkably high standard for quality of work. In addition, I am incredibly appreciate of the support I received from Goodmans to pursue this opportunity with the UNHCR.