

IHRP Summer Internship Final Report: UNHCR, Pretoria, South Africa

This summer, I had the privilege of spending three months as an intern at the UNHCR in Pretoria, South Africa. My internship was an inspiring and enlightening experience. The UNHCR has a unique role in managing emergency responses and working on policy issues in collaboration with government and civil society organizations, as well as working directly with refugees and asylum-seekers. I learned a great deal about balancing collaboration and advocacy; compassion and empathy on the one hand, and careful scrutiny and critical analysis on the other; seemingly universal ideals and contextualized local realities. I also learned about the lived experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers, the persecution they faced in their countries of origin, and the challenges that riddle their integration efforts in South Africa.

This internship was also an opportunity to learn about my place in this field. I have long held a strong interest in international human rights law, and refugee issues in particular, and this experience allowed me to explore whether I have the emotional resolve to serve effectively some of the world's most vulnerable individuals. Indeed, many of the stories I listened to were absolutely heartbreaking; but this was outweighed by the empowerment of bringing about (or at least, advocating for) concrete solutions, armed with the legitimacy of international law. I also found that many refugees and asylum-seekers felt relieved simply for the opportunity to share their stories, and I appreciated that my role was not strictly confined to a legal focus. My work at the UNHCR was incredibly engaging and meaningful, and I have no doubt that this internship has formed a foundational base for my career.

Tasks & Responsibilities

Intake Interviews

The UNHCR office in Pretoria conducts weekly intake interviews with refugees and asylum-seekers. After undergoing training during the first couple of weeks, I began conducting these interviews on my own. Translation services were available to facilitate interviews with refugees and asylum-seekers who did not speak English. My role involved capturing biographical data, and recording the details of persecution interviewees faced in their countries of origin, as well as the difficulties they faced in South Africa.



Figure 1: World Refugee Day celebrations.

Intake interviews were often intensely emotional. Many refugees and asylum-seekers were severely traumatized, and each and every one of them has experienced xenophobic threats and attacks in South Africa, some hardly escaping with their lives. One of the families I interviewed had a petrol bomb thrown inside their home in the middle of the night, and their two youngest children were nearly killed by the attack. Another woman's son was murdered when his store was looted.

I was responsible for identifying particularly vulnerable cases and referring them to specific interventions to be implemented by other UNHCR departments or UNHCR partner organizations (who provide legal aid and social assistance, such as rent and



Figure 2 Standing on Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela had spent most of his 27 years of imprisonment, with Cape Town in the background.

business grants, vocational skills training, academic scholarships, and psychosocial support). I also provided refugees and asylum-seekers with advice and guidance regarding the next steps in their case. This required an intimate understanding of the challenges that they face, and the durable solutions that are practically available.

While intake interviews take place at the Pretoria office, I also had the opportunity to observe interviews at the Lindela Repatriation Centre, where non-citizens are detained in preparation for deportation.

Electronic Follow-ups & Protection Needs Assessments

After refugees and asylum-seekers register their case at the UNHCR through an intake interview, they may follow-up on their case and provide any updates by e-mail. I was responsible for answering these inquiries.

Refugees and asylum-seekers who have been identified as fitting specific vulnerability criteria, either after their intake interview or byway of an electronic update, are often invited for a Protection Needs Assessment interview. I had the opportunity to conduct these interviews as well. The purpose of these interviews is to further explore the details of the case, and potentially recommend it for resettlement to another country.



Figure 3 Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island.

Supporting Conferences, Workshops, & Meetings

I also had the opportunity to attend and assist conferences, workshops, and meetings concerning international refugee law standards and local implementation challenges.



- **Child Protection Seminar:** 50% of all refugees are children. In collaboration with child protection experts from UNHCR Headquarters and civil society organizations, as well as other regional UNHCR offices (from Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique), the seminar focused on (1) exchanging lessons-learned and good practices, (2) challenges and opportunities, particularly using national systems, and (3) strategies to strengthen national and community-based child protection systems.

- **Livelihoods Strategies Seminar:** Refugees and asylum-seekers often struggle to integrate into South Africa, and become economically self-reliant. Regional UNHCR offices collaborated with UNHCR Headquarters experts and UNHCR partner organizations to identify new strategies for creating more effective livelihood support programs.

- **Protection Working Group:** UNHCR meets regularly with civil society organizations and government personnel to collaborate on refugee protection campaigns, initiatives, and policies. This collaboration has been particularly crucial in managing synergies in emergency responses to the xenophobic attacks that took place over the past few months. Since the outbreak of the violence, the UNHCR had slow down or halt many of its routine activities in order to mitigate the situation.

Participating in these events exposed me to important discussions where various stakeholders shared ideas, strategies, and effective practices. They identified common goals in order to better address refugee protection needs.

Figure 4 Standing by the Hector Pieterse Memorial. Mr. Pieterse was fatally shot in the 1976 Soweto uprising, and he became the subject of an iconic image portraying him being carried by another student, Mbuyisa Makhubu. Mr. Makhubu was forced into hiding shortly after the picture was published, but it is suspected that for the past 11 years, he has been detained in Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, Ontario.

Research and Document Drafting

The UNHCR provides support and guidance to government policy development initiatives. I had the opportunity to conduct research on backlog projects aimed to alleviate the overwhelmed asylum system in South Africa, as well as administrative closure procedures for abandoned asylum claims. I also contributed to drafting documents and presentations prepared for the South African government, the South African Police Services, and UNHCR Headquarters. Finally, I was responsible for drafting weekly “South Africa Highlights”, which provide concise updates on the UNHCR’s protection activities and other related current events in South Africa.

Final Remarks

In addition to learning about and engaging in the invaluable work of the UNHCR this summer, I was also able to explore South Africa, an absolutely fascinating country. With its recent apartheid history, and perhaps the most progressive Constitution and media system in the world, human rights activism seems to be below the surface of most deliberations. It is a society in transition, persistently reaching for inspiring ideals that have been set out some of the most prominent human rights activists of our times.

This experience has not only become a cornerstone to my legal education, but has also consolidated my passion. I am eternally grateful for this opportunity!



Figure 5 Qunu, Eastern Cape, Nelson Mandela’s home village.