



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME RESEARCH REPORT I

Addressing the Exploitation of Humanitarian Crises by Transnational Organized Crime

Introduction to the Topic:

Humanitarian crises, including armed conflicts, natural disasters, climate-induced displacement, and public health emergencies, have increased significantly in scale and frequency over the past decades. These crises create environments of instability, weakened governance, and urgent human need. Transnational organized crime (TOC) groups systematically exploit such conditions to expand their operations, generate profit, and strengthen their influence across borders. This exploitation represents a major threat to human security, international stability, and the integrity of humanitarian response systems.

Transnational organized crime refers to structured groups operating across national borders to engage in illicit activities such as human trafficking, migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, illicit financial flows, and exploitation of natural resources. During humanitarian crises, these groups take advantage of disrupted law enforcement, porous borders, mass displacement, and vulnerable populations.

Refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), women, and children are particularly at risk of exploitation, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, and recruitment into criminal networks.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), organized criminal groups increasingly operate in crisis-affected regions where state capacity is limited or overwhelmed. Humanitarian corridors, refugee camps, and disaster zones may be infiltrated by criminal networks posing as aid providers, smugglers, or employers. As a result, humanitarian crises not only generate immediate human suffering but also create long-term security challenges by enabling the entrenchment of transnational crime.

Background information

Humanitarian crises often result in the collapse or severe weakening of governance structures, law enforcement, and judicial systems. In such contexts, criminal organizations are able to operate with reduced risk of detection or prosecution. Conflict zones and disaster-affected regions frequently lack effective border controls, making them ideal transit points for illicit trafficking routes.

One of the most prevalent forms of exploitation is migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Individuals fleeing conflict or environmental disasters may turn to smugglers to cross borders, exposing them to abuse, extortion, and violence. Many are subsequently trafficked for forced labor,

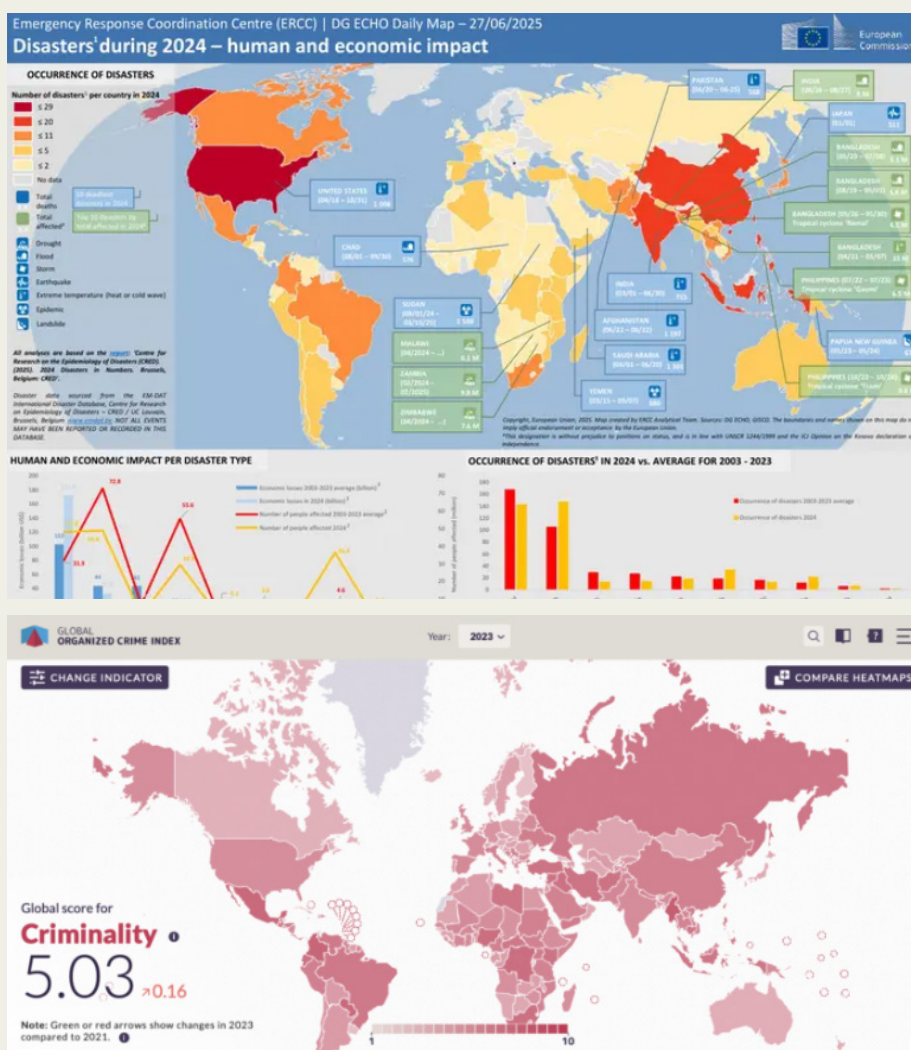


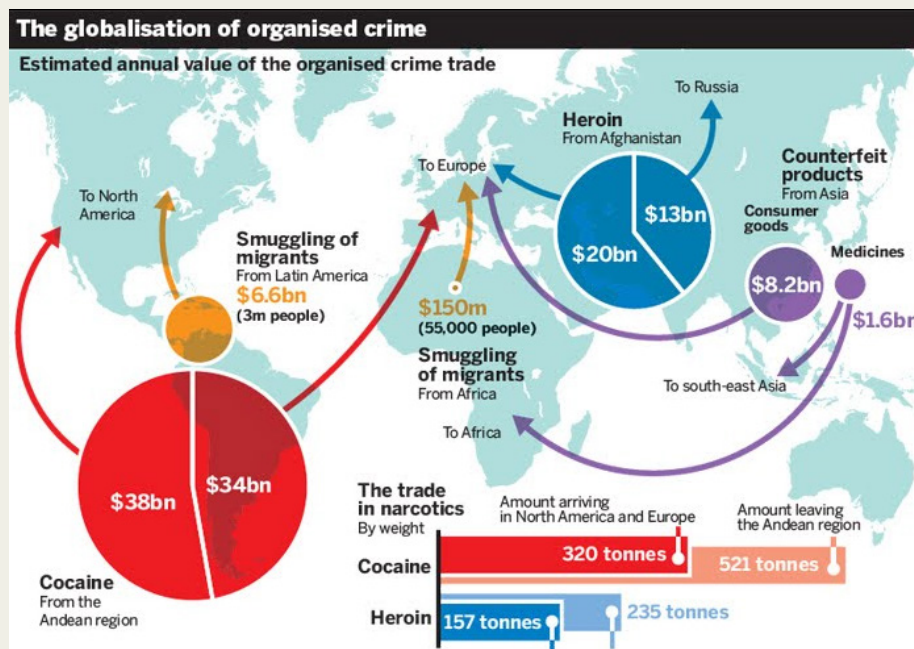
sexual exploitation, or domestic servitude. UNODC reports indicate that trafficking flows often increase along major displacement routes, such as those stemming from conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia.

Humanitarian aid itself can also be exploited. Organized crime groups may divert food, medical supplies, fuel, and financial assistance for resale on black markets. In some regions, armed criminal groups impose taxes on aid deliveries or demand bribes for access to affected populations. This diversion undermines the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and prolongs civilian suffering.

Additionally, crises linked to climate change, such as droughts, floods, and food insecurity, have become new opportunities for organized crime. Illegal exploitation of natural resources, including logging, mining, and wildlife trafficking, often increases when communities lose traditional livelihoods. Criminal groups recruit from vulnerable populations by offering income or protection, further embedding themselves within crisis-affected societies.

Graphs





Historical Context

The exploitation of humanitarian crises by criminal actors is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, periods of war and instability have been accompanied by smuggling, black markets, and organized illicit trade. However, the scale and transnational nature of modern organized crime have significantly intensified this dynamic.

In the 1990s, conflicts in the Balkans led to widespread smuggling of arms, people, and narcotics across Europe. Similarly, prolonged instability in Afghanistan facilitated the

expansion of global opiate trafficking networks. More recently, the Syrian conflict created large-scale displacement, which was exploited by migrant smuggling networks operating between the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated how global crises can be exploited by transnational organized crime. Criminal groups engaged in the trafficking of counterfeit medical supplies, fraud related to emergency financial assistance, and cybercrime targeting vulnerable individuals and institutions. These developments highlight how both sudden and protracted crises can be leveraged by organized crime to adapt and expand their operations.

Impacts on International Security and Human

The exploitation of humanitarian crises by transnational organized crime has profound consequences for international peace and security. Criminal networks fuel corruption, weaken state institutions, and contribute to cycles of violence and instability. In some regions, they collaborate with armed groups or terrorist organizations, using illicit profits to finance further conflict.

From a human rights perspective, the consequences are severe. Victims of trafficking and exploitation often suffer physical abuse, psychological trauma, and long-term social marginalization. Children are particularly vulnerable, facing risks of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and recruitment by armed or criminal groups. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and exploitation during displacement.



Moreover, the erosion of trust in humanitarian actors and institutions undermines international response efforts. When aid is diverted or associated with criminal activity, affected communities may become reluctant to engage with legitimate assistance providers, further exacerbating humanitarian needs.

Past UN Actions

United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC): Adopted in 2000, UNTOC is the primary international legal instrument for combating transnational organized crime. It provides a framework for international cooperation, criminalization of organized crime activities, and mutual legal assistance among states.

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol): This protocol addresses human trafficking and emphasizes victim protection, prevention, and prosecution of offenders, particularly in contexts of vulnerability such as humanitarian crises.

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018): While non-binding, the Global Compact highlights the need to combat migrant smuggling and trafficking, protect migrants in vulnerable situations, and strengthen international cooperation during displacement crises.

UN Security Council Resolutions: Various resolutions have addressed the links between conflict, organized crime, and exploitation of civilians, calling for integrated approaches that combine security, humanitarian, and development responses

Focus of Debate

The debate should focus on strengthening international cooperation to prevent and respond to the exploitation of humanitarian crises by transnational organized crime. Key areas include enhancing information-sharing between humanitarian organizations and law enforcement, improving protection mechanisms for displaced populations, and addressing the root causes of vulnerability such as poverty, inequality, and lack of legal migration pathways.

Delegates should consider how to balance humanitarian principles of neutrality and access with the need for security and accountability. Discussions should also explore capacity-building for crisis-affected states, ensuring that anti-crime measures do not inadvertently criminalize victims or restrict access to essential aid.

Significant Parties

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC): UNODC plays a central role in researching, monitoring, and supporting states in combating transnational organized crime, including in crisis-affected contexts. It provides technical assistance, legal frameworks, and capacity-building programs.

European Union: The EU is a major destination and transit region for displaced populations and has a strong interest in addressing migrant smuggling and trafficking networks. Through agencies such as Europol and Frontex, the EU supports cross-border cooperation and law enforcement efforts.

Countries Hosting Large Refugee Populations: States such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Uganda, and Bangladesh face significant challenges in managing displacement while preventing criminal exploitation. Their cooperation and capacity are critical to effective responses.



Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Humanitarian Agencies: NGOs are often first responders in crises and play a vital role in protection, awareness, and victim support. Their coordination with states and international organizations is essential.

Sudan – Ongoing conflict has caused massive displacement, with trafficking and smuggling networks exploiting refugees.

Syria – Prolonged civil war has fueled migrant smuggling routes to Europe and human trafficking.

Afghanistan – Weak governance and poverty enable drug trafficking, human trafficking, and smuggling.

Myanmar – Conflict and persecution have led to large refugee flows vulnerable to exploitation.

Haiti – Political instability and gang control facilitate trafficking, arms smuggling, and aid diversion.

Ukraine – War-related displacement has increased risks of trafficking and organized crime exploitation.

USA- The U.S. supports global counter-trafficking initiatives, humanitarian assistance, and sanctions against transnational criminal networks. It plays a key role in international law enforcement

Glossary and Key Terms:

Transnational Organized Crime: Criminal activities carried out by structured groups operating across national borders for profit.

Humanitarian Crisis: A situation in which there is a widespread threat to life, health, or livelihoods requiring external assistance.

Human Trafficking: The recruitment, transportation, or exploitation of persons through force, coercion, or deception.

Migrant Smuggling: The facilitation of irregular migration for financial or material benefit.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): Individuals forced to flee their homes but who remain within their country's borders.

Humanitarian Access: The ability of humanitarian actors to reach affected populations and provide assistance safely and effectively



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