A

Asylum seeker

Asylum seekers are persons who are requesting a country to accept them as refugees and who are waiting for the authorities' decision on their asylum application. If the request is rejected, the rejected person must leave the sovereign territory of the state in question. Like any other person with irregular status, the person may be deported unless they are granted a residence permit for humanitarian or other reasons.

Armed conflict

International humanitarian law applies to all armed conflicts. Although none of the relevant conventions contains a definition of armed conflict, it has been described as follows in jurisprudence: "an armed conflict exists whenever there is a resort to armed forces between States or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organised armed groups or between such groups within a State." Thus armed conflicts can be international or non-international. To qualify as such a non-international armed conflict must reach a certain intensity and the armed group(s) must be organised to a certain degree. Internal tensions, internal disturbances such as riots, isolated or sporadic acts of violence and similar events are not covered by international humanitarian law.

Anti-personnel mine

Anti-personnel mines are weapons on or under the ground that explode when a person comes in contact with them or near them. They are thus set off by the presence of a person (often that of the victims of the mines).

Aggression

Aggression is the use of armed force by one state against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of another state. Although international law prohibits use of military force in principle, it allows two exceptions: military self-defence in well-defined circumstances or that within the context of measures to maintain or restore international peace and security based on a United Nations Security Council decision taken under Chapter VII of the charter.

B

Biological weapons

Biological weapons disseminate bacteria, viruses, fungi etc. to weaken or kill the enemy. They are considered weapons of mass destruction. Biological weapons are regulated by the Biological Weapons Convention (The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction) of 1972, which entered into force in 1975 and which Switzerland ratified in 1976.

Big pharma

Big Pharma' is a coinage denoting the corporate groups that make the greatest profits in the pharma industry. The term is sometimes used to pillory the pharma industry, which has the image of being more interested in profit than in health. The term is used derogatorily.

C

Cultural heritage

Cultural heritage is the entirety of testimony from the past. It consists of tangible assets (paintings, coins, manuscripts, clothing, monuments, ruins/wrecks etc.) and intangible assets (traditions, rituals etc.).

Crime of genocide

Actions which aim at complete or partial annihilation of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group qualify as genocide. These actions include notably: killing members of a particular group, inflicting serious physical or mental injuries, measures designed to prevent births or physically eliminate a particular group, enforced transfer of children to another group. The United Nations adopted a convention in 1948 to prevent and punish genocide.

Crime against humanity

Acts intended to cause major suffering or serious impairment of physical or mental health qualify as crimes against humanity when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. In particular this includes murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, deprivation of freedom in violation of the basic principles of international law, torture, rape, sexual enslavement, enforced prostitution, enforced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation and similar forms of serious sexual violence, persecution on political, racial, nationalist, ethnic, cultural, religious or gender-specific grounds, apartheid and the enforced disappearance of persons.

Combatant

In an international armed conflict all members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict are considered combatants, with the exception of medical and religious personnel. Combatants may take part in licit acts of war, for which they may not be subjected to criminal prosecution or brought to court (‘combatants’ privileges’). In certain circumstances persons who participate in an uprising to defend their national territory are also accorded the status of combatants, as are militia fighters, volunteers, and members of resistance movements. Combatants who are captured have a right to the status and guarantees accorded to prisoners of war.

Collective security

A system of collective security aims to replace the principle of “everyone for themselves” (self-help) with the principle of regarding an act of aggression against a member of the system as aggression against all members, which demands a collective – possibly armed – response. The NATO is an example of collective security. The member states of this organisation have committed themselves to protecting each other if a member state is attacked.

Civilian / civilian population

Until 1949, international humanitarian law protected the wounded, sick, shipwrecked and imprisoned members of the armed forces. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 extended protection in time of war to the civilian population. The Additional Protocols of 1977 increased the degree of protection and extended it by means of special regulations to specific categories of civilians (women, children, refugees, journalists).

Civil society

Civil society includes all NGOs, associations and individuals who are committed in the political realm to defending the population’s interests.

Chemical weapons

Chemical weapons are defined by the Chemical Weapons Convention (Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction), which entered into force in 1997, as “any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals.” They are considered weapons of mass destruction. Chlorine and mustard gas are examples of chemical weapons.

Charta of the United Nations

Written in 1945, the Charter of the United Nations is the founding document of the UN and defines the purposes and principles of the UN, that is, to maintain international peace and security, as well as the composition, mission and powers of its main bodies (General Assembly, Security Council, Secretariat, Trusteeship Council, International Court of Justice, Economic and Social Council).

Central Tracing Agency of the ICRC

The Central Tracing Agency, created under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), is based in Geneva. It is the successor to the Central Prisoners of War Agency which defended the rights of prisoners of war and the right of their families to know what had become of them during World Wars I and II. The agency works with the national authorities' official information services, ICRC delegates and other institutions active in the field. It coordinates the search for missing persons, passes on information about prisoners of war and other detainees, carries out prisoner transfers and repatriations, conveys messages and helps to reunite families.

D

Dublin area

The Dublin agreement of 1990 defines an instrument for the coordination of asylum policy. According to this system, asylum seekers may submit an application for asylum only once within the Dublin area. The Dublin area includes all EU member states as well as the four associated states (Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein). The Dublin III Regulation entered into force at the EU level on 19 July 2013.

Disarmament

The UN General Assembly defines disarmament as the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction as well as a reduction in armed forces and conventional armament. There are different UN organisations dedicated to this aim, such as the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA).

Diaspora

Scattering of a people or an ethnic group across the world. The term diaspora is often used with the objective of claiming a common identity despite of the group's scattering.

E

Externally displaced person

Persons who are forced to leave their country, often in large numbers, due to armed conflict, civil commotion, natural or human-made disasters, for instance, and who do not fulfil the accepted criteria to be legally defined as refugees. They are sometimes referred to as 'de facto refugees'.

Epidemic

An epidemic is a mass occurrence of an infectious disease. In most cases, it is regional and temporary (as opposed to a pandemic, which is characterised by global propagation). Winter flu can be epidemic.

Environmentally displaced person

Persons who have to leave their place of habitual residence due to environmental changes. These lead to the migration of persons who flee from natural disasters or 'persistent or recurring' conflicts that hinder the persons' access to vital, usually natural, resources.

Environmental migrant

Persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence (IOM, 2007).

Endemic

An endemic infection refers to the persistence of a transmissible disease in a given region. The disease may be prevalent permanently or latently and affects large parts of the population. The presence of this disease is known, and cases of illness are reported. However, the disease does not necessarily spread any further. In the past, diseases like leprosy or tetanus were endemic among children in Europe, but thanks to vaccine development and improvement of living standards they have been largely eliminated. Among the diseases endemic to certain parts of the world today are dengue fever, yellow fever and malaria.

Emigration

Emigration refers to a person quitting their country of residence and settling in a different country. International law grants every person the right to leave a country, including their own, and allows for restrictions only under certain circumstances. The right to leave a country is not paralleled by any right to enter a country other than the home country.

Emergency aid

Institutional aid (e.g. from a state) for people in emergency situations to safeguard their existence and human dignity.

Economic migrant

Persons who leave their country of origin to settle in another country in order to improve their living conditions. This term may be used to differentiate between economic migrants and refugees fleeing from persecution. It may also be used for persons who try to enter a country without an entry permit or who enter an asylum procedure without legitimate reason as well as for seasonal workers.

F

Fundamental rights

Fundamental rights are the set of essential rights that a state grants its population. In Switzerland, they are set out in the federal constitution and are composed of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Forced displacement

In international law of armed conflict, forced displacement means the individual or collective transfer of civilians within an occupied territory. According to the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949, Art. 49) and Amendment Protocol I relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (1977, Art. 85), forced displacement constitutes a war crime unless it is justified for compelling military reasons. In a general sense, forced displacement means the individual or collective transfer of persons away from their country or community, in particular due to armed conflicts, civil commotion, natural or human-made disasters.

G

Good offices

Good offices are a the efforts of a third party (e.g. state, international organisation) to settle a conflict between two or more states peacefully with the objective of initiating a dialogue between the parties to the conflict and reaching a negotiated solution. Such initiatives include the provision of a conference venue, participation in international peacekeeping operations and mediation between parties as well as the facilitation of dialogue between them.

Global health

Global health means achieving health equity at a global level by addressing transnational health issues, determinants, and the interventions and formal structures that are beyond the control of national institutions.

Genocide

The term genocide was first used by Raphael Lemkin in 1944. Etymologically, the word is a combination of ‘genos’, which is classical Greek for race or kin, and the Latin suffix ‘caedo’, which refers to the notion of killing. In 1946, genocide was recognised as a crime against international humanitarian law by the UN General Assembly for the first time (A/RES/96-I).

Geneva Conventions

The four Geneva Conventions are important treaties constituting the core of international humanitarian law. They govern the protection of war victims as well as the means and methods of warfare. The fist convention dates back to 1864 and was initiated by Genevan Henry Dunant, the founding father of the International Committe of the Red Cross (ICRC).

H

Humanitarian aid

Relief and rescue operations by international organisations and non-governmental organisations for victims of conflicts, natural or human-made disasters.

Humanitarian

Humanitarian designates a form of aid or an organisation that promotes respect for people and the wellbeing of humanity. A humanitarian ethic is based on the conviction that it is right to help people in serious danger. Humanitarian aid reflects international solidarity, through which victims of natural disasters or armed conflicts receive help and protection.

Human security

It is the purpose of human security to guarantee individual security and to protect human beings from political violence, war etc. The concept goes beyond physical security since it also encompasses social and economic security, political rights and the environment. Human security promotes public welfare, fundamental rights and all measures that can prevent direct threats to security.

Human rights

Human rights are the fundamental rights that every person has, without exception. These rights include, for example, the right to life, to education and to a fair trial. International organisations such as the UN fight for the protection and enforcement of these rights. In 1948, the UN General Assembly therefore adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which sets forth the fundamental rights and freedoms in 30 articles to protect every person in every country in the world as effectively as possible. States also contribute to the implementation of human rights by integrating them in their constitutions, for example. Unlike international humanitarian law, which only applies in times of war, human rights apply to all persons at all times, according to their current conception.

Human dignity

Dignity is the respect, consideration or esteem that someone or something deserves. The dignity of human persons is the principle according to which a person must never be treated as an object or a means to an end.

Human capital flight

Permanent or long-term emigration of qualified specialists with a negative impact on the economic and social development in their country of origin. In a broader sense, the term also referes to student mobility – a potential migratory flow of qualified specialists. The expression ‘human capital flight’ suggests an emigration rate that is considered disproportionately high by the country of origin. This phenomenon occurs not only in developing countries but also, and to a relatively large extent, in industrial countries.

Help

English lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat.
Theme(s): L’aide humanitaire, Environnement

Health security

Health security is security with regard to health. To guarantee health security, it is important to take different areas into account, such as food, medication, workplace health and the environment. Health security, like food security, is part of human security.

Health

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.” (Preamble of the WHO Constitution, 1946)

Hague Conventions

Several conventions were adopted at the two peace conferences in The Hague (Netherlands) in 1899 and 1907, to regulate the conduct of war. One notable achievement was a ban on use of weapons which are of a nature to cause unnecessary suffering. To these was added the Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Additional Protocols of 1954 and 1999.

International treaty

When two (bilateral) or more (multilateral)entities of international law (mainly states, but also international organisations) come to an agreement, they codify this in an international treaty to make sure that all parties adhere to the agreement. These treaties are also called ‘conventions’.
Concluding an international treaty includes the following steps:
– Negotiations between the different parties,
– Signing to demonstrate a country’s intention to respect the contractual provisions,
– Ratification – the formal commitment to respect the treaty. This may require amendment of national law or the consent of the legislature (parliament).,
– Entry into force – the date on which the treaty enters into force in all countries that have ratified it.

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement consists of three independent parties. They are the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the national societies. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is guided by its fundamental principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality) and is unified by a central objective: to help, without discrimination, those who suffer and thus to contribute to peace in the world.

International organisation

An international organisation consists of a group of states that seek to implement common goals through interstate collaboration.

International humanitarian law

International humanitarian law lays down internationally acknowledged rules to limit the consequences of armed conflicts. It protects persons who are not or no longer involved in the combat operations and limits the means and methods of warfare. The majority of the regulations relate to international conflicts, that is, conflicts between states. Armed conflicts nowadays mostly happen within individual states (e.g. civil wars). Only a very few regulations of international humanitarian law are applicable to these cases. International humanitarian law should not be confused with human rights, which apply at all times and to all persons.

International criminal tribunal

These tribunals were created within the framework of the United Nations following violations of international humanitarian law in the early 1990s. In 1993, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was set up under a resolution of the Security Council to try the persons who had violated international humanitarian law. In 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was implemented likewise.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has its legal basis in the Rome Statute, which came into force in 2002, and has its seat in The Hague (Netherlands). The ICC prosecutes individuals for the most serious crimes of international concern: crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and crime of aggression. The ICC plays a complementary role, i.e., it only steps in once it becomes clear that the national authorities primarily responsible for prosecution are either unwilling or unable genuinely to carry out the necessary investigation and prosecution.

International cooperation

International cooperation refers to several countries discussing/cooperating/participating in a common project. This cooperation may be bilateral (between two countries) or multilateral (between multiple countries).

Internally displaced person

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Intergovernmental organisation

An intergovernmental organisation is an international organisation between several sovereign states for the purposes of coordination. These countries' heads of state and heads of government discuss certain aspects on which they wish to collaborate and make joint decisions. The UN and the World Trade Organisation WTO, for example, are intergovernmental organisations.

Infectious disease

Infectious diseases are caused by pathogenic agents such as viruses, bacteria, parasites or fungi. They include tropical and subtropical diseases like malaria, dengue fever and leprosy, which are especially widespread in tropical countries and which can be combatted with prevention and vaccination campaigns.

Immigration

Immigration is the entry into a state of which a person does not possess citizenship with the aim of settling there.

L

League of Nations

The League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN, was founded in 1919 in Geneva. Its objective was to maintain peace. Since it had only limited influence, however, it could not prevent the rise of fascism in Europe, which led to World War II. The League of Nations was finally replaced with the UN in 1946. Many international organisations, among them the International Labour Organization (ILO), were founded during the time of the League of Nations.

M

Multilateralism

We speak of multilateralism when three or more states negotiate with each other to define common rules. This corresponds to a world where all states would share a common set of rules, in the definition of which they have all collaborated irrespective of their level of power.

Multilateral institution

A multilateral institution is an entity that is active at an international level. For example, the United Nations is a multilateral institution because it defines rules between multiple countries and operates at an international level.

Migration flow

Migration flow, or migratory movement, is the displacement of multiple people from their place of habitual residence.

Migration balance

Migration balance (or net migration) is the difference between the number of immigrants (persons coming from another country) and emigrants (persons moving to another country) in a certain territory.

Migration

The term migration refers to the spatial relocation of a person’s or a group of people’s place of habitual residence between countries or between two places within a country. It includes all types of population movements irrespective of their causes, their nature and their duration. It includes in particular the movement of refugee workers, displaced and uprooted persons (IOM, 2007).

Migrant

At the international level, there is no generally accepted definition of the term ‘migrant’. It is usually employed to denote persons who have decided to migrate voluntarily, for ‘personal reasons’ and without compelling external factors. The term is also used for persons who move to another country or another region to improve their or their family’s material or social living conditions or future prospects.

Mediation and facilitation

In order to settle a conflict, a third party can be called in to mediate between the parties to the conflict. This is called mediation or facilitation. Such third parties may be the UN, regional organisations, states or NGOs. Switzerland has a long tradition of mediation and facilitation within the framework of its policy of good offices.

Mandate

A mandate is a mission given to a person, a company or a state. The mandate conveys the necessary authority to complete the mission in lieu of the other party.

N

Nuclear proliferation

The term ‘nuclear proliferation’ refers to the increase in the number of bodies that have nuclear weapons.

Nuclear fusion

Nuclear fusion is a physical process during which two atomic cores fuse to form a new one. This releases large quantities of energy. The sun and the stars shine because of nuclear fusion. They release energy. The sun’s energy makes life on earth possible. The nuclear fusion process is used, for example, in a hydrogen bomb.

Non-state actors

Non-state actors – including armed groups, military and private security companies – are playing an ever greater role today in armed conflicts. International humanitarian law is legally binding not only on states but also on non-state actors.

Non-permanent member of the UN Security Council

The UN Security Council has ten non-permanent member states, which are elected for a two-year mandate by the UN General Assembly. Together with the five permanent members they form the Security Council, but unlike the permanent members, they do not have a right of veto. Switzerland has a seat as a non-permanent member for the first time in the 2023–2024 period.

Non-interference

Within international law, the principle of non-interference is a protection for states. It stipulates that no other state or actor may interfere in a state's internal affairs such as politics or national votes and elections.

Non-governmental organisation (NGO)

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) is a group of individuals who through their collaboration seek to implement charitable goals (cf. international organisations). It can carry out its activities at a local or international level. Amnesty International, for example, is an NGO. It carries out activities at a global level without any state control.

Non-communicable disease (NCD)

Although there is no generally accepted definition of non-communicable diseases (NCD), the WHO uses this term for diseases that have a long duration, progress slowly and are not infectious, such as cardiovascular diseases (e.g. heart attack or stroke), cancer, chronic respiratory diseases (e.g. chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or asthma) and diabetes.

Neutrality

From a legal point of view, neutrality means that a state decides not to participate in wars, dispatch mercenaries or make its territory available to a warring party. Furthermore, a neutral state is responsible for its own defence and must treat the different warring parties equally (e.g. with regard to exporting war material). Anything that goes beyond these dispositions is regulated individually by each state at the political level.

Naturalisation

Naturalisation means that the relevant state authority grants a foreign person citizenship upon the person's application. Every country individually defines the conditions under which it grants citizenship. If the applicant is a refugee, states are obliged to facilitate naturalisation (Geneva Refugee Convention, 1952, Art. 34). At a regional level, the European Convention on Nationality sets forth in Art. 6 that "each State Party shall provide in its internal law for the possibility of naturalisation of persons lawfully and habitually resident on its territory."

Nansen Initiative

It is the Nansen Initiative's objective to reach a consensus on the principles of protection for displaced persons who have to leave their country due to natural disasters or climate change. It has led to an agenda for the protection of displaced persons that is based on international cooperation, standards for the treatment of environmentally displaced persons and operational measures.

P

Public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)

A public health emergency of international concern is an extraordinary event that, as determined in the International Health Regulations (2005), constitutes a public health risk to other states through the international spread of disease and potentially requires a coordinated international response. (International Health Regulations, 2005)

Public health

Public health encompasses the entirety of all measures and provisions to maintain and protect a certain group of persons or the entire population of a country and is a collective task. The term also denotes scientific investigation into the health of a population at a national or another level (e.g. at an international level or at the level of a social group). Since its establishment in 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) has defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” In order to be in good health, a person’s nutritional, hygienic, educational, social and mental needs must be met.

Protocol

A protocol is a document that records the decisions and commitments made in an international conference.

Prisoner of war

Combatants who have been captured by the enemy in an international armed conflict. The crews of merchant navy ships and commercial airlines as well as other persons who accompany armed forces without directly being a part of them are entitled to prisoner of war status. The conditions of detention, and use as a workforce, are regulated by the Third Geneva Convention. Prisoners of war have the right to be visited by delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Criminal charges may not be brought against them for acts of war that are lawful under international humanitarian law. Prisoners of war are not free to renounce their prisoner of war status. The medical and religious personnel who administer to prisoners must not be considered prisoners of war, although they have the right to the same treatment. Mercenaries and spies on the other hand are not normally granted prisoner of war status.

Principle of non-refoulement

The principle of non-refoulement is anchored in international law. It prohibits expelling or deporting persons into states where their life and limb are at stake. The principle is connected to human rights and is an integral part of customary international law. According to Art. 33 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951, “no Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” This principle is the cornerstone of the international protection of refugees and asylum seekers.

Primary health care

According to the 1978 Declaration of Alma-Ata, “primary health care is essential health care based on practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable methods and technology made universally accessible to individuals and families in the community through their full participation and at a cost that the community and country can afford to maintain at every stage of their development in the spirit of self-reliance and self-determination. It forms an integral part both of the country’s health system, of which it is the central function and main focus, and of the overall social and economic development of the community.”

Pollution

Pollution denotes damage to the environment by potentially toxic substances, e.g. air and water pollution, but also noise pollution. People’s actions may have catastrophic effects on our environment and thus also on people’s health and on the planet.

Philanthropic foundation

A philanthropic foundation is founded by one or several persons who transfer part of or their entire assets to the foundation or collect donations to realise a charitable and non-profit-oriented purpose.

Permanent mission

A permanent mission is the official representation of a country within an international organisation. Switzerland has two permanent missions in Geneva to represent Switzerland in the UN as well as in the WTO and EFTA. The permanent missions of almost all UN member states are likewise in Geneva.

Permanent member of the UN Security Council

There are five countries who are permanent members of the UN Security Council: China, Russia, the USA, France and the United Kingdom. Together with the non-permanent members they form the Security Council. The big difference between permanent and non-permanent members is that the permanent members have a right of veto, which allows them to block a resolution in a vote.

Peacekeeping operations

UN peacekeeping operations are missions to protect the civilian population, promote human rights, re-establish the rule of law and support disarmament in countries that are in a conflict or war. These operations must adhere to three basic principles: consent of all parties involved; impartiality of the mission; non-use of force (except for self-defence or in defence of the mandate).

Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping consists in organised international intervention to prevent, limit or resolve conflicts within states or between states. To this end, various different bodies may be deployed to maintain peace (police, soldiers, civilians).

Patent

A patent is an intellectual property (IP) right for a technical invention (e.g. the discovery of a molecule for a drug). A patent allows the patent holder to prevent others from using their invention for commercial purposes for up to 20 years.

Pandemic

A pandemic is the spread of an infectious disease across several countries or continents. Oftentimes, a pandemic starts as a more local epidemic which then spreads worldwide.

R

Returnee

Returnees are persons who have been abroad and who are brought back to their country of origin for various reasons (accident, sickness, natural or human-made disaster, epidemic, armed conflict, etc.). For example, if a person stays in a different country and this country is affected by a tsunami with destructive effects, the person can be repatriated (brought back). Repatriation is often organised by the country of origin’s embassy in the country concerned.

Responsibility to Protect

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is the principle of the responsibility of states to protect the population from serious crimes, namely genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing.

Resolution

Resolutions are decisions taken by international organisations and international conferences. Most resolutions are not legally binding but have the character of a recommendation (e.g. the resolutions of the General Assembly of the United Nations). This is different for some resolutions of the UN Security Council, which can be binding on all member states, meaning that all member states must respect them.

Refusal of entry

Refusal of entry is a state’s decision to deny a person entry into its territory.

Refugee

According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” Refugees enjoy special protection at the international level, which allows them to request asylum in other countries. The term ‘refugee’ differs from the term ‘migrant’ in that the latter designates any person who lives in a country other than their country of origin for a determined or indeterminate period of time, irrespective of their motivation.

Refoulement

Refoulement means the act by a state of denying a foreign person entry into its sovereign territory and sending the person back to their country of origin. In a broader sense, refoulement also means deportation of foreign persons with irregular status from the state’s territory. In that sense, refoulement comprises all coercive measures to transfer persons to another state – whether by expulsion, rejection at the border or extraterritorial interception etc. Deporting persons into states where their life or freedom would be threatened, where they might be persecuted on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion or where they are at risk of torture is considered a violation of international law.

Ratification

To ratify means to adopt and affirm a commitment. In international law, ratification is preceded by negotiations, drafting a treaty and signing it. Ratification of international treaties is a competence of the contracting states’ national authorities. They confirm the states’ commitment with their ratification.

Rare disease

Rare diseases is an umbrella term for various uncommon disorders. Affected persons and health professionals are often helpless when confronted with them since frequently neither therapies nor precise information about the diseases are available. Nowadays, more than 6000 rare diseases are known. In Europe alone, over 25 million people are affected by them.

S

Syndemic

A syndemic is a global phenomenon that is more comprehensive than a pandemic and that shows biological and social interactions which are important for forecasting, treatment and health policy. Developing a vaccine or a treatment is not sufficient to get a syndemic under control. This applies to the Covid-19 syndemic, for example.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In 2015, the UN adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which build on the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs are guidelines for a socially equitable, economically efficient and ecologically compatible development. Development needs to take into account the effects on society and the environment so as to ensure that future generations can still live on this planet. All UN member states have set themselves the goal of reaching the 169 associated targets by 2030, which is why the term ‘2030 Agenda’ is also used.

Sustainable development

According to the definition by the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development, “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In other words, it is a long-term economic concept that includes ecological and social aspects.

Stateless person

Stateless persons are persons without a nationality, either because they never had one or because they have lost their citizenship without acquiring a new one. Statelessness deprives persons of their rights – and releases them from their duties – that come along with nationality, e.g. the right to diplomatic protection and the right to return to one's country of origin. Within international law, the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons regulates the legal situation of stateless persons and grants them certain rights, particularly with regard to economic and social aspects.

Special international tribunal

A tribunal that is specially created within a certain context. It is a temporary tribunal, the competences of which are limited in time, space and in material terms. The first tribunals of this type were implemented after World War II (Nuremberg and Tokyo).

Sovereignty

Sovereignty of a state implies that the state is the highest decision-making authority within its national borders. It is thus not possible for any other state or organisation to interfere with the state's internal affairs. The only exception is the UN Security Council, which can make decisions that are binding for all UN member states.

Sexually transmitted infection (STI)

Sexually transmitted infections or STIs are those diseases that are mainly transmitted by sexual intercourse. Non-sexual transmission is also often possible (through blood or bodily secretions). Sexually transmitted infections are caused by different pathogens, some of which are relatively easily transmitted. STIs include AIDS, chlamydia, gonorrhoea ('the clap'), etc.

Schengen area

The Schengen area is a zone of free movement of people without border control and comprises 26 states. The Schengen Agreement was signed by Germany, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands in 1985. It allows persons to cross borders freely but not to settle freely. Free movement of persons is one of the fundamental freedoms of the European Union (free movement of people, goods, services and capital). It allows EU citizens and non-EU citizens to travel within Europe without border control. Step by step, all EU states ratified the agreement. It has been part of EU law since 1997 (Treaty of Amsterdam). The Schengen area comprises almost all EU member states and several countries outside of the EU (Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein).

T

Tropical disease

Tropical diseases are infectious diseases whose pathogens (viruses, bacteria, parasites etc.) mainly occur in tropical and subtropical regions. 'Neglected tropical diseases' are a group of diseases with a major impact on the population. These include cholera, dengue fever, diphtheria, ebola, yellow fever, malaria, zika virus etc.

Trafficking in persons

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, 2000)

U

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10th, 1948, the 58 member states of the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This fundamental document, which has since been translated into more than 500 languages, is a source of inspiration for the promotion of universal human rights and constitutes the basis for the international protection of human rights. To commemorate its adoption, Human Rights Day is celebrated annually on December 10th.

United Nations Security Council

The Security Council is one of the main bodies of the UN. It has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The Security Council is composed of 15 member states: five permanent members with the right of veto (which gives them the power to block a resolution despite the majority's consent), namely France, the USA, Russia, the United Kingdom and China, and ten non-permanent members, who are elected for a period of two years and half of whom are replaced every year. Switzerland has a seat as a non-permanent member for the first time in the 2023-2024 period. The Security Council makes decisions (for example, on economic or political sanctions, that is, punitive measures to force a state to fulfil its obligations, or even interventions in other countries if the local government violates international humanitarian law) to ensure that international peace and security are respected. Unlike the General Assembly, it can adopt decisions (resolutions) that are binding on all UN member states.

United Nations General Assembly

The General Assembly is one of the six main bodies of the United Nations. It is a gathering of all member states and observer states of the UN at which they discuss questions concerning human rights, development, peace or security (all topics covered by the United Nations). Each of the 193 member states has a vote, regardless of its size or number of inhabitants. Its decisions (resolutions), made during the annual gathering at the UN headquarters in New York between September and December, are non-binding recommendations.

UN peacekeepers

The UN peacekeepers are composed of soldiers, police and also civilians. They contribute to peacekeeping operations with a mission to maintain or re-establish peace (protecting civilians, defending human rights or promoting the rule of law, for example). They are supplied by all member states and operate under the authority of the United Nations.

V

Veto right

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, the USA, Russia, France and the United Kingdom) have a right of veto that allows them to oppose a common decision, which consequently cannot be adopted. This may result in blocking situations.

W

Weapons of mass destruction

Weapons of mass destruction are considered the most dangerous weapons and include chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons. The UN endeavours to eliminate these weapons, which can kill large numbers of people and cause major harm. A single one of these weapons can destroy an entire city and cause millions of deaths and may have catastrophic long-term consequences for the environment and for human beings.

War crime

War crimes are grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 protecting people and property as well as other serious violations of the laws and customs that apply to an international or non-international armed conflict. War crimes include notably: wilful killing, torture, deportation, ill treatment, unlawful detention, hostage taking, wilful attacks against civilians and against civilian objectives, recruitment of children in armed forces, and pillage. States are under an obligation to prosecute or extradite persons suspected of having committed war crimes on their territory.