



BACKGROUND GUIDE

# SOCHUM

Fakulta sociálních studií

# MUNI MUN

2026



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## Letter from the Secretariat

Dear Delegates,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the 2026 edition of the Masaryk University Model United Nations Conference. As Secretary General, it is an immense privilege to witness the incredible passion and dedication each of you will bring to this conference.

As our motto suggests, our aim for this year is to help delegates lead, think, and be inspired. In accordance with this goal, we have curated a diverse selection of committees and topics that ensure heated debate and the need for compromise. We hope that each delegate can take advantage of the unique space that MUNs bring, one where ideas are tested, diplomacy is practiced, and perspectives are broadened.

On behalf of the entire MUNIMUN team, I wish you the best of luck in your preparations and sincerely hope you have fun at the end of the day.

Do not forget that we are here to help ensure that your experience at MUNIMUN is the best that it can be. Should you have any questions, comments, concerns, or any other statements, please do not hesitate to contact me, your chairs, or the general MUNIMUN email.

I look forward to seeing the energy you bring to this conference and the lasting memories you will create.

Best wishes,

Kerem Efe Özen

Secretary General



## Committee overview

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) is the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, established in 1945 to address human rights and social development issues. It includes all 193 UN member states and meets annually in New York City, where it typically adopts about 60 resolutions each session (Global Policy Forum, 2025; United Nations, n.d.).

Originally formed to tackle urgent social and humanitarian issues following World War II, SOCHUM has since broadened its focus. It now addresses a wide array of topics, including the rights of women, children, indigenous peoples, and refugees. The committee also works to combat racism, discrimination, and social development challenges, such as aging populations and the rights of people with disabilities.

The evolution of SOCHUM's focus has been influenced by the adoption of various international treaties, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, which established the rights of refugees, and the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to combat climate change. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, laid the groundwork for international human rights law by asserting that all human beings are entitled to basic civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

A notable achievement of SOCHUM was the development of two legally binding treaties drafted by the committee, based on the UDHR: the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (United Nations General Assembly, 1966). Together with the UDHR, the ICESCR, and the ICCPR, they form the core foundation of international human rights law.

Today, the committee continues its efforts to protect human rights. For example, during the 2024 session, SOCHUM drafted resolutions 79/161 and 79/160, which addressed the glorification of Nazism and neo-Nazism, and the elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, respectively. These resolutions were later adopted by the General Assembly.

SOCHUM also reviews reports from various human rights bodies, such as the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and engages in interactive dialogues with experts as part of its decision-making process (Frankel & Regan, 2011, pp. 73-74; United Nations, 2009). Although SOCHUM's decisions are non-binding, they serve as important recommendations that can influence national policies and shape international human rights standards. Through its ongoing work, SOCHUM plays a crucial role not only in addressing immediate human rights violations but also in shaping the global discourse on social and humanitarian issues.

## Key Terms and Definitions

### Topic A

**Absconder** – a migrant worker who leaves a job without the permission of an employer. Because their legal status is tied to their employer, an absconder becomes undocumented and loses their legal right to stay in the country. This puts them at risk of being arrested, detained, fined, or deported.

**Debt bondage** – when someone is forced to work to repay an excessive debt that they might never be able to pay off.

**Domestic worker** – a person employed in a private household to perform a variety of services, such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry.

**Forced labor** – defined by the Forced Labour Convention (1930) as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.”

**Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** – a political, economic, and security alliance of six Arab nations in the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

**Host state** – a nation to which migrants travel. GCC states fall into this category.

**Kafala (sponsorship) system** – a legal framework used across much of the Middle East that ties the residency and employment status of a migrant worker to a specific employer (kafeel) for the duration of their stay in the country.

**Remittance** – a transfer of money made by a migrant worker to relatives in their country of origin.

**Sending state** – a nation from which migrants originate. In the context of the GCC, these are the countries whose citizens travel to GCC states in search of employment.

**Undocumented migrant** – a foreign-born person residing in a country without legal authorization or valid documents, sometimes referred to as an "irregular" or "illegal" migrant

### Topic B

**Asset** - Property or resources, including money or valuables, owned by individuals or entities.

**Asset Freeze** - A form of sanctions where access to bank accounts or other financial assets is blocked.

**Blockade** - Preventing goods and services from entering or leaving a country, often used as part of sanctions.

**Comprehensive Sanctions** - Sanctions that affect entire economies, blocking all or most trade and financial activities.

**De-risking (Over-compliance)** - When banks or businesses avoid all dealings with sanctioned entities (including legal humanitarian ones) due to fear of punishment.

**Donor Countries** - Nations that provide financial or material aid for humanitarian purposes.

**Financial Warfare** - Tactics like blocking access to banking networks (e.g., SWIFT), freezing assets, and limiting financial transactions to pressure countries.



**General Licenses** - Special permissions that allow exceptions, such as humanitarian activities, under sanctions.

**Global North** - A term for developed, wealthy countries that often impose sanctions.

**Humanitarian Carve-outs (Exemptions)** - Legal exceptions allowing essential goods like food and medicine to be delivered despite sanctions.

**Humanitarian Corridors** - Safe routes or procedures established to ensure aid delivery during conflicts or sanctions.

**Liquidity** - Available cash or near-cash resources to conduct trade or finance.

**Nuclear Proliferation** - The spread of nuclear weapons and related technology to non-nuclear countries.

**Recession** - Economic decline causing lower production, employment, and trade.

**Rule of Law** - The principle that laws apply equally to all individuals and governments. Targeted Sanctions (Smart Sanctions): Measures focused at specific individuals, companies, or government sectors to reduce impact on ordinary people.

**Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCMs)** - Sanctions imposed by one country or a group of countries independently of the UN.

**Warlords** - Armed leaders controlling territories often by force; sometimes targets of sanctions.

M U N I M U N



BACKGROUND GUIDE



# SOCHUM

TOPIC A:  
**COMBATING MODERN SLAVERY  
AND FORCED LABOR OF  
MIGRANT WORKERS IN GULF  
STATES**



# Combating Modern Slavery and Forced Labor of Migrant Workers in Gulf States

## Background

### Defining the issue

It is a widely accepted fact that slavery still exists in the 21st century. It continues today in the form of forced labor – a practice particularly common in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which this committee will examine. For work to qualify as forced labor, it must involve some form of coercion or threat, and the person must not have agreed to do it willingly.

What makes the GCC so susceptible to this problem is its migrant policies. Non-nationals represent approximately 70% of the population across the region, and in countries like Qatar and the UAE, migrants make up as much as 96% of the total workforce (Damir-Geilsdorf, 2016, p. 164). To manage this influx, GCC states rely on the kafala (sponsorship) system, under which a migrant worker's visa and legal status are entirely tied to their employer. The employer controls the worker's entry, residence, and exit from the country, and workers must obtain permission to change jobs or leave. This extensive control employers have over their legal status makes workers susceptible to abuse and exploitation.

The power employers hold over workers' legal status is rarely the only force keeping migrants trapped. For many, financial pressure locks them in from the very start. Many migrants take on large debts to cover outrageous recruitment and migration costs when moving into a GCC country. Workers are then compelled to work to repay their debts and often forced into working conditions they would otherwise refuse. This situation is known as "debt bondage." These debts can persist for years or even generations, making it nearly impossible to settle. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable from the outset due to language and cultural barriers, lack of information, and an inability to organize collectively.

Among the most vulnerable are domestic workers, who are employed in private households as cleaners, caregivers, drivers, cooks, and so on. They are particularly exposed to abuse because their work occurs behind closed doors, often in isolation. Unfortunately, they are often excluded from the same legal protections available to other workers. For instance, while Oman's labor law prohibits forced labor, this law does not extend to domestic workers (International Labour Organization, 2021). Until 2025, the forced labor of domestic workers was not prohibited at all, and they still remain subject to a legal system distinct from that of other workers (Migrant Rights Research Open Repository, 2025).

Yet despite this legal abandonment, these workers remain a vital economic lifeline for their home countries. Remittances sent home by GCC-based migrants are vital to the economies of the migrants, most of them originating from South and Southeast Asia. For example, in Nepal, remittances amounted to roughly a third of the country's GDP in 2018 (Ratha et al.,



2018). As such, the issue extends well beyond the region's borders and makes it an international concern.

## Historical background

Slavery in the Middle East is not a new practice or concept. Although slavery was formally abolished in several Gulf states during the 1950s, it was effectively replaced by the kafala system, which was established to manage the growing demand for imported labor following the discovery of oil in the region (Damir-Geilsdorf, 2016, p. 166).

The migration to the Gulf region was further accelerated by the 1973 oil crisis, when Arab states imposed an oil embargo on countries that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War. As a result, oil prices skyrocketed and the sudden influx of oil revenue allowed Gulf states to invest heavily in their infrastructure. However, their local populations were far too small to meet the resulting labor demands. Thus, the number of migrant workers across the six GCC countries rose from around 685,000 in 1970 to approximately 2.7 million within just a few years (Birks et al., 1986). By the late 1970s, foreigners made up 72% of the Gulf labor force (Hélène, 2022, p. 14). During this period, the kafala system evolved from being managed by individual employers to being linked to large recruitment companies, which opened the door to mass exploitative practices, such as fraudulent contracts and debt bondage (Hélène, 2022, p. 26).

The COVID-19 pandemic then made an already dire situation significantly worse. A decline in income forced many workers into more debt, and workers across various sectors were confined to their workplaces, compelled to work excessive hours to make up for labor shortages (International Labour Organization et al., 2022, p. 27). Domestic workers, in particular, were locked inside their employers' homes and required to work even more intensely as entire families stayed indoors (International Labour Organization, 2021, p. 7). Simultaneously, the pandemic restricted the ability of both state and non-state actors to identify and respond to cases of forced labor, as resources were redirected and lockdowns limited access to those in need (International Labour Organization et al., 2022, p. 27).

The issue of forced labor in the GCC region gained global attention, particularly due to Qatar's preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In the decade leading up to the event, over 6,500 migrant workers lost their lives while constructing the necessary infrastructure, averaging 12 deaths per week (Pattison & McIntyre, 2021). This situation brought unprecedented global scrutiny to labor conditions in the GCC and transformed the issue into a pressing human rights concern.



## International framework

### International efforts and responsibility

Several international organizations have played active roles in addressing forced labor in the GCC countries, with the ILO being the most consistently involved. The ILO has repeatedly stated that the kafala system is not aligned with international labor standards and has actively engaged with member states to address these violations. For instance, in 2014, the ILO received a formal complaint alleging that Qatar was violating core labor standards (International Labour Organization et al., 2022, p. 38). Following an investigative mission, the ILO and Qatar agreed on a joint reform program in 2017, resulting in some improvements, such as allowing workers to change jobs and leave without employer permission. However, issues like passport confiscation and limitations on independent trade unions persist.

In addition to the ILO's efforts, several UN human rights mechanisms have applied pressure on GCC governments. The Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review – a process through which every UN member state's human rights record is examined – has consistently produced recommendations urging GCC governments to strengthen protections for migrant workers and to reform the kafala system. Additionally, various UN experts, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, have repeatedly called on GCC states to either reform or abolish the kafala system and to ratify the relevant human rights conventions (Crépeau, 2014).

The General Assembly has also taken steps to address forced labor and foster the protection of migrant workers through several resolutions. One notable resolution is the SOCHUM annual resolution on Violence Against Women Migrant Workers. This resolution urges states to strengthen legal protections, ensure access to justice, and eliminate exploitative recruitment practices affecting female migrant workers.

However, responsibility at the international level remains a contested issue. GCC states bear the most direct responsibility, as the kafala system, which these governments have allowed to persist, creates conditions that facilitate exploitation. Nonetheless, sending countries like India and the Philippines also share in this responsibility. Recruitment agencies in the GCC often collaborate with agencies and brokers in sending countries, who charge migrants for their services rather than the sponsors, as should be the case (Damir-Geilsdorf, 2016, p. 173). Additionally, the economies of sending states rely heavily on remittances, making them hesitant to confront GCC states too aggressively, even when their citizens are mistreated abroad. That said, it is important to acknowledge that sending countries have used temporary "migration bans" to retaliate against GCC states in response to the abuse of migrant workers, thereby pressuring Gulf governments to improve working conditions (Hélène, 2022, p. 22).

## **Relevant international treaties**

### **Forced Labour Convention, 1930**

Adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1930, this Convention requires member states to eliminate all forms of forced or compulsory labor as swiftly as possible. Notably, it prohibits authorities from imposing or allowing forced labor for the benefit of private individuals, companies, or associations.

All GCC countries ratified this Convention.

### **Migration for Employment Convention, 1949**

This ILO Convention guarantees migrant workers equal treatment with nationals regarding salaries, working hours, trade union membership, and social security. It also mandates that employment contracts outlining working conditions must be provided before departure and that recruitment services must be free of charge.

However, this Convention has not been ratified by any of the GCC states.

### **Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956**

Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1956, this Convention builds upon earlier anti-slavery instruments, such as the Forced Labour Convention. It targets practices that, while not outright slavery, are still exploitative. For instance, it requires states to abolish debt bondage and the trafficking of children for labor exploitation.

This Convention was ratified by Bahrain (1990), Kuwait (1963), and Saudi Arabia (1973).

### **Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957**

This ILO Convention builds on the 1930 Forced Labour Convention by requiring member states not only to suppress forced labor but also to take adequate measures to secure its immediate and complete abolition. It explicitly calls for the elimination of forced labor when used as a tool for political coercion or for economic gain, acknowledging that forced labor is often systematically imposed to serve state or private interests.

This Convention was ratified by all GCC member states.

### **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, 1990**

This Convention establishes comprehensive protections for migrant workers. It explicitly prohibits forced labor, slavery, and the confiscation of identity documents, and guarantees equal working conditions and wages compared to nationals. It also protects workers from violence and intimidation, ensures they are informed of their employment conditions before departure, and safeguards against the use of deportation to intimidate workers. Furthermore, it guarantees migrant workers the freedom to leave any country.



This Convention has not been ratified by any of the GCC states.

### **Domestic Workers Convention, 2011**

Adopted by the ILO in 2011, this Convention establishes key rights for domestic workers, ensuring they receive protection comparable to those in other sectors. These rights include fair wages, safe working conditions, regulated working hours, social security, and protection from abuse and harassment. The Convention also guarantees domestic workers the right to keep their own identity documents, freedom of association, and access to legal dispute mechanisms.

Despite all GCC states voting in favor of its adoption, this Convention has not been ratified by any of them.

### **Protocol to the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, 2014**

This ILO Protocol strengthens the 1930 Convention by requiring states not only to suppress forced labor but also to actively prevent it, protect victims, and sanction perpetrators. It calls for national action plans and explicitly requires measures to protect migrant workers from abusive recruitment practices. Victims must have access to compensation, regardless of their legal status, and cannot be penalized for unlawful acts they were compelled to commit as a result of forced labor.

This Protocol was ratified by Saudi Arabia (2021) and the UAE (entering into force in 2027).

### **Current State of the Issue**

On paper, all GCC states have labor laws in place that regulate contracts, working hours, overtime, and wages, and impose penalties for violations. However, in practice, forced labor and human rights violations continue to occur. Many workers arrive only to find that the contract they signed back home has been replaced with one that offers significantly lower pay, and having just arrived deeply indebted, most feel they have no choice but to accept.

Once hired, workers are often coerced into working longer hours than initially agreed upon and receive little to no wages. They remain trapped in these conditions due to deliberate coercion. One common method is wage withholding, where employers intentionally fail to pay workers, keeping them fearful of not receiving any payment at all if they leave. Passport confiscation is another prevalent issue. Although it is illegal across all GCC states, 90% of low-income migrant workers surveyed in Qatar reported that their employers held their passports (Gardner et al., 2013).

Other forms of coercion against these workers can be much more extreme, including sexual and physical violence, forced confinement, and deprivation of necessities such as food or water if workers refuse to comply. For example, in 2009, there were over 10,000 complaints from domestic workers in Kuwait regarding non-payment of wages, excessively long working hours, and various forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Motaparthi, 2010, p. 90). In the UAE, workers have reported similar treatment. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2014) interviewed 99 domestic workers, nearly all of whom stated they were required to work



Watch, 2025a, 2025b). Other countries, like Saudi Arabia, offer only partial protections (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). Even where formal protections exist, as in Kuwait and Qatar, they are still weaker than those for other workers, and their enforcement is often inadequate (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, 2018b). Additional discriminatory practices also exist. For example, in several GCC states, domestic workers can be forcibly deported simply for becoming pregnant (International Labour Organization, 2021).

## [Link to the committee](#)

Forced labor in the GCC countries clearly falls within SOCHUM's mandate, as it represents a fundamental violation of the human rights the committee was established to protect. Additionally, the kafala system disproportionately affects migrant workers who are often recruited from lower-income countries in South and Southeast Asia, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa. The issue, thus, directly relates to SOCHUM's focus on the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups.

SOCHUM possesses several meaningful tools to address the issue of forced labor. For example, the committee can draft and recommend resolutions urging GCC member states to align their domestic policies with internationally recognized human rights standards.

Furthermore, the committee can encourage GCC states to ratify key international instruments that they have not yet signed, such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families (1990) and the Domestic Workers Convention (2011), which the GCC states have declined to ratify.

In addition to these actions, SOCHUM can encourage both sending and host states to strengthen bilateral agreements and improve protections for migrant workers. Since the committee includes all 193 UN member states, it provides a platform for GCC countries and major sending nations to engage in dialogue on how to prevent forced labor.

## **Bloc Analysis**

### **Bloc 1: Sending states**

Sending states to the GCC countries, such as India, the Philippines, Nepal, and Ethiopia, are the most vocal group in addressing forced labor. Their primary focus is on protecting and improving the conditions of their citizens abroad, which is why they advocate for resolutions that enhance the ILO's involvement, establish bilateral protections, ensure wage transparency, and expand social protection coverage. However, they typically refrain from using language that might be interpreted as supporting labor bans or unilateral sanctions against the GCC states.

This cautious approach is largely due to the heavy reliance of these countries on remittance flows from migrants in the GCC. For instance, remittances to Asian sending countries amounted to 72 billion USD from the Gulf alone, out of a total remittance flow of 98 billion USD (Hélène, 2022, p. 22). This economic dependency makes sending countries hesitant

to adopt positions that could jeopardize their remittance income, which is vital for improving living standards and reducing poverty back at home.

For instance, the Philippines has favored practical bilateral solutions rather than confrontational strategies toward GCC states. As of 2018, the Philippines had 43 valid bilateral labor agreements with 27 destination countries, including one with Saudi Arabia, for example, specifically addressing the protection of domestic workers (Center for Migrant Advocacy, 2020, p. 10, 12). Despite these agreements, however, Saudi Arabia remains one of the top sources of complaints from Filipino migrant domestic workers (Center for Migrant Advocacy, 2020, p. 6).

## **Bloc 2: GCC states**

GCC states prioritize national sovereignty in immigration and labor policies, emphasizing the right to pursue reforms on their own terms. Although GCC states acknowledge the existence of labor abuses, they dispute the characterization of the kafala system as forced labor. They point to recent reforms as evidence of their progress, emphasize bilateral cooperation over multilateral mechanisms, and challenge the authority of the UN and other international organizations to interfere in their domestic immigration laws. Furthermore, GCC states generally oppose binding monitoring mechanisms and reject the labeling of the kafala system as forced labor.

The GCC states seek to preserve the kafala system because their economic welfare has long depended on migrant labor, which this system effectively regulates. Additionally, they aim to manage the influx of migrants to prevent them from outnumbering the local population. Consequently, the kafala system serves their interests by enabling the use of migrant labor without the requirement to grant long-term citizenship.

To give an example of how the bloc operates, Qatar has repeatedly presented its reforms to the kafala system in international forums as proof of its commitment to progress. However, as seen in this background guide, they are insufficient to eliminate forced labor within the country. Nonetheless, Qatar has successfully used this to deflect binding accountability. For example, it was re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council for the term 2025–2027, even as migrant workers in Qatar continue to be governed by the abusive kafala system.

## **Bloc 3: Western and allied states**

Western nations, such as EU member states, Canada, and Australia, typically prioritize human rights protections and labor standards. They advocate for binding international accountability mechanisms that neither sending countries nor the GCC are likely to fully accept. These nations often push for strong language in resolutions that emphasize the need for accountability, monitoring, and the ratification of international agreements, such as ILO conventions, by GCC states.

However, despite their commitment to human rights, these countries often make compromises when consensus is necessary. Their criticism of GCC states is often softened by their interests in energy and trade with these nations, particularly regarding oil.

BACKGROUND GUIDE



# SOCHUM

TOPIC B:  
**PROTECTING CIVILIANS FROM  
THE IMPACT OF  
INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS**

# Protecting civilians from the Impact of the International Sanctions

## Background

### Defining the issue

International sanctions are political and economic tools used by countries and international organizations to pressure a state, institution, or individual into changing certain policies or behaviors. These actions range from travel bans and freezing of assets to blockades and full trade embargoes. The goal is to promote international peace, security, and respect for human rights without resorting to military conflict (Cortright & Lopez, 2002).

Sanctions primarily aim to:

- Prevent nuclear proliferation (stopping countries from developing nuclear weapons),
- Combat terrorism,
- Address serious human rights abuses,
- End conflicts and restore peace.

They are preferred as peaceful means of coercion or punishment when diplomatic efforts fail. Despite their intended political goals, sanctions often cause serious humanitarian consequences. Civilians, ordinary people living in sanctioned countries, frequently face shortages of food, medicine, and basic services due to trade restrictions and economic isolation. These hardships result in increased malnutrition, disease, poverty, and undermined access to healthcare and education (World Food Programme, 2021).

SOCHUM deals with human rights and humanitarian affairs. It has a responsibility to address how sanctions affect civilians and find ways to safeguard their rights, including the right to food, healthcare, and development as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UNGA, 1948).

Sanctions, especially when broadly applied, can force vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and displaced persons to bear the "cost" of global political disputes (UNICEF, 2020).

In an interconnected global economy, blocking a country's financial systems or trade not only affects the sanctioning target but also impacts neighboring regions and global supply chains, thus becoming an issue of global concern (World Food Programme, 2021).

## Historical background

Sanctions have origins in early international law, with the League of Nations pioneering their use. However, their modern application intensified under the United Nations post-World War II.

A critical case highlighting sanctions' humanitarian risks was the sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the UNSC enacted Resolution 661, almost entirely blocking Iraq's trade and financial interactions (UNSC, 1990). A UN report later estimated that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children died from shortages of food and medicine created by sanctions blocking civilian imports (Gordon, 1999).

This situation sparked a global debate on sanctions effectiveness and humanity, often called the start of a “humanitarian crisis caused by sanctions” controversy.

To address these concerns, between 1998 and 2003, a series of international expert meetings known as the Interlaken, Bonn-Berlin, and Stockholm Processes were convened. These gatherings brought together diplomats, legal experts, and policymakers to study the humanitarian impact of sanctions and develop guidelines for improving their design. The key outcome was the concept of “smart sanctions” — these focused on targeting the political and military leadership responsible for wrongdoings (such as warlords or dictatorial regimes) rather than imposing broad economic restrictions that harm whole populations. This represented a major shift towards limiting civilian suffering while maintaining sanctions' political goals (Portela, 2010).

Since 2004, the United Nations Security Council has primarily pursued these smarter targeted sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans on specific individuals, as opposed to sweeping embargoes affecting entire countries.

Furthermore, the rise of “financial warfare” in the 2010s introduced new forms of sanctions restricting access to international banking systems, such as SWIFT exclusions, expanded asset freezes, and sophisticated financial sanctions. These broad financial measures, while targeted in intent, often have wide-reaching effects on civilian trade and financial stability (Mehrling & Pozsar, 2015).

Following the 2022 conflict in Ukraine, sanctions expanded dramatically. By 2026, the international system is facing “Sanctions Fatigue” and a surge in unilateral sanctions by countries or blocs without UN approval. These include secondary sanctions that penalize third-party countries or companies for trading with sanctioned nations, resulting in a multifaceted and complex global sanctions environment (Portela, 2010).

## International framework

The international legal framework governing sanctions and the protection of civilians is principally anchored in the United Nations Charter and supplemented by other key international treaties, conventions, and Security Council resolutions aimed at balancing enforcement with humanitarian protection.

## United Nations Charter

- Article 41 of the UN Charter (1945) empowers the Security Council to enforce measures not involving armed force. These include complete or partial interruption of economic relations, severance of diplomatic ties, and other diplomatic or economic sanctions to maintain or restore international peace and security (United Nations, 1945).

## International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Treaties

- The Geneva Conventions in 1949 and their Additional Protocols establish protections for civilians during armed conflict, including the obligation to allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian aid (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2021).
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 provides the foundation for human rights globally. It guarantees rights to food, health, and an adequate standard of living even under sanctions regimes (United Nations General Assembly, 1948).
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966 further protects rights integral to living standards, including the rights to health, adequate food, and social security, which sanctions must not unjustifiably infringe upon (United Nations, 1966).

## UN Resolutions

- Resolution 661: Imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait. This was one of the earliest examples demonstrating the humanitarian cost of broad sanction regimes (UNSC, 1990).
- Resolution 1452: Highlighted the importance of humanitarian exemptions during sanctions, particularly regarding medicines and food aid (UNSC, 2002).
- Resolution 1973: Imposed sanctions on Libya while urging humanitarian aid access, emphasizing the need for carve-outs to protect civilians during conflict (UNSC, 2011).
- Resolution 2253: Reinforced “smart” or targeted sanctions focusing on individuals and entities associated with terrorism financing, with clear humanitarian exemptions (UNSC, 2015).
- Resolution 2664: Established a permanent humanitarian carve-out protecting aid organizations from asset freezes, thus ensuring continued humanitarian access in sanctioned contexts (UNSC, 2022).
- Resolution 2761: Expanded the humanitarian carve-out and mandated greater coordination between sanctioning bodies and humanitarian agencies (UNSC, 2024).
- UNGA Resolution 46/182: Establishes the foundation for coordinated humanitarian assistance and underscores the primary responsibility of states to protect civilians in emergencies (UNGA, 1991).

- UNGA Resolution 60/180: Emphasizes the importance of ensuring humanitarian aid access in conflict and stresses the need to respect international humanitarian law in sanctions design (UNGA, 2005).

## Reports and Mandates Relevant to Sanctions and Human Rights

- The UN Special Rapporteur on the Negative Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures monitors and reports on how sanctions affect human rights and development. Reports consistently stress the need to balance sanctions with humanitarian principles and recommend increased transparency and review mechanisms (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023).
- The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) plays an operational role in coordinating humanitarian responses and advocating for sanction regimes that safeguard aid delivery (OCHA, 2025).

Despite these comprehensive legal instruments and resolutions, several challenges remain:

- Lack of centralized oversight: No single UN body currently has the authority to systematically review the humanitarian impact of all sanctions worldwide.
- Unilateral sanctions: Sanctions implemented outside UN approval, often by powerful states or blocs, may not incorporate international humanitarian safeguards consistently.
- Financial sector de-risking: Private sector actors operate under risk-averse policies that sometimes exceed legal requirements, obstructing legitimate humanitarian payments (Charity & Security Network, 2024).
- Fragmented accountability: States often disclaim responsibility for indirect humanitarian harm caused by sanctions, creating a legal and moral vacuum.

## Current state of the issue

As of 2026, the humanitarian consequences of international sanctions remain severe and multifaceted across various regions and countries. The effects of sanctions are compounded by other global challenges such as inflation, pandemic recovery difficulties, climate change-related disasters, and protracted conflicts, which together intensify the vulnerability of millions.

According to the OCHA more than 239 million people worldwide now require urgent humanitarian aid, a historic high largely influenced by economic disruptions and crises linked to sanctions (OCHA, 2026). These needs span food security, healthcare, shelter, water, sanitation, and protection services.

Despite the growing demand, humanitarian funding saw a dramatic decrease of approximately 43% in 2025, driven by significant budget cuts from traditional donor countries such as the United States and Germany (Cadmus, 2025). This funding decline severely restricts the ability of humanitarian agencies to respond adequately to crises.

Additionally, a 2024 survey by the Charity & Security Network highlighted that only about 50% of financial institutions moderately adjusted their policies to facilitate humanitarian trade under sanction regimes, while roughly 19% were unaware of legal exemptions intended to protect humanitarian transactions. This "de-risking" behavior by banks and private companies continues to delay or block essential aid flows (Charity & Security Network, 2024).

There are some examples of how this sanction can lead to a humanitarian crisis that affects civilians:

- Afghanistan: Central bank sanctions imposed since 2021 contributed to a liquidity freeze, deeply restricting the flow of money within the economy. Approximately 23.7 million Afghans now face food insecurity, a collapsing education system, and insufficient healthcare, largely worsened by these financial sanctions (World Bank, 2025).
- Syria: Despite a political transition in late 2024, economic sanctions continue to impede reconstruction efforts estimated at over \$216 billion, delaying recovery and worsening living conditions for millions still displaced or in poverty (World Bank, 2025).
- Venezuela: The country endures a healthcare system overload due to chronic shortages of medicines and equipment, compounded by sanctions limiting access to essential imports. Around 7.9 million Venezuelans require humanitarian assistance to meet basic health and nutrition needs (International Organization for Migration, 2026).

### **Key points of tension**

A fundamental tension exists between the desired political objective of sanctions, to change harmful behavior or policies without the use of armed conflict, and the unintended suffering of civilians who often bear the brunt of economic restrictions. Sanctions can reduce populations' access to food, healthcare, clean water, and education, worsening poverty and public health crises.

Supporters of sanctions argue that they are a necessary alternative to military intervention and that targeted sanctions minimize civilian impacts. Critics highlight that, in practice, even "smart" sanctions frequently have broad economic consequences, harming vulnerable groups disproportionately. This is often exploited by sanctioned governments who blame external actors for internal hardships, strengthening domestic political narratives; a phenomenon known as the "rally around the flag" effect.

Many sanctions regimes have persisted for years or decades without clear criteria for removal, such as those on North Korea, Cuba, or Iran. This has led to entrenched humanitarian crises with no clear resolution path, prolonging civilian hardships indefinitely. The international community struggles to balance pressure on governments while offering a constructive exit strategy to encourage positive change.

### **Link to the committee**

The protection of civilians and safeguarding of human rights under sanctions regimes squarely falls within SOCHUM's mandate, which focuses on social, humanitarian, and human rights issues. While the Security Council addresses conflict and peace and security, SOCHUM examines

the broader societal and humanitarian repercussions of international policies, such as economic sanctions.

Sanctions affect millions of civilians' lives by disrupting access to food, healthcare, education, and basic services. Vulnerable populations (women, children, displaced persons, and persons with disabilities) often suffer disproportionately.

SOCHUM's role involves:

- Ensuring the international community balances the enforcement of sanctions with the protection of human rights.
- Recommending ways to strengthen humanitarian exemptions and improve coordination between sanctioning bodies and aid organizations.
- Advocating practical solutions such as “White Channels” for humanitarian banking and supply chains to avoid civilian harm.
- Facilitating dialogue on integrating human rights considerations into sanctions regimes and supporting the rights of those living under sanctions regardless of political tensions.

By addressing these issues, SOCHUM helps uphold international law and human dignity while advancing peace and sustainable development.

## **Bloc Analysis**

### **Bloc 1**

This group is made up of countries frequently subject to unilateral or multilateral sanctions or those that oppose sanctions use on principle, especially when imposed unilaterally or without UN Security Council authorization. These states argue that sanctions frequently violate national sovereignty, are unfair political tools that inflict disproportionate hardship on civilians, and are sometimes used to push regime change under the guise of international law.

In debate, these countries commonly call for easing or lifting sanctions immediately and emphasize the primacy of multilateralism under the UN system. They support initiatives for unconditional humanitarian aid corridors and unconditional exemptions designed to protect civilian populations. However, they often oppose efforts to strengthen sanctions enforcement or introduce new coercive measures.

Countries in this bloc typically advocate for reforms to limit unilateral sanctions, enhance respect for sovereignty, and increase humanitarian protections, although few currently propose comprehensive alternative sanction frameworks.

### **Bloc 2**

This group consists mainly of Western democracies and allied nations that regularly implement sanctions as instruments of foreign policy to uphold international norms related to security,



human rights, and non-proliferation. These countries argue that sanctions provide an important alternative to military force, enabling the international community to respond firmly and peacefully to threats such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and severe human rights violations.

In committee, these states typically support policies that reinforce the effectiveness and enforcement of sanctions regimes. They advocate for targeted sanctions focused on political and military elites rather than the general population, alongside clear humanitarian exemptions that allow aid to reach affected civilians. They emphasize maintaining strict monitoring and compliance mechanisms to prevent sanctions evasion and misuse of humanitarian channels.

Countries grouped here include the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, and most European Union member states. They are likely to promote resolutions strengthening transparency, sanction enforcement, and cooperation between sanctioning authorities and humanitarian agencies. However, these countries often resist measures they perceive as weakening sanctions' coercive power, such as broad calls for sanction relief without clear political conditions.

Their opponents see sanctions as a crucial, peaceful "middle ground" between failed diplomacy and catastrophic conflict. Their priority is strict control to stop aid from being "diverted" to terrorist organizations or corrupt elites, targeted pressure on human rights violators, and the rule of law.

They are in favor of Resolution 2664 of the UN Security Council, but they think that corruption and "bad governance" in the target nation rather than the sanctions themselves are the main causes of challenges. They maintain that, when used properly, exemptions are already adequate. For this bloc, sanctions are effective because these nations have access to the global financial system (such as the US dollar or the euro). They consider themselves to be the "enforcers" of international standards and are cautious about creating any opening that might be used by "rogue" states.

### **Bloc 3**

This bloc comprises mainly emerging economies and some developing countries that acknowledge sanctions' political utility but prioritize minimizing their humanitarian impact. These states call for balanced approaches that address both security objectives and the rights and wellbeing of civilians affected by sanctions.

Delegates from this group support targeted, time-bound sanctions with clear exit strategies and recommend integrating Humanitarian Impact Assessments (HIAs) into sanction design and review processes. They emphasize greater cooperation between sanctioning bodies and humanitarian organizations to ensure aid delivery is not impeded. This group is also concerned about the collateral effects of secondary sanctions on third-party countries and advocates for international standards regulating such measures.

## Research and Preparation questions

### Topic A: Combating Modern Slavery and Forced Labor of Migrant Workers in Gulf States

1. Can the kafala system be genuinely reformed or does meaningful change require dismantling it entirely? What would the transition look like for economies that are structurally dependent on migrant labor?
2. Recruitment debt, document confiscation, and wage theft are among the most common entry points into forced labor for migrant workers. What practical measures can the committee propose to break this cycle, particularly in contexts where legal enforcement is limited or inconsistent?
3. To what extent are both sending and host countries responsible for preventing forced labor conditions? How effective are current bilateral agreements or cooperative mechanisms between these states?
4. What kinds of enforcement mechanisms in a committee resolution would be broadly acceptable for member states, and what would likely be rejected as too intrusive or too weak to be meaningful?
5. Several GCC states have ratified international conventions against forced labor while simultaneously maintaining domestic legislation that permits practices those same conventions prohibit. How should the committee respond to states that treat ratification as a symbolic gesture rather than a binding commitment?
6. To what degree can international bodies such as the ILO assist GCC states in implementing and monitoring labor protections without being seen as an interference in the domestic labor policies of sovereign nations?

### Topic B: Protecting civilians from the Impact of the International Sanctions

1. What is the official role of the delegation's state in the current global sanctions landscape (as a sender, a target, or a third party)?
2. How have sanctions on a neighboring country affected the social and economic stability of the delegation's own region?
3. What specific evidence exists (such as UN or Red Cross reports) regarding the shortage of food, medicine, or electricity in sanctioned areas within the region?
4. Does the delegation's government officially support or oppose the use of Unilateral Coercive Measures (sanctions imposed by one country rather than the UN)?
5. What is the delegation's position on over-compliance, where private banks refuse to process legal aid payments out of fear of international fines?
6. Does SOCHUM should focus on creating technical rules for aid delivery or on making political statements about the legality of sanctions?
7. Should the international community require a mandatory Humanitarian Impact Assessment before any new sanction can be approved?
8. Does the delegation support the creation of "White Channels" (pre-approved banking routes) to guarantee that humanitarian funds reach their destination safely?

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