

**BIPR Webinar: SAIS & SOAS Faculty Panel:
Conflict and Migration in Times of COVID-19**

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The Bologna Institute for Policy Research (BIPR) hosted a joint faculty panel webinar with SAIS and SOAS University of London on the impact of COVID-19 on conflict and migration. SOAS Professor Michael Charney highlights the way the pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of refugee communities and how COVID has strengthened a global pre-existing political shift to the right. Complementarily, Professor Sara Pennicino from SAIS Europe focuses on the way governments are using the pandemic to legally justify border securitization and how this will likely cause a long-term detriment in the level of protection of human rights for refugees across the globe. Both speakers concentrate on the increase in border security during COVID that negatively impacts refugee and migrant communities.

Charney emphasizes that the millions of displaced people globally are the most vulnerable and marginalized population in the world. COVID only further worsens their situation. He primarily focuses on the Rohingya refugee camps to explain how the addition of an infectious disease like COVID to the camps creates a disaster waiting to happen for displaced communities. The inherent situation of density in refugee camps makes social distancing impossible. Additionally, Charney argues that the lack of sanitation systems and clean water make it almost impossible to effectively follow directions for handwashing. Poor hygiene also gives rise to other dangerous infectious diseases such as cholera and measles. Thirdly, the lockdown in Bangladesh has been devastating for the Rohingya refugee camps. There has been an 80% drop in humanitarian services causing food and water shortages and the lack of staff in the camps has resulted in overflowing latrines. Most consequentially, the pandemic provides a legitimate façade to Myanmar's concern about allowing the Rohingya population to return which will be the most detrimental long-term impact of COVID for the refugee community. Myanmar can now claim that the refugees are a public health concern and a potential health threat if they return. Therefore, the government is increasingly able to refuse re-entry, exacerbating an already present shift toward stronger border control.

Pennicino focuses on the humans at sea who are trapped due to international law failing to truly define their jurisdiction. Between 2013 and 2019, there were 15,000 casualties in the Southern

Mediterranean alone. As governments have closed ports to counter the pandemic, migrants are left without the ability to access a port of entry. As recent as May 2020, three boats carrying Rohingya refugees were unable to dock in Malaysia or even return to Bangladesh for over two months. Therefore, governments are using the legal tool of closing a port under international law to refuse the entry of refugees. As an increasing number of countries around the world turn to closing their borders and thus ports, refugees have continued to remain adrift at sea. Pennicino argues that the trend of administrative detention and denial of disembarkation will not improve in the future unless there is an increased understanding of the jurisdiction of people at sea.