

Secretary General's Report Oceans and the Law of the Sea: Capacity-building and the Transfer of Marine Technology: New Developments, Approaches and Challenges, 2025

UNHCR's contribution

In 2024, UNHCR continued to support the capacity building at global, regional and country levels of States and other actors involved in search and rescue operations, as well as those engaged in post-disembarkation activities in the context of refugee and migrant maritime movements. The focus of these activities remained on addressing protection challenges, including access to asylum and non-refoulement, and ensuring understanding of key issues at the intersection of international refugee law, human rights law and the law of the sea. UNHCR's training initiatives also aimed to enhance operational effectiveness, with a particular emphasis on improving data collection to better inform responses and strengthen protection efforts for refugees and vulnerable individuals in the context of sea journeys. UNHCR's engagement on protection at sea is part of a broader organizational effort to promote more effective responses to the challenges of mixed and onward movements of refugees and migrants through a route-based approach.¹

In November 2024, UNHCR supported the development and delivery of the first global course on Protection in Mixed Movements, organized by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law (IIHL), including facilitating sessions and sponsoring the participation of 53 government officials from different countries across the world. The course covered various topics related to responses to mixed movements of refugees and migrants and included a session on protection at sea, focusing on the normative framework and scenario-based questions. A new iteration of the [IIHL course](#) is planned for 2025.

UNHCR continued to promote a dedicated e-learning course on the Protection of Migrants and Refugees Moving by Sea, jointly developed with IOM in 2022. The e-learning course is available to governments, civil society and others through online platforms including the UNHCR Workday Learning platform². UNHCR and IOM began translating the online course into Spanish, French and Arabic, with these new language versions set to be available in 2025.

During the reporting period, UNHCR intensified its monitoring of human rights challenges faced by refugees and migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean Sea. The organization enhanced its efforts by utilizing [Marine Traffic](#), an online vessel-tracking tool, to track merchant vessel activities in areas surrounding distress situations. With increasing movements and shipwrecks along other maritime routes, particularly the Northwest Africa Maritime Route, UNHCR conducted training for its personnel on the use of Marine Traffic. The organization plans to expand the use of this tool to strengthen engagement with the shipping sector and flag States, aiming to improve protection for refugees and migrants on these routes.

On 18 December, UNHCR together with IOM, OHCHR, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons especially Women and Children, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, and the Centre for Humanitarian Action at Sea issued a joint statement on "*Distress at sea: a call for a humanitarian and precautionary approach*" which calls on States and other stakeholders to adopt a humanitarian and precautionary approach in identifying and responding to possible situations of

¹ *A Route-Based Approach: Strengthening Protection and Solutions in the Context of Mixed Movements of Refugees and Migrants* | [Refworld](#)

² To access the course on Workday Learning, external users must first register on the platform by visiting this [registration link](#). Once registered, learners can view the course via this direct [course link](#).

“distress”, as enshrined in relevant instruments relating to the law of the sea and in compliance with international human rights and refugee law.³ The guidance contained in this joint statement will be integrated in further capacity building and trainings conducted by UNHCR and its partners on protection at sea.

Asia Pacific

Working closely with the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, UNHCR facilitated a roundtable discussion on maritime people smuggling in the Andaman Sea on 19-20 February 2024. The event, focused on protection aspects, explored opportunities for coastal States to collaborate on operations and investigations related to people smuggling.

In collaboration with UNODC, UNHCR conducted two training sessions on screening, protection, and assistance for migrants and refugees arriving by boat. These sessions, part of a broader two-week training programme on ‘Responding to Smuggling of Migrants by Sea,’ was held for government officials in Sri Lanka and Fiji on 1 July and 19 August 2024, respectively.

In Banda Aceh, Indonesia, UNHCR organized a workshop on 12-13 December 2024 for government officials at national, provincial, regency, and village levels. The training focused on key issues related to boat arrivals of stateless Rohingya refugees, with an emphasis on law of the sea, reception arrangements and transition to post-emergency response.

On 18 December 2024, UNHCR held a protection at sea workshop in Colombo, Sri Lanka, with government and civil society stakeholders involved in Search and Rescue, disembarkation, and reception arrangements. Drawing on past experiences with Rohingya boat arrivals, the workshop aimed to identify challenges, gaps, and solutions to inform a guidance document for future incidents and responses.

Caribbean

On 11 December 2024, UNHCR conducted a training workshop on international protection and protection at sea for officers of the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard. The training focused on key topics including responsibilities under the law of the sea and the analysis of applicable jurisdiction in different maritime zones. It also covered the differences between rescue and interception operations, how to define distress situations and identify places of safety, and the duty to render assistance to vessels in distress, with a humanitarian and precautionary approach. The workshop addressed intersections with transnational criminal law, international protection principles such as non-refoulement, access to territory and asylum, non-penalization, and family unity. Additionally, state responsibility for SAR, disembarkation, and the non-criminalization of rescuers were discussed. The training was complemented by scenario-based learning exercises to reinforce these concepts.

³ *Distress at sea: a call for a humanitarian and precautionary approach*, 18 December 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/distress-sea-call-humanitarian-and-precautionary-approach>.

Southern Europe

In Greece, UNHCR has been providing training on international refugee protection and human rights law to Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) personnel since 2013. The training sessions, designed to be interactive, are tailored to the audience and operational needs, including one-day trainings, roundtables, and multi-day residential programs covering topics like UNHCR's mandate, international law, search and rescue at sea, shipwreck response, child protection, and GBV prevention. External experts, such as ICRC, national human rights bodies, Frontex FRO, and others, are regularly invited to lead specific topics. These events promote knowledge exchange, good practices, networking, and advocacy. The most recent residential training occurred in December 2024 in Athens. Additionally, upon HCG's invitation, UNHCR participates as a trainer in internal HCG trainings on refugee protection and human rights. Training is outlined in UNHCR's Memorandum of Cooperation with HCG.

In Malta, UNHCR delivered a training session on human rights and refugee law in maritime operations for coast guard authorities from Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey, as part of the two-week Operational Maritime Law Programme organized by the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC), in collaboration with the Armed Forces of Malta and supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration.

Middle East and North-Africa

Together with the IIHL, UNHCR organized an online course and in-person workshop for participants from North African States on strengthening protection responses in mixed movements, including a component on protection at sea. UNHCR Mauritania supported the participation at the course of five national authorities involved in disembarkations in mixed movements. To further strengthen local capacities, ahead of the planned resumption of joint screening activities for disembarked individuals, UNHCR trained police and gendarmerie officers on refugee law, interviewing techniques, and the use of technical tools to be used during screening.

In Yemen, UNHCR, in collaboration with UNODC, co-facilitated a two-day training on Search and Rescue operations at the Yemen Coast Guard Base in Mokha. The training aimed to improve coordination between the Yemen Coast Guard and humanitarian organizations in responding to new arrivals or sea incidents involving migrants and refugees. Further capacity development activities are planned for 2025 as follow-up.

In July 2023, UNHCR Morocco and the Moroccan Coast Guard (Marine Royale) held a two-day capacity-building workshop on international refugee law and protection at sea for high-level officials at the School of the Royal Navy in Casablanca. A follow-up workshop is scheduled for January 2025.

A regional workshop on missing migrants, refugees, and border management was organized in Rabat in December 2024 by the National Council of Human Rights and IOM. The event, attended by Moroccan Ministerial authorities and other government representatives from Guinea, Mali, Spain, Switzerland, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, also included UN entities such as UNHCR and OHCHR, other humanitarian agencies like ICRC and the Moroccan Red Crescent as well as the EU Commission and civil society partners.

Western Indian Ocean and Southern Africa

From 23 to 28 June 2024, UNHCR hosted government focal points from Indian Ocean countries for a week-long hybrid training and engagement sessions on asylum and migration issues. These sessions aimed to support the development of a national legal framework for protection. One of the sessions centered on strategies for addressing the movement of migrants and asylum-seekers using Madagascar as a transit route to reach Mayotte.

On 5 December 2024, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) and UNHCR organized a consultation workshop on the findings of a new joint-study on the mixed movement dynamics along the Western Indian Ocean Route in Pretoria, South Africa. During the event, MMC presented findings from the qualitative data collection in 2024. Regional government counterparts (Tanzania, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles and Mauritius) engaged in discussion on the implications of the data presented for mixed movement programming and policy development in the Western Indian Ocean Region.

UNHCR, 15 January 2025