

Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of

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Submitted by:

Sanctuary Beyond War



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Sanctuary Beyond War, is an advocacy project founded in August 2024 through the **Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Human Rights** John Lewis Young Leaders Fellowship, which is dedicated to protecting displaced civilians, refugees, and migrants while advocating for stricter regulations on weapon use in armed conflicts. The project promotes disarmament, peacebuilding, and human rights through organizing, education, and legislative advocacy. Its mission centers on engaging youth in issues related to disarmament, displacement, and migrant rights.

Key advocacy pillars include advancing a human rights-centered approach during conflicts, upholding International Humanitarian Law, and protecting those displaced by war. Sanctuary Beyond War has partnered with organizations like Amnesty International USA and Legacies of War to host educational workshops, mobilize youth activists, and advocate for policy changes, such as lifting the freeze on international aid and addressing arms exports and human rights. The project has distributed over 100 educational materials and engaged more than 115 college students in activism.

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I. Brief Overview of Submission

This submission highlights key human rights concerns in the United States, particularly regarding the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, the impact of U.S. foreign military policies on displacement, and the need for stronger legal protections for displaced populations. It also assesses the implementation of recommendations from previous UPR cycles, identifying areas where the U.S. has not met its commitments.

II. Human Rights Issues of Concern

A. U.S. Treatment of Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

1. Lack of Compliance with International Refugee Protections

The United States continues to fall short of its international obligations to protect refugees and uphold the right to seek asylum, as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and reaffirmed in its previous Universal Periodic Review (UPR) commitments.¹

Despite global recommendations, the U.S. extended the use of Title 42—a policy originally justified under public health concerns—to rapidly expel asylum seekers without allowing them to present their claims, violating the principle of non-refoulement.² Restrictive asylum policies, paired with systemic barriers to legal representation, have left many migrants and refugees without access to due process.

President Trump's January 2025 executive order (EO22) rescinded key immigration reforms from the Biden era, dismantling civil enforcement priorities, regional migration strategies, and integration programs, while disbanding the task force dedicated to reuniting separated families—leaving many permanently torn apart.³ These changes cleared the path for harsher enforcement policies that disproportionately harm asylum seekers, including children, survivors of gender-based violence, and long-term U.S. residents. Many are funneled through expedited removal without legal counsel, facing unjust deportations and prolonged detention. Family separation remains a cruel deterrent tactic, prioritizing punishment over protection and deepening the trauma experienced by displaced families.⁴

Many face deportation due to decades-old criminal records, often linked to over-policing in immigrant communities or outdated immigration laws that fail to consider rehabilitation, ties to U.S. citizen family members, or the risk of persecution in their countries of origin.⁵ These policies not only contravene international human rights standards but also reflect a broader pattern of criminalizing migration, perpetuating cycles of displacement, separation, and trauma for immigrant families.

2. Migrant Labor Exploitation and Forced Labor in Detention Centers

In the United States, immigration detention has evolved into a billion-dollar industry fueled by the systemic exploitation of migrant labor.⁶ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) operates the country's largest detention and supervised release system, detaining nearly 400,000 immigrants annually—more than double the number held by the Department of Justice. Immigration enforcement now receives more federal funding than all other major law enforcement agencies combined, yet basic human rights remain absent from its framework.⁷ On the U.S.-Mexico border, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) routinely denies asylum seekers due process, often returning them to dangerous conditions. Inside the U.S., Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) partners with local police, leading to racial profiling, surveillance, and the criminalization of immigrant communities.⁸

A critical but underreported dimension of this system is the normalization of forced labor under ICE's so-called "Voluntary Work Program".⁹ Although ICE's Performance-Based National Detention Standards (PBNDS) describe the program as optional and non-coercive, they are not legally enforceable and leave space for widespread abuse.¹⁰ Detainees—most of whom are awaiting civil immigration proceedings, not serving criminal sentences—are forced to perform essential labor such as cooking, cleaning, and facility maintenance for as little as \$1 a day.¹¹ This is not voluntary labor. This is economic coercion, often necessary for purchasing basic necessities like toothpaste or phone calls to family.

Through our investigative work, including testimonial interviews with detainees at Batavia Detention Center in Buffalo, New York, we have witnessed the compounding effects of detention trauma, worsened by egregious labor exploitation. One detainee we work closely with described being paid \$1 per day—an amount too low to even afford hygiene products—while being denied access to urgent medical care for a chronic condition. The lack of financial autonomy, adequate medical treatment, and mental health support created an environment of helplessness and despair. These are not isolated incidents—they are systemic features of a dehumanizing detention regime. Without access to healthcare, psychosocial support, or any pathway to financial stability, reintegration after release is not just difficult—it's nearly impossible. The long-term consequences of family separation and detention leave deep emotional scars that current policies do nothing to address.

Whether in publicly operated facilities like Batavia or private prisons such as Stewart Detention Center in Georgia, this pattern of abuse is widespread. Private prison corporations like GEO Group and CoreCivic profit enormously from ICE detention contracts—\$1.05 billion and \$552 million respectively in 2022 alone—while facing multiple federal lawsuits for violating the U.S. statute on forced labor (18 U.S.C. § 1589).¹² Meanwhile, Congress continues to approve billions in ICE detention funding—\$2.9 billion for FY 2023—despite documented human rights violations.¹³

B. U.S. Military Policies and Their Impact on Displacement

1. Role of U.S. Foreign Interventions in Creating Refugee Crises

U.S. foreign interventions have played a central role in generating some of the most significant refugee crises of the modern era, often destabilizing entire regions under the banner of promoting democracy or fighting terrorism. Rather than fostering stability, many U.S. military operations have fractured state structures, intensified violence, and displaced millions, fueling humanitarian disasters that stretch across generations and borders.

In the Middle East, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq offers a stark example. Justified under the pretext of eliminating weapons of mass destruction, the war resulted in the deaths of an estimated 500,000 people and the displacement of over 9.2 million civilians.¹⁴ The collapse of Iraq's governing institutions created a power vacuum that facilitated sectarian violence and the rise of extremist groups like ISIS.¹⁵ Religious and ethnic minorities—including Yazidis, Christians, Shias, and Turkmen—faced targeted persecution, with many forced to flee their homes. The displaced often ended up in overcrowded refugee camps or attempted to seek asylum abroad, where they faced restrictive immigration policies and criminalization of their migration.¹⁶

Similarly, in Afghanistan, U.S. military intervention following the September 11 attacks sparked over two decades of protracted conflict.¹⁷ The war devastated the economy, weakened social institutions, and displaced millions.¹⁸ The Taliban's return to power in 2021 only exacerbated the crisis, particularly for women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and ethnic minorities like the Hazara community, who face renewed threats under the current regime.¹⁹

Beyond the Middle East, the U.S.'s legacy of militarization in Southeast Asia has left deep scars. During the Vietnam War and its covert campaigns in Laos and Cambodia, U.S. forces carried out extensive bombing operations that displaced entire rural communities. In Laos alone, over 80 million unexploded bombs remain scattered across the countryside, still killing and injuring civilians decades later.²⁰ The psychological and physical toll of these remnants of war continues to undermine development, safety, and migration stability in the region.²¹ In Cambodia, U.S. military action contributed to the conditions that led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge, whose genocidal regime forced millions to flee, resulting in one of the largest refugee movements in Southeast Asia's history.²² Many of those displaced lived for years in refugee camps in Thailand or remained stateless, their legal status and dignity denied.²³

U.S. military interventions have not only displaced millions but also disrupted formal migration pathways, forcing refugees into dangerous and often deadly migration routes. The destruction of critical infrastructure—such as hospitals, schools, and housing—has made return impossible for many. Displaced populations are often left vulnerable to smuggling networks or violent border enforcement, facing criminalization instead of care. Host countries, influenced by U.S. foreign policy, frequently adopt restrictive asylum policies that exacerbate the crisis. The U.S. further

compounds this injustice by failing to provide adequate reparations, resettlement options, or post-war support.²⁴ Recent decisions, such as freezing USAID funding for vital recovery programs like demining and refugee resettlement, highlight a broader disregard for the long-term consequences of militarism and a lack of political will to prioritize peace over power.²⁵

2. Impact of U.S. Arms Trade on Human Rights Violations

The U.S. arms trade and increasing militarization of governance—both at home and abroad—represent a direct assault on human rights, transparency, and the core principles of democratic accountability. As military and security institutions gain disproportionate influence over decision-making, the role of civilian oversight is diminished. This troubling trend not only erodes democratic norms domestically but also has devastating ripple effects worldwide, especially in fragile states and regions already scarred by conflict.

Domestically, national security decisions are increasingly delegated to military institutions with limited checks and balances. The delegation of troop deployment decisions in Afghanistan to the Department of Defense marked a sharp departure from traditional executive oversight, exemplifying the growing normalization of military-first governance.²⁶ Simultaneously, law enforcement agencies across the U.S. have been equipped with military-grade weaponry, blurring the line between civil protection and wartime occupation.²⁷ This domestic militarization disproportionately harms Black, Brown, and immigrant communities—communities already over-policed and under-protected.

Internationally, U.S. militarization manifests through aggressive foreign policy, arms exports, and the global exportation of militarized policing. The U.S. has conducted 72 military interventions since 2000, many of which have destabilized regions, empowered extremist groups, and led to mass civilian displacement.²⁸ In countries like Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, U.S. interventions—often justified under the guise of promoting democracy or humanitarian protection—have instead exacerbated conflict, dismantled local institutions, and left enduring legacies of violence and trauma.

The situation is compounded by U.S. arms sales to repressive regimes. American-made weapons and tear gas have been used to crush democratic uprisings and suppress protest movements in countries such as Egypt, Colombia, and Peru.²⁹ Despite well-documented human rights abuses by allies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the U.S. continues to supply them with billions in weaponry, fueling ongoing conflicts in Yemen and elsewhere.³⁰ These arms sales call into question the U.S.'s stated commitments to human rights and peacebuilding and expose the hypocrisy at the core of its foreign policy.

Adding to the crisis is the outsized influence of private defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman.³¹ These companies spend millions lobbying for increased military spending, securing lucrative arms deals, and pushing policy in directions that prioritize profit over human lives. In 2023 alone, these corporations poured over \$6 million into lobbying

efforts aimed at expanding the arms trade and avoiding accountability. Their financial entanglement with lawmakers creates a revolving door of influence, shielding the military-industrial complex from meaningful reform.³²

III. Implementation of Previous UPR Recommendations

Assessment of Past Commitments

The United States has made only partial progress in fulfilling the recommendations from its previous Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle, particularly those related to immigration detention, asylum access, and the human rights implications of its foreign policy. Despite pledges³³ to reduce reliance on detention and ensure compliance with international refugee law, the U.S. has yet to adopt a comprehensive federal strategy to protect the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and those displaced by U.S.-linked conflict. Efforts remain fragmented across federal agencies, with little transparency or coordination. While some administrative changes have occurred, they have been neither sufficient nor sustainable, failing to reverse the long-standing harm caused by punitive immigration practices and the global consequences of U.S. militarization.

Areas of Non-Implementation

Detention conditions across the country continue to fall far below international human rights standards. Migrants—including children, LGBTQ+ individuals, and survivors of trauma—remain confined in facilities plagued by overcrowding, medical neglect, labor exploitation, and psychological abuse. These issues have persisted despite explicit UPR recommendations calling for more humane and non-carceral alternatives. Additionally, the United States has made no meaningful progress in ensuring transparency or accountability for its arms exports, many of which have fueled violence in regions with ongoing human rights violations. U.S.-made weapons continue to be transferred to governments involved in extrajudicial killings, forced displacement, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. This ongoing disregard for the downstream impact of U.S. foreign policy undermines global human rights norms and weakens the credibility of U.S. commitments on peace and justice.

Recommendations

To fulfill its human rights obligations, the U.S. must take immediate steps to fully implement the asylum and immigration detention reforms outlined in previous UPR cycles. This includes ending the arbitrary and prolonged detention of migrants, expanding access to legal representation, and investing in community-based alternatives that respect dignity and due process. Further, the United States must enact enforceable mechanisms that prevent arms transfers to human rights-abusing regimes and align its foreign policy decisions with the core principles of international humanitarian law. A whole-of-government approach is urgently needed—one that moves beyond rhetorical commitments and demonstrates a genuine shift toward protecting displaced communities, upholding refugee protections, and promoting accountability for the global impacts of U.S. policies.

IV. Recommendations

Key Recommendations

1. Implement robust vetting and accountability mechanisms for U.S. arms transfers, ensuring they undergo transparent and independent human rights risk assessments in line with international humanitarian law, and are suspended or denied if likely to contribute to civilian harm or conflict escalation. UN agencies such as the Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and OHCHR should assist in monitoring compliance.
2. Expand U.S. refugee resettlement programs, particularly for populations displaced by U.S. military operations, in partnership with UNHCR. Prioritize resettlement and humanitarian parole for vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors, LGBTQ+ refugees, and survivors of gender-based violence and political persecution.
3. Increase U.S. funding to humanitarian aid and reparations programs through UN agencies such as UNDP, UNICEF, and IOM, specifically targeting communities severely affected by U.S. foreign policy. Prioritize long-term development and psychosocial support for displaced families and war-impacted populations.
4. Abolish immigration detention for asylum seekers and work with UNHCR and IOM to implement rights-based, community-centered alternatives to detention that uphold international refugee law and protect the dignity and safety of migrants.
5. Guarantee universal access to legal representation for asylum seekers, especially those in expedited removal proceedings. Collaborate with OHCHR and civil society to ensure due process, protection from refoulement, and adjudication systems that are transparent, fair, and consistent with international human rights obligations.
6. Establish independent oversight mechanisms for all immigration detention facilities in the U.S., in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), to monitor conditions, prevent abuse, and ensure compliance with international labor and human rights laws.
7. Support the creation of a global monitoring initiative on forced labor in immigration detention, led by the ILO in coordination with the OHCHR and relevant Special Rapporteurs. This initiative should track state compliance, document labor exploitation, and recommend enforceable international standards to eliminate forced labor in all forms of immigration-related detention.

Commitment to Continued Monitoring and Advocacy

At Sanctuary Beyond War (SBW), we are committed to continuously monitoring the human rights situation in the U.S. and globally, ensuring that the rights of displaced populations are protected. We will hold the U.S. government accountable for its policies that fuel displacement and undermine international protections. Through ongoing advocacy, we will press for stronger legal frameworks, better enforcement of refugee rights, and comprehensive reforms to U.S. detention and asylum practices. We will continue collaborating with organizations such as

Amnesty International USA and Legacies of War on proposing recommendations and drafting policy memos to U.S lawmakers, government officials and international stakeholders. Currently, Sanctuary Beyond War is drafting a policy memo and engaging with U.S members of congress sitting on the Arms Exports Task Force to provide key recommendations on how arm transfer policies can better safeguard human rights.

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