

European ombudspersons for children raise alarm: unacceptable safety risks for children on the move

Amsterdam, 25 January 2016 - Refugee children on the move face major safety risks during their journey to and through Europe. These risks include death, illness, trafficking, separation from parents, extortion by smugglers and exploitation and abuse. European countries and institutions are failing to protect children on the move. This is concluded by the Taskforce Children on the Move, formed by the European Network of Commissioners and Ombudspersons for children (ENOC).

The European ombudspersons, represented by ENOC chairman Marc Dullaert, call upon European leaders to give the highest priority to the safety of children. At her request, Vera Jourova, the EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, will be presented the report by Marc Dullaert on Monday afternoon. Separately, in an open letter the ombudspersons jointly call upon the European leaders Jean-Claude Juncker, Donald Tusk, Martin Schulz and other senior representatives of the European Union to make refugee children their highest priority. The individual ombudspersons will on Monday also present the report to governments of their respective countries.

During 2015 the number of children coming to Europe to seek international protection has increased vastly. For 2015 there are still major gaps in the information provided by Eurostat, but at least 337,000 children are registered as asylum seekers, being 29% of all asylum seekers. According to UNHCR, 16% of all migrants crossing the Mediterranean in June were children, whereas by December the percentage of children arriving in Europe had risen to 35%.

Major Risks for children on the move:

- The journey across the Mediterranean Sea is dangerous for children – approximately 30% of all migrants who die during the crossing are children. Children arrive wet and cold, and many are at risk of hypothermia, leading to myriad illnesses, including pneumonia. Volunteers working at the shores in Greece are reporting that children die upon arrival due to hypothermia. There is a lack of coordination and immediate support at the shores in Greece. In Lesbos migrants have to walk 70 km to the reception centre, although a number of NGO's provide transport for at least children and families.
- Transit centres along the Western Balkan route are not adequately equipped for the winter season and lack basic sanitation facilities. According to the UNHCR, in mid-December depending on the country only 22% to 45% of available accommodation had been "winterized".
- Children risk becoming separated from their parents during the journey, mainly at chaotic border controls. Some children face sexual abuse and violence at the transit centres. Many children, both unaccompanied children and children travelling with their families, are extorted by smugglers, including through threats aimed at family members still in the country of origin or refugee camps.
- Unaccompanied children face an increased risk of becoming victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Many unaccompanied children do not want to disclose to the authorities that they are children, as they fear that being placed in detention will make it impossible for them to continue their journey to northern Europe.
- Unfortunately, the risks for children on the move do not stop when they reach the country of destination. Some states do not have a system for legal guardianship for unaccompanied children, leaving these children without secure adult protection. In other countries the appointment of a legal guardian takes too long. There are reports from various countries of violent actions by locals targeting refugee children, but also of violence among child refugees. The low proportion of girls arriving makes them a particularly vulnerable group. Many countries also report children going missing from the reception centres, or falling victim to trafficking or exploitation. Many countries allow children to be placed in detention, in some cases even for several months, in facilities that are rarely designed to be child-friendly.

Call for action

An analysis of the European response to the increased influx of migrants reveals that Europe is failing to address these issues. While border control and other measures to restrict immigration are at the top of the agenda for the EU as well as individual countries, no actions to protect children are taken. The EU Agenda for Migration, the guideline used by the EU institutions and Member States to handle the influx, mentions only a single action regarding children, which is placed in a footnote.

Recommendations

- The ombudspersons for Children call upon the European Commission to urgently develop a comprehensive EU action plan for all children in migration. Europe as a whole needs to step up and take responsibility for its international commitments towards children.
- The Children's Ombudspersons advise the European Leaders to give priority to children in the implementation of the relocation scheme in order to prevent the risks children face while en route through Europe. The European Commission agreed to relocate 160,000 individuals applying for international protection, mainly from Italy and Greece to other member states. This should include both unaccompanied children and children travelling with their families.
- The ombudspersons also recommend swift improvements to the conditions of the reception and transit centres on the route through Europe. The centres must be heated, have warm water, blankets and warm clothes. Child-friendly spaces should be set up and for those staying overnight, there should be separate sleeping areas for men and women and children.
- The ombudspersons recommend that the European leaders make better use of legal opportunities to enter the EU. This includes, for example, increasing the possibilities for family reunification, increasing the resettlement quotas and issuing humanitarian visas.
- A child rights perspective should be an integral part of financial assistance to third countries that facilitate aid to refugees, particularly the aid provided by the EU to Turkey in accordance with the action plan agreed on 15 October and 29 November 2015. This should include the right to education for all children, child-friendly spaces in refugee camps and having child protection systems in place.

About ENOC

The Taskforce represents 41 European Ombudspersons and Commissioners for Children based in 33 countries. Marc Dullaert, the Netherlands' Ombudsman for Children, leads the taskforce in his capacity as the chairman of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children. The ombudspersons for children of Flanders, Croatia, England, Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland, Catalonia and Sweden are also members of the Taskforce.

- End of press release -

The full report and the open letter to the EU dignitaries is available for download on ENOC's website: <https://www.crin.org/en/enoc>. If you would like to receive these documents before Monday 25 January at 2 PM CET, please contact one of the PR officers listed below.

ENOC Chairman Marc Dullaert will present the report to Vera Jourova, the EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, at 5.30 PM CET. Media who would like to attend the press conference at 2 PM, the presentation at 5.30 PM or both, are asked to register with one of the PR officers below:

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