REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE



The refugee and migrant crisis in Europe – whether off its coasts, on its shores, or along its roadsides – is a crisis for children. One in every four asylum seekers in Europe so far this year has been a child. A total of 110,000 children sought asylum between January and July – an average of over 18,000 children every month. The needs, protection and best interests of each one of those children should always come first.

Behind those numbers are stories of enormous suffering. Most children have undertaken perilous journeys, exposed to the elements and the threat of smugglers. Children tell us they are exhausted and have trouble sleeping. Young children are confused about where they are going. Children say they are cold at night or stuck in wet clothes for hours after it rains. They are worried they will be arrested or sent back to their countries of origin. Most children talk about missing their homes and playing with their friends. They hope to go to school again soon and sleep in a bed.

A significant number of children are travelling unaccompanied or have become separated from their families on the move. Last year, 25,000 unaccompanied children arrived in Europe. This year, estimates based on limited data are that as many as 12,000 unaccompanied children may have come to Europe so far – a conservative estimate.

The human face of conflict

As if their current plight were not distressing enough, the vast majority of children currently seeking refuge in Europe are escaping horrors we can only imagine – half of those arriving in Europe across the Mediterranean so far this year are Syrians.

Over 2 million Syrian children have crossed the borders and now live as refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. But as the conflict continues, the sense of lost opportunity and desperation to find a better future for their children are encouraging many families to seek sanctuary further afield. The human face of that conflict is now arriving on Europe's shores.

UNICEF's response

Beyond UNICEF's deep involvement in responding to the crises in Syria and neighbouring countries, UNICEF is active in supporting migrant and refugee children in European countries where it has existing programmes. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, we have provided equipment at the main reception centre to improve access to water. Some child-friendly centres have also been established. In its first two weeks of operation, some 1,200 children had come to the first centre.

In neighbouring Serbia, UNICEF has also established a child friendly space, equipped with educational materials and toys. Parents will be provided guidance on child health and nutrition, hygiene and safety issues. Additional child friendly spaces are planned for Belgrade and Kanjiza, near the Hungarian border.

Looking ahead
UNICEF estimates that as many as 320,000 refugee and migrant women and children in Europe could be in need of assistance over the next six months. Our commitment is to reach as many as we can, with our partners.

UNICEF's action plan focuses on countries with the greatest number of children on the move, with scaled up interventions in Serbia and the fYR Macedonia, and identifying entry points for support in Greece, Italy, Hungary and Austria; support in countries of eventual destination such as Germany; and countries where new refugee and migrant movements could appear.

In countries where children are on the move but without a UNICEF country programme, UNICEF will design country specific action plans that can meet gaps in care and support for children. Technical support will be provided to governments and partners as requested, drawing on a team of UNICEF experts in emergency coordination, child protection, water, sanitation and hygiene, education, policy guidance and supply and logistics.

In countries of destination in Europe, working in coordination with our National Committees, UNICEF will look at areas where national capacity may benefit from our additional support – for example, assistance to children in transit centres, support to determine the best interests of children and the particular needs of unaccompanied minors.

UNICEF will also monitor refugee and migrant movements in countries where new patterns may emerge – such as Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Austria – where we will support emergency preparedness and identify where we can add value to the work of partners.

Putting children first
UNICEF and our National Committees have been working closely with European Member States to urge concerted efforts that prioritise the best interests and wellbeing of refugee and migrant children. These efforts include advocacy for:

- Continued search and rescue operations on sea and on land.
- Adequately resourced services - family tracing and reunification, healthcare, safe places for learning and play, psychological 'first aid' and counselling to address the traumas they have experienced on their journey, and access to appropriate social services.
- Undertaking asylum procedures with the best interests of the child as a priority.
- Avoiding the use of detention for children, unless on an exceptional basis as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time, and not to apply criminal law against refugee and migrant children simply for being refugees and migrants.

Tackling underlying causes
If we do not address the root causes of the crisis in Syria and in neighbouring countries, the situation will only worsen. UNICEF continues to support programmes inside Syria – where more than 3 million children are internally displaced – and in neighbouring countries hosting the majority of refugees. Parents say they risk the dangerous journey to Europe because they have no other option, and see no future for their children where they are. So as we address immediate needs of children for healthcare, safe water and adequate nutrition, UNICEF, for example through the No Lost Generation initiative, will continue efforts to reinforce the hopes and aspirations of those who do remain, through programmes on education, child protection and adolescent engagement. We also continue to make every effort to address the situations in other countries of origin such as Nigeria and Eritrea, where conflicts have pushed so many children to be on the move.