



Refugee crisis in Europe and rights of children

Statement from ECPAT – leading child rights network of organisations fighting for the fundamental rights of children everywhere to be protected.

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Recent crises and war in several countries, including Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea among others, have led to tens of thousands of refugees arriving in the European Union via southern Europe and across the Mediterranean Sea. Among them are a significant number of children, some of whom are separated from their families.

All of these children are extremely vulnerable to a range of abuses and may arrive already as victims of trafficking. It is vital that these children are identified early and afforded the protection they need to prevent further abuse and to stop them going missing. Other children arriving in Europe, with or without their families, are also extremely vulnerable to exploitation and require protection to prevent this risk becoming a reality.

In the face of this huge crisis, the importance for a robust child protection response cannot be underestimated. Whether it is criminal records checks for volunteers working with refugees or resourcing investigations to dismantle trafficking groups, whether organised or not, the necessary levels of child protection at all stages must not be diluted. The need to maintain and uphold children's rights and child protection laws is more important now than ever in order to create a protective environment for these children on arrival, as well as working to find durable solutions for each and every one of them.

Key reports by the Fundamental Rights Agency on guardianship for children deprived of parental care in the EU highlight the need for functioning guardianship systems in order to protect children who are victims of trafficking or those who are at risk of exploitation – in line with the EU's Strategy *Towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings 2012-2016*. It acknowledges the vulnerability of these children and identifies guardianship systems as an effective measure to identify victims and to prevent abuse. Yet the way in which individual Member States enforce child protection laws and operate systems of guardianship vary massively, which may mean children are put at risk.

ECPAT urges the European Commission to ensure all children affected in the refugee crisis are prioritised and protected effectively by a well-planned and resourced strategic response. Protection systems in all Member States and neighbouring countries must be consistent and work together, cross-border, to safeguard children. The European Commission must lead the way in promoting the rights of refugee and migrant children who are arriving or who are already in Europe, ensuring that - despite the challenges they face in their young lives - they are able to exercise their rights and live their lives free from the threat of abuse.

Signatories to the statement: ECPAT International, Children's Human Rights Center of Albania, Defence for Children-ECPAT Netherlands, ECPAT Austria, ECPAT Belgium, ECPAT France, ECPAT Luxembourg, ECPAT Sweden, ECPAT UK, FAPMI-ECPAT Spain, Neglected Children's Society-ECPAT Bulgaria, Nobody's Children Foundation.