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Number of unaccompanied children crossing deadly Central Mediterranean Sea migration route to Italy increases by 60 per cent – UNICEF

Deaths and disappearances on the Central Mediterranean route tripled this summer compared to last

GENEVA/ROME – More than 11,600 children crossed the Central Mediterranean Sea to Italy without their parents or legal guardians between January and mid-September 2023. This is an increase of 60 per cent compared to the same period last year, where around 7,200 unaccompanied or separated children made the perilous crossing.

Lampedusa, a small island in the south of Italy is often the first port of call for people seeking asylum, safety and opportunities in Europe. The number of arrivals peaked this month with 4,800 people arriving on a single day.

Children who undertake these harrowing journeys alone are often placed in overcrowded inflatable dinghies or shoddy wooden fishing boats unsuitable for poor weather conditions. Some are placed in the hold of the ship, some on iron barges – particularly dangerous for navigation. The lack of regionwide, coordinated and adequate search and rescue capacities and cooperation at sea on disembarkation compound the dangers children face when crossing.

War, conflict, violence and poverty are among the main drivers for children fleeing their home countries alone. Evidence shows that unaccompanied children are at risk of exploitation and abuse on every step of their journeys, with girls and children from sub-Saharan Africa the most likely to suffer abuse.

Between June and August this year, at least 990 people including children died or disappeared as they attempted to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea, triple the number compared to the same period last summer when at least 334 people lost their lives. Many shipwrecks leave no survivors, and many go unrecorded, making the true number of casualties likely much higher.

Children who survive their journeys are first held in centres known as hotspots before being transferred to reception facilities that are often closed and limit movement. More than 21,700 unaccompanied children across Italy are currently in such facilities, up from 17,700 a year ago.

“The Mediterranean Sea has become a cemetery for children and their futures. The devastating toll on children seeking asylum and safety in Europe is a result of policy choices and a broken migration system,” said Regina De Dominicis, UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia and Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe. “The adoption of a Europe-wide response to supporting children and families seeking asylum and safety and a sustained increase in international aid to support countries faced by multiple crises are desperately needed to prevent more children suffering.”

In line with international law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF calls on governments to provide safer and legal pathways for seeking asylum; ensure children are not held in closed facilities; strengthen national child protection systems to better protect children migrating; coordinate search and rescue operations and ensure disembarkation to places of safety.

The ongoing debate between the European Parliament and the EU Member States on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum presents an immediate opportunity to affirm and uphold key child protection principles and develop policies that address the multiple infringements of children's rights in countries of departure, in transit and on arrival.

UNICEF continues its work to support member states in strengthening systems and support in communities of origin, prevent and mitigate risks children face as they move and provide support and inclusive services to all children, regardless of their or their parents' legal status.

In Lampedusa, UNICEF provides essential protection services including mental health and psychosocial support and access to information and referral to specialized services. This work is supported by the European Commission's Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs (HOME) as part of the PROTECT project.

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Notes to editors

Multimedia assets will be made available here (from 27 September 2023): <https://weshare.unicef.org/Package/2AM408LBXYJ1>

- Data on people who have died or disappeared attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea migration route are from IOM's Missing Migrants Project.
- Data on the number of unaccompanied and separated children are from the Government of Italy's Ministry of Interior
- Data on the number of unaccompanied and separated children in reception centres are from the Government of Italy's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

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