



# Danger every step of the way

A harrowing journey to Europe for refugee and migrant children

# RISKING IT ALL

They risk detention, rape, forced labour, beatings or death. Yet, tens of thousands of children, many of them unaccompanied or separated, are making the dangerous refugee and migrant journey in the hope of finding safety or a better life in Europe. They are fleeing brutal violence, abject poverty, drought, forced early marriage, untold hardship or lack of prospects and hope in dozens of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

*"We should never forget what is driving so many families to risk so much in the hope of gaining sanctuary in Europe. And we should never forget that children on the move are first and foremost children, who bear no responsibility for their plight, and have every right to a better life," said Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe*

From the brutal five-year conflict in Syria or the parched earth of Somalia, to rickety boats and squalid makeshift camps, every step of the journey is fraught with danger, all the more so for the nearly one in four children travelling without a parent or a guardian.<sup>1</sup>

## The Central Mediterranean route

In recent weeks, the crossing from North Africa to Italy has become the busiest. It is also the deadliest. The death toll rose to 2,427 between January 1 and June 5, 2016, as compared with 1,786 in the first six months of 2015.<sup>2</sup>

And the number of unaccompanied children making the notoriously dangerous Central Mediterranean crossing more than doubled to over 7,000 in the first five months of 2016 as compared with the same period in 2015, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Unaccompanied children made up over 92 per cent of the 7,567 children who crossed by sea to Italy between January 1 and May 31, 2016.

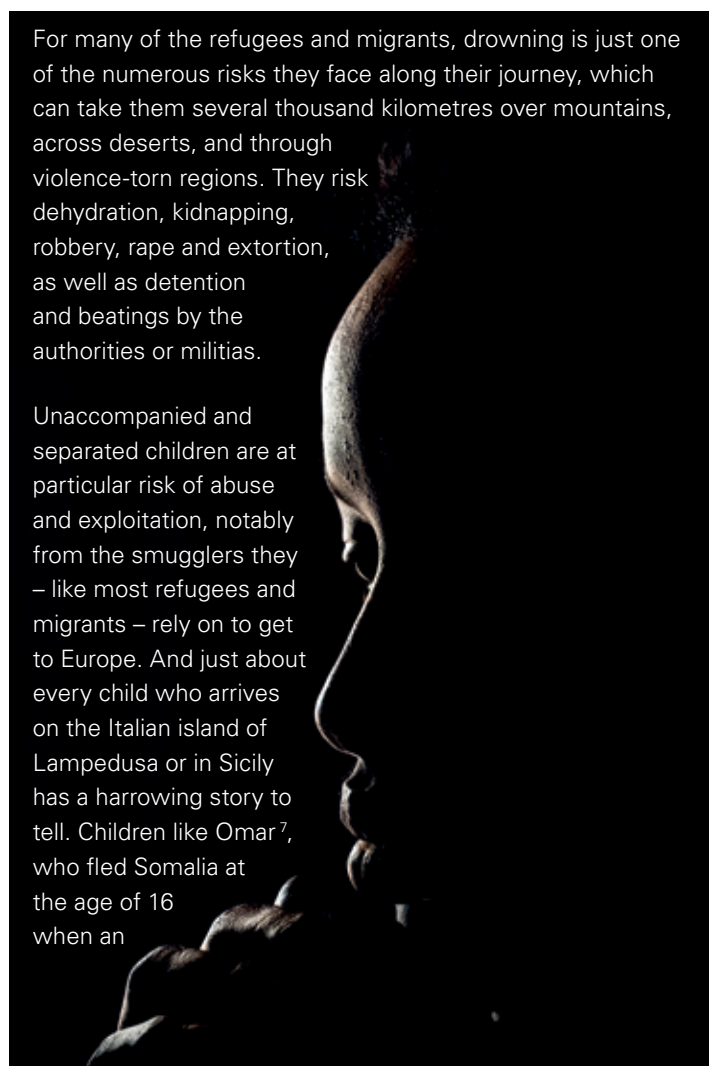
In large part because of the huge risks and hardships involved, comparatively few families take this route, with adult men making up 70 per cent of the approximately 28,000 arrivals in that period.<sup>3</sup>

Smugglers typically cram people aboard unseaworthy fishing boats or rubber dinghies with unreliable engines and, often, insufficient fuel to reach Europe. There have been numerous reports of smugglers abandoning ship at the limits of Libyan territorial waters – casting their human cargo adrift – in order to avoid arrest by European security forces.

And, with the summer cross-Mediterranean migration season upon us, the numbers may well increase in the coming months. There are currently almost 235,000 refugees and migrants in Libya<sup>4</sup> and some 956,000 in the Sahel countries,<sup>5</sup> many – if not most – of them hoping to make their way to Europe. In the last week of May 2016 alone, a total of more than 16,500 were recorded as heading to Libya from Agadez, a major migrant thoroughfare in Niger.<sup>6</sup>

For many of the refugees and migrants, drowning is just one of the numerous risks they face along their journey, which can take them several thousand kilometres over mountains, across deserts, and through violence-torn regions. They risk dehydration, kidnapping, robbery, rape and extortion, as well as detention and beatings by the authorities or militias.

Unaccompanied and separated children are at particular risk of abuse and exploitation, notably from the smugglers they – like most refugees and migrants – rely on to get to Europe. And just about every child who arrives on the Italian island of Lampedusa or in Sicily has a harrowing story to tell. Children like Omar<sup>7</sup>, who fled Somalia at the age of 16 when an



1 Eurostat data retrieved 7 June, 2016

2 IOM 7 June, 2016

3 IOM Mixed Migration flows in the Mediterranean and beyond, 19 May 2016

4 IOM DTM Libya March-April 2016

5 OCHA The Sahel Converging Challenges Compounding pressures Jan 2016 p. 5

6 IOM Niger flow monitoring points 24-30 May 2016

7 Name has been changed to protect his identity.

armed group threatened to kill him because he refused to join their ranks. When he eventually reached Libya, the smugglers demanded more money, detained him and beat him, until his family sent him the funds. He says he can barely remember the boat ride, but does recall seeing people drown as the boat started sinking, and then the welcome sight of an Italian rescue ship.

Some migrants, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa, use a "pay-as-you-go" system, often stopping to work for a few days, weeks or months along the way to pay the smugglers. These migrants are more likely to become stranded and exposed to abuse.

"If you try to run they shoot you and you die. If you stop working, they beat you. It was just like the slave trade," Aimamo, 16, said of the farm in Libya where he and his twin brother worked for two months to pay the smugglers. "Once I was just resting for five minutes, and a man beat me with a cane. After working, they lock you inside." When they first arrived in Libya – after a lengthy journey from The Gambia through Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – the two brothers said they were arrested and beaten before one of the smugglers secured their release.

There is strong evidence that the migration crisis has been exploited by criminal human trafficking networks to target the most vulnerable, in particular women and children. There is concern over a sharp increase in Nigerian women and girls leaving Libya for Italy, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimating 80 per cent of them are victims of trafficking.<sup>9</sup>

*"It is so unfair for the kids who have fled horrible situations of war or violence to then have to endure these harrowing journeys," said Poirier.*

Italian social workers claim that both girls and boys are sexually assaulted and forced into prostitution while in Libya, and that some of the girls were pregnant when they arrived in Italy, having been raped.

But because of the illicit nature of human smuggling operations, there are no reliable figures to show how many of the refugees and migrants die, disappear into forced labour or prostitution, or linger in detention.



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## The Eastern Mediterranean route

Last year, the vast majority of refugees and migrants arriving at Europe's shores were Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis, who would travel through Turkey, and then on to Greece by boat. But the numbers plunged dramatically following border closures in the Balkans in March 2016 and the introduction in the same month of the Turkey-EU agreement to send back refugees and migrants to Turkey.

In October 2015, some days saw as many as 7,000 refugees and migrants land on Greek shores. The daily average was down to 47 in May 2016.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, thousands of children and families have been stranded, not knowing whether they'll be turned back or will eventually be able to move on. By June 1, 2016, a total of almost 58,000 refugees and migrants were stranded, most in Greece and the others in Hungary and Balkan countries.<sup>10</sup> Many nonetheless continue the journey with the help of smugglers, which puts them at heightened risk.

Many children, especially those who are unaccompanied or separated, have fallen between the cracks of asylum systems that are overstretched, slow and uneven. All too often children are held behind bars – in detention facilities or in police custody – because of a lack of space in child protection centres and limited capacity for identifying alternative solutions. Procedures to determine a child's asylum request are typically complex and lengthy – up to two years in some countries – and processes for family reunification can be equally slow. As a result, children

*“Children's lives are put on hold for what to them would seem like an eternity; their aspirations to learn, their hopes for the future frozen in limbo,” said Poirier.*

often spend long periods of time in a social welfare centre, uncertain of what their future holds, and many have been out of school for months or even years.

Fears of being prevented from continuing the journey, mistrust in the authorities or the long wait for cases to be processed, have led many of the unaccompanied children to avoid registering, or to run away from reception centres.

There is no clear way of accounting for all of the almost 96,000 unaccompanied minors who applied for asylum in Europe in 2015 – out of almost 406,000 children and a total of nearly 1.4 million applicants<sup>11</sup> – and there are fears some may have fallen prey to criminal gangs.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR Greece data snapshot 5 June 2016

<sup>10</sup> IOM Migration Flows Europe retrieved June 8, 2016

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat data retrieved June 7, 2016

# SETTLING DOWN

For children who finally reach their destination, a new, often difficult journey begins, one of adaptation and integration – or possibly one of repatriation if their asylum request is rejected.

The sheer scale of the crisis has strained welfare systems in host countries despite efforts at all levels in society to provide support. For example, a December 2015 assessment by the German Government and UNICEF of children who arrived in Germany with their families has shown that children are vulnerable to becoming victims of violence, abuse and exploitation, particularly in reception and temporary accommodation centres. As they wait for their applications to be processed – which can take months – refugees and migrants are often housed in sports halls, former military barracks or other temporary shelters. Children in these centres do not always have access to mainstream schooling, adequate psychosocial support or regular recreational activities.

Numerous ordinary people have opened their hearts – and sometimes their homes – but the newcomers have also had to contend with xenophobic attacks, hate speech and stigmatization. This can lead to a feeling of alienation and social exclusion, particularly among children already struggling with the local language and culture. In Germany, federal police reported 45 arson attacks on refugee shelters between January and mid-May 2016.

*“Children on the move have endured war, persecution, deprivation and terrible journeys. Even when they have reached the relative safety of their destination, they still need protection, education, healthcare and counselling. We must be by their side,” said Poirier.*

## Children must be protected

Hundreds of thousands of refugee and migrant children have made their way to Europe and many more are on the move right now. They all face high risks at every step of the journey – death, rape, attacks, detention, forced labour. Every one of these children is in need of protection and entitled to the rights guaranteed under the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). **Every country – those they leave, those they cross and those in which they seek asylum—has a duty to protect them.** In the European Union, policy and legislative reform should be used to create more opportunities for safe, legal and

*“We must never lose sight of the human nature of this crisis. And we should never lose sight of the children caught up in it. Protecting them is a must,” said Poirier.*

regular channels for refugees and migrants, strengthening legal safeguards for children and improving procedures to reunite children with family members. Existing family reunification rules should be interpreted broadly and more flexibly to respond to the humanitarian needs of children.

Around the world, almost one in 10 children live in countries and areas affected by armed conflicts, and more than 400 million live in extreme poverty. **Unless these drivers of migration are addressed as a global priority, they will lead to a never-ending movement of children in search of a better life.** Investing in children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable, must be a priority in order to tackle the cycle of poverty and conflict that is driving so many to flee their homes.

These are challenges we must all meet.

## UNICEF’s seven point plan for refugee and migrant children

1. Children must be protected against trafficking and exploitation.
2. Under no circumstances should children be locked up just because they are refugees or migrants.
3. Children must not be sent back to their home countries if they face harm or death.
4. Children must be given access to services such as health and education.
5. Unaccompanied or separated children must be kept safe. Family reunification is often the best way to do this.
6. The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in any decision concerning that child.
7. Safe and sustainable legal global pathways for migration must be established.

## KEY PRINCIPLES

- The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in any decision concerning that child. Regardless of their migration status, children are children. Their rights are enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which all countries in Europe are parties.
- Any application by a child for asylum or other forms of humanitarian protection, should be considered on its own merits – even when children apply with their parents -- and in an age- and gender-sensitive manner. Processing children's asylum applications should be prioritized, and transfer of asylum claims should be processed within three months. The right to appeal the decision should be guaranteed, and children should be allowed to remain in Europe and receive legal assistance during the process.
- No child should be detained as a result of their or their parents' or guardians' migration status. Alternatives to detention or closed facilities – such as foster care, supervised independent living and reporting obligations - must be implemented urgently.
- The 'non-refoulement' principle prohibits returning a person to a country where he or she may face persecution and serious human rights violations. Under this principle, children cannot be returned if they face risks such as torture, detention, forced recruitment, early marriage, FGM, trafficking or exploitation. Additional precautions must be taken, looking not just at the risks, but also at the child's best interests and whether the conditions are in place for the child's healthy development.
- Every effort should be made to reunite unaccompanied children with their families in Europe when it is in the child's best interests, taking into account that for many of these children family ties go beyond European law's narrow definition. While they are unaccompanied or separated, these children should have access to a professional guardian to look after their well-being, legal representation and best interests.
- Every child should have access to basic services, including healthcare, sanitation and education, and be protected against trafficking and exploitation in line with international and European laws.

## WHAT UNICEF IS DOING?

UNICEF is active in all the countries refugees and migrants are leaving, working to safeguard children from the brutality of conflict, advocating to address inequalities, and working to give a fair chance in life to every child, especially the most disadvantaged. It provides lifesaving services to children, such as water and sanitation and health care, as well as education and child protection.

UNICEF is responding to the crisis through a combination of advocacy, technical assistance to governments, capacity building and delivery of services in Turkey, Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Germany, and has formalized agreements to extend its operational support to children and women in Italy.

Among others, UNICEF

- Works with governments and partners, including the European Union, to improve standards, child protection systems, policies and practices for the best interests of children to be the single overriding principle in handling complex child protection cases.
- Has provided support for children and families along the routes to their final destinations. It set up mother and child corners and child friendly spaces where children on





the move can have an opportunity to rest, play, receive psychosocial support, access specialized child protection services and benefit from health referrals. Following the EU-Turkey border agreement and border closures, the focus in Greece and the Balkans has shifted to programmes for stranded populations with longer-term needs, such as health, nutrition and education.

- Has helped train first responders, social workers and government counterparts in dealing with child protection issues.
- Supports the provision of supplies, including shelter materials, clothes, age appropriate foods and baby cribs.
- Advocates for the promotion and the protection of the rights of all refugee and migrant children without discrimination on the basis of their, or their parents', migration status.
- Monitors the child rights' situation and the impact of new policies and practices.
- Works with host communities to address xenophobia and promote social inclusion.

## FACTS AT A GLANCE

### Arrivals by sea in 2015:

1,015,078,

including 265,388 children.

Arrivals by sea Jan. 1 to June 4, 2016

206,199,

of which 35 per cent are children.<sup>12</sup>



### Asylum applications in 2015 in Europe:

Total: 1,392,655.

Children: 405,955,

including unaccompanied children:

95,970.<sup>13</sup>

### Asylum applications in Europe Jan-Apr 2016:

Total 348,580.

Children: 95,080.<sup>14</sup>



### Fatalities at sea in 2015:

Central Mediterranean 2,892;

Eastern Mediterranean: 806,

Western Mediterranean: 72.<sup>15</sup>

### Fatalities at sea Jan-May 2016:

Central Mediterranean: 2,061,

Eastern Mediterranean: 376,

Western Mediterranean: 6.<sup>16</sup>



<sup>12</sup> UNHCR

<sup>13</sup> Eurostat data retrieved 7 June, 2016

<sup>14</sup> Eurostat data retrieved 7 June, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Missing Migrant Project data of missing migrants retrieved 27 May 2016

<sup>16</sup> IOM June 3, 2016

## Some of the countries of origin of refugees and migrants

### Syria

Five years of conflict have taken a heavy toll on children. An estimated 8.4 million children - more than 80 per cent of Syria's child population – are affected, either inside the country or as refugees in neighbouring countries. As many as 3.7 million Syrian children were born since the conflict started five years ago, their lives shaped by violence, fear and displacement. Children as young as seven are recruited by armed forces and groups. More than 15,500 unaccompanied and separated children have crossed Syria's borders. UNICEF estimates that more than 2.1 million children inside Syria, and 700,000 in neighbouring countries, are out-of-school.

### Afghanistan

Some 35 years of protracted conflict, combined with natural disasters, have severely affected the survival and livelihood of Afghans, particularly children and women. More than 8 million people are estimated to be affected by the conflict, including 4.6 million children. In 2015, more than 2,800 children were killed or injured in the violence – about a quarter of all civilian casualties. Children were also being recruited, mainly by armed groups, but also by the police and the army.<sup>17</sup> Many children in areas not controlled by the government lack access to basic health services, while treatment coverage for chronic malnutrition is only 30 per cent.

### Iraq

Years of violence and conflict have left about 10 million Iraqis – a third of the total population – in need of humanitarian assistance. Over half of them are children. Nearly 3.2 million people are internally displaced, and many need shelter, food, fuel, medical services and access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities. As violence continues to escalate in the country, there have been reports of mass executions, gender-based violence including rape and torture, and use of children as human shields.

17 <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Afghanistan-Fact-Sheet-May-2016.pdf>



## Nigeria

Close to half the population live in poverty,<sup>18</sup> the vast majority in the north of the country. Nigeria is home to the largest number of child brides in Africa, with 23 million girls and women who were married in childhood. The Boko Haram insurgency has caused over 2.3 million people to flee their homes in Nigeria and neighbouring countries, including at least 1.3 million children. Children are being killed, maimed and abducted. In 2015, 44 children, most of them girls, were used in suicide attacks in Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Boys are forced to attack their own families to demonstrate their loyalty to Boko Haram, while girls are exposed to severe abuse including sexual violence and forced marriage to insurgents. Over 670,000 children are still deprived of education. There have also been reports that children have been detained as a result of counter-terrorism operations.

## Somalia

More than two decades of conflict, insecurity and drought have left 4.9 million people – out of an almost 11 million population – in need of humanitarian and livelihood assistance. Most are in conflict-ridden central and southern Somalia, where insecurity impedes humanitarian access. In the north, drought has left communities on the brink. More than 300,000 children under the age of five are acutely malnourished, as many as 5,000 children and youth could currently be with armed groups, and 1.7 million children are out of school. More than 2 million Somalis remain displaced in the region, including over 1.1 million in their own country and more than 967,000 as refugees in neighbouring countries.

## The Islamic Republic of the Gambia

One of Africa's smallest countries, The Islamic Republic of the Gambia suffers from chronic food insecurity. High poverty rates – close to 50 per cent<sup>19</sup> – leave the population particularly vulnerable to the disasters that often strike the low-income country – drought, floods, wind storms, pest infestations and disease outbreaks. In April 2016, an estimated 427,000 people, out of a population of around 2 million,<sup>20</sup> were food insecure. Some 59,000 children suffered from moderate acute-malnutrition and 11,000 children from severe acute malnutrition.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/country/nigeria>

<sup>19</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/country/gambia>

<sup>20</sup> [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/apr2016\\_minidashboard\\_gambia\\_2.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/apr2016_minidashboard_gambia_2.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/apr2016\\_minidashboard\\_gambia\\_2.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/apr2016_minidashboard_gambia_2.pdf)

# VOICES OF CHILDREN



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## Peace, 17, from Nigeria

Orphaned in 2012 by a car accident, 17-year-old Peace lived in Benin City, Nigeria, with an impoverished aunt, who decided to marry her off to a 40-year-old. "This man took me to his house and made me his house girl. I said to my aunt, 'He's older than my dad,' but she said 'If you don't marry this man, I will poison you.' That's when I escaped. I didn't bring anything, just my shirt and the clothes I was wearing." She travelled first to Agadez, Niger, a transit point for migrants heading to Europe. From there, smugglers took her across the Sahara to Libya. "So many people died in the desert. We saw dead bodies, skeletons." Peace said that when she finally reached Sabratha – a major embarkation point in Libya for the sea crossing to Italy – she and others were locked up in a windowless house for weeks. "Our Libyan handlers wouldn't let us out. There was no water, no change of clothes, not enough food," she said, adding: "There was fighting outside, I could hear shooting, and I was scared all the time." One day, she said, everyone started running to a boat. During the crossing, several people fell overboard and drowned, and others inside the boat fainted and died. "I was even sitting down with dead bodies and I was scared." Peace is now awaiting an asylum hearing and staying at Rainbow House – a government-administered centre on the Italian island of Sicily that provides shelter, food and legal aid for unaccompanied refugee and migrant children. Lying in her bunk bed, she recalls the horrors of her journey. "I wish my friend had told me this is how difficult it is. I would have continued suffering in Nigeria."



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## Abubacarr, 16, from Gambia

Abubacarr, 16, from the Islamic Republic of the Gambia, hopes to become a professional football player. For now, he is staying at a government-run center for unaccompanied children in Sicily, Italy. It took him eight months to get there. "A long time I was on that journey," he says, "because I had no money. I would go, stop, go, stop, go, stop." After his father died in 2009, his family struggled to make ends meet "Our family suffered after my father died ... since he died I couldn't attend school, and many times we couldn't even afford food." Abubacarr eventually decided to try his luck in Europe, and left without telling his mother. "I just left with the clothes on my back – I had heard that at the checkpoints, and especially at the Libya border, that they will take anything you're carrying. If I could have carried anything, I would have brought my football shoes and jersey." The land journey took him through Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and finally, to Libya. "I travelled without a passport, just a vaccination card. I crossed the borders, but they never asked for ID, just for money. Prices were different, in Burkina, it was 15,000 CFA francs (USD\$25), in Mali it was 20,000 CFA Francs (USD\$30)." He then spent four months in Libya, where, he said it was "very hard to survive. They were killing people and I suffered for four months." Abubacarr, who was 15 at the time, said he worked odd jobs, including masonry and washing dishes. "I worked in Libya until I got 500 Dinars (USD\$395) and then took a boat. On all the boats it was very dangerous. We were packed so tight together. I went to sea the first time and they caught me and sent me to prison. I escaped though, and took a second boat, that time we got rescued by the Norwegian military. They gave us food and water and new clothes... When I called my mother it had been five months. I said 'I'm in Italy,' and she didn't believe I was here. She was crying and shouting. So many people go to Libya and disappear, their families never hear from them again. So my mother thought that I was dead. I started crying when I heard her voice. I was so happy, and sad at the same time," Abubacarr said, adding: "I came to Europe and I left Africa."



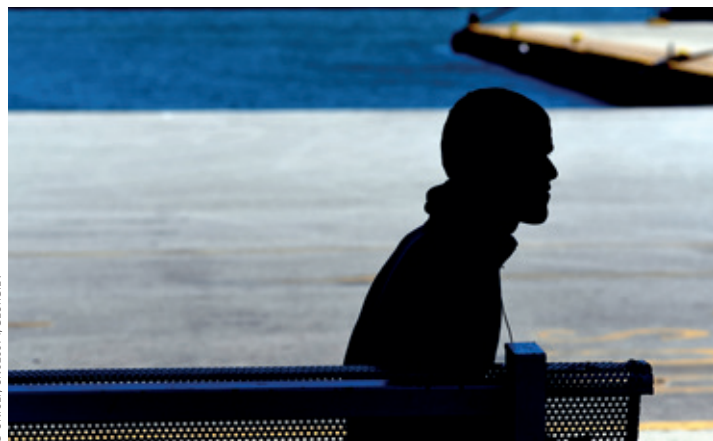
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### Sajad, 15, from Iraq

"I thought we were going to die at sea on the journey," says Sajad Al-Faraji 15. But now, he adds, "every day, things are good compared to that." Sajad and his family fled Iraq, and made it to Austria in November 2015 after a long, difficult journey across the Mediterranean and through the Balkans. They are now staying at an abandoned hospital in Vienna that houses thousands of refugees and migrants, waiting for their asylum applications to be processed.

"We've been to the police, and they took our fingerprints and gave us a white card and a green card," says Sajad's sister Houda, 25. "The green card is for hospitals and school, it is very necessary, and the white card means we haven't been refused, so that's a very good card. Now, we are waiting for a letter from the authorities for an interview."

Sajad would love to go to school like his 14-year-old brother Zein, who had lobbied for four months before he was eventually admitted to a language class. A few months ago, Sajad, who has been paralyzed from the waist down since he was a baby, fell from a chair and broke a leg. He spent the next six weeks in a hospital. The fall, he says, was all the more frustrating since there was an opening at the time at a school that specializes in children with disabilities. "I want to learn the language, find a medical solution for my legs. My dream is to be able to walk."



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### Ibrahim, 17, from Afghanistan

A 17-year-old orphan, Ibrahim<sup>22</sup> says he made the harrowing, journey to Greece in order to pursue his dream. "All I want is to learn how to read and write ... That's my number one priority."

22 Name changed to protect his identity.

In Afghanistan, where he lived with an uncle and worked at his iron foundry, he never had a chance to attend school. And, he adds, "life there was difficult because of the war. So I wanted to change my life, go somewhere else, go to school." He says it took him several months to get to Greece. On the way, he was robbed, was left for days with no food or water by smugglers who drove him part of the way, and hiked over several mountain passes, again with no food or water. Now, sitting on a bench in Athens' Piraeus harbour, he says "things are much better, and I hope to go to school." When he was interviewed, Ahmed had been in Greece for four months, and was receiving support from UNICEF's local partner Solidarity Now, who provide legal aid, including guidance on asylum procedures, to refugees and migrants. Asked what advice he would give other children thinking of making the journey, he said: "I would never advise anyone to do what I did. So many children die or suffer terrible injuries along the way – I saw it myself. The journey was far too dangerous."



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### Jannat, 7, from Syria

Jannat, 7, has fond memories of her besieged hometown in Syria. "I loved living in Homs," she said. "I loved my grandmother who lived there ... I miss her very much." Her grandmother has since died – according to her family as a result of the stress caused by the heavy fighting in Homs. But Jannat and her family, who fled first to Lebanon and eventually to Germany, remain upbeat. "What makes our family special is that we're ambitious and always able to find the positives," Jannat's mother, Amira Raslan said with a smile. "My daughter, no matter the conditions, is always wanting to go to school, to do well, and one day become a doctor. We really believe there is hope, despite all of the problems, and we all feel that way—especially the kids though. They were born into and grew up in terrible conditions, in war, but still ... they dream." Jannat, her twin brother, another brother aged 4, and their parents arrived in Germany in December 2015 after crossing the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Jannat's parents did their best to help the children cope with the hardships of the journey. "We made every place special, by taking photographs," says Amira. "Like if we passed over a border, we'd say 'Oh great! We made it into Serbia! Picture! Picture!'"



For further information, please contact:

**Sarah Crowe,**  
scrowe@unicef.org,  
+41795438029

**Christophe Boulierac,**  
cboulierac@unicef.org,  
+41799639244

**Chris Tidey,**  
ctidey@unicef.org,  
+41792042345

**John Budd,**  
jbudd@unicef.org,  
+1 917 9099542