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'A child is a child': UNICEF decries the situation for migrant children at borders

The United Nations Children's Fund is calling for renewed commitment from all parties to ensure children's rights are not violated as they seek refuge in European countries.

By Vatican News staff writer

Afshan Khan, Special Coordinator for Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe released a statement earlier this week in which he expresses his "deep concern" with regards to the "dire" situation facing child migrants and asylum seekers in Europe and at its borders.

The reality for children

In 2021, children were repeatedly involved in political and border management disputes at the EU's external borders. These developments call for a renewed commitment to the protection, safety, and best interests of children.

In his statement, Khan refers to shocking reports of children living in appalling conditions and being turned away or detained at eastern borders. He describes these episodes as "a direct violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child". Children and their families have the right to seek asylum "and to have their protection needs assessed on an individual basis", he writes.

Respect

Afshan Khan continues by stressing that UNICEF recognises the sovereignty of member states, the challenge posed by irregular migration, and the need for safe and orderly border management processes, while respecting human and children's rights. "We join our sister UN agencies, UNHCR, IOM, and OHCHR, in condemning the use of refoulement, wherever it occurs, as it violates international law and puts children's lives at risk without regard to their best interests or the risks they may face upon return", he adds.

A call to renewed commitment

He then goes on to call for a renewed collective political commitment to the protection and safeguarding of all children in Europe - and this, he says, "regardless of their migration status". Khan adds, "Migrant children should not be exploited for political purposes and their right to seek asylum in safety must be guaranteed".

Bringing his statement to an end, Khan writes that UNICEF stands ready to work with EU, eastern European and western Balkan governments, UN organisations, and civil society to "urgently provide humanitarian support, protection, and child-friendly accommodation to all children in need at international borders". He adds that the organisation also calls for the "urgent adoption of immigration reform measures that respect children's rights in countries of origin, transit, and destination".

A child is a child

Finally, he stresses that "together, we can - and must - ensure that the rights of all children are understood, protected, and promoted everywhere. A child is a child. No matter what the circumstances".