

Open letter to European governments

Immediately honour commitments to relocate unaccompanied children from the Greek islands

Athens, 3 April 2020

We, the undersigned organizations, **jointly call on European governments to proceed immediately with the emergency relocation of unaccompanied children from the Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on the Greek islands**, with no discrimination, giving precedence to existing family links and the best interests of the child.

In mid-March, a group of seven EU member states announced they would take in unaccompanied children from the islands. Since then, while an additional country pledged to relocate, efforts have largely stalled. Yet, **immediate action is all the more urgent in light of the COVID-19 pandemic**.

We welcome Commissioner Johansson's announcement in the European Parliament on 2 April, that a group of children will be transferred to Luxembourg next week. It is imperative this takes place as planned, and we encourage other countries to swiftly do the same.

Now, more than ever, the protection of unaccompanied children needs to be ensured and all efforts to help decongest the RICs must be fully supported, if the people living there are to have any chance of protecting their lives and health and complying with measures aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19.

Tens of thousands of people remain trapped in the camps on the Greek islands, including older people, people with disabilities, those with serious health conditions, families with children and pregnant women. Amongst them are 1,752 unaccompanied children¹. Most of them are deprived of access to their most basic rights, such as shelter and adequate food, medical, psychosocial care, as well as education. **Overcrowding and extremely limited access to running water, toilets and showers, make it impossible to abide by the guidelines for protecting oneself from COVID-19**, putting them at significantly heightened risk of infection, serious illness or death, especially those with underlying health conditions.

With eight cases of COVID-19 already confirmed as of the start of April among the local population on the island of Lesbos, and one on Samos², now is the time to act.

¹http://www.ekka.org.gr/images/%CE%A3%CE%A4%CE%91%CE%A4%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%A4%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%91_2020/EKKA%20Dashboard%2029-2-2020.pdf

² <https://eody.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/covid-gr-daily-report-29-03-20.pdf>

The recent pledges by -now- eight states to relocate 1,600 of these unaccompanied children from the islands sent a much-needed signal of solidarity. Honouring these commitments without delay is now of critical importance to protect these children.

The European response to the pandemic has already demonstrated that the swift and safe transfer of people to EU member states from across the globe is possible. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the European Emergency Response Center has evacuated more than 10,000 EU citizens from China, Japan, the US, Morocco, Tunisia and other countries³. Germany alone was able to repatriate 170,000 holiday-makers around the world in a matter of days due to the pandemic.⁴ The same must be done for the most vulnerable people in the Greek island camps. Doctors, public health professionals and academics⁵ have already outlined how children can be relocated from the RICs with sufficient protection and health security measures, in line with medical guidelines for COVID-19.

We urge Germany, France, Portugal, Finland, Lithuania, Croatia, Ireland to follow Luxembourg's lead in this emergency, and ensure that their pledged relocations are immediately implemented. All relocations must be done in line with the best interests of the child, with priority to family links, ensuring broad eligibility that does not discriminate against specific nationalities, gender, date of arrival or certain age groups.

Meanwhile, we call on additional European countries to join with pledges of their own to relocate more of these children and ensure that all unaccompanied children now trapped in the island RICs in Greece can be safely relocated immediately.

Where there is political will, these transfers are possible. There is no time to lose.

Signed by:

ActionAid Hellas
Action for Education
Amnesty International
ARSIS – Association for the Social Support of Youth
Avocats Sans Frontières, France
Better Days
Caritas Europa
Caritas Hellas
Center for Health Equity Education and Research International Group AMKE CHEERING

³https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/crisis-management_en, accessed 2 April 2020

⁴https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147944?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email

⁵https://www.evacuate-moria.com/?fbclid=IwAR3UVJh6439OgpQdjOp8Te5rpS_z813xs1-RdhoozpL1EdCRh1PiGrV6pqU

Češi pomáhají, Czech Republic
COSPE, Italy
CVCS, Italy
Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
Defence for Children the Netherlands
Defence for Children International, Greece
Diaconia ECCB – Centre of Relief and Development, Czech Republic
Dirty Girls of Lesvos
Donate4Refugees, UK
Dynamo International – Street Workers Network, Belgium
Echo100Plus
Fair Planet
Fenix Humanitarian Legal Aid
FOCSIV Italy
Free Movement Skateboarding, UK
Greek Council for Refugees (GCR)
Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR)
Help Refugees/Choose Love
HIAS Greece
HuBB - Humans Before Borders, Portugal
HumanRights360
Human Rights Watch
Humanity Now, USA
I AM YOU
Indigo Volunteers, UK
International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
Khora
Lighthouse Relief (LHR)
Lumos Foundation
Médecins du Monde (MdM)
Metadrasi
Mobile Info Team
Network for Children's Rights
Northern Lights Aid
Office of Displaced Designers
OMEP
Pampiraiki Support Initiative for Refugees & Migrants
Praxis
ReFOCUS Media Labs
Refugee Legal Support
Refugee Rescue
Refugee Rights Europe
Refugee Support Europe, Cyprus

Refugee Youth Service, UK/France
SAO Association, for displaced women, Switzerland
SEEBRÜCKE, Germany/ Switzerland/ Belgium/ Austria
Seeds of Humanity, Israel
Seeds of Humanity Hellas
ShowerPower
Solidarity Now
SOS Villages Greece
Stichting Vluchteling, Netherlands
Still I Rise
Terre des hommes
The Home Project
Velos Youth
Verein Fair, Switzerland