

European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC)

Open Letter on the emergency situation of migrant children trapped in camps at the border between Greece and Turkey and on the Greek Islands

6 April 2020

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As we are facing an unprecedented health crisis and as COVID-19 infiltrates every aspect of our lives we should not lose sight of the ongoing migration and refugee crisis affecting the European continent and more severely Southern Europe.

The situation is particularly critical at the border between Greece and Turkey, after the latter changed strategy and encouraged the movement of a significant number of refugee and migrant population to the Greek border.

The refugee camps on the Greek islands host a number of people considerably higher than their capacity, most of whom live in inhuman conditions. In this context, the condition of particularly vulnerable children including those who are very young or unaccompanied is of grave concern. We are extremely alarmed by the deprivation of children's most basic rights such as shelter, water, food, access to health care and education. An increasing number of children and young people are struggling with severe mental health issues exacerbated by the deteriorating situation.

Children are trapped in overcrowded, unsanitary and deplorable living conditions, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In these conditions and given the lack of adequate sanitation services and medical care, it is extremely difficult to follow the guidelines and advice issued by health authorities to protect from COVID-19 and prevent an uncontrollable spread of the disease. As European States try to protect their population, the resulting restrictions on movement and access, especially border closures, have put relocation operations and asylum-seeking processes on hold and at serious risk.

In this context, we, members of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), would like to reiterate what we have repeatedly and tirelessly stated in our numerous statements¹ on the matter that: *children on the move are children first*. These children, independently of their or their families' immigration status, are entitled to maximum protection, safety and care while European countries fail to respond to their basic needs.

ENOC strongly calls on European States and Institutions to ensure their policies, laws and practices are fully compliant with the UNCRC and other relevant European and International Human Rights Instruments which ensure the protection of all children and the consideration of their best interests as a primary consideration. Children are entitled to the right to life, survival and development as well as to protection from any form of harm.

¹ See ENOC Position Statements on [« Ending detention of children for immigration purposes », 2019](#), on [« The Right to Education of Children on the Move », 2018](#), on [« Safeguarding and protecting the rights of children on the move: The challenge of social inclusion », 2017](#), on [« Children on the Move: Children First », 2013](#), on [« the EU Return Directive », 2008](#), on [« State Obligations for the Treatment of Unaccompanied Children », 2006](#)

Therefore, we urge for the immediate evacuation of migrant children – whether accompanied or unaccompanied – from the refugee camps on the Greek islands, in order to guarantee their safety and fundamental rights, and prevent disastrous outbreak of COVID-19. European States and Institutions should support Greece in transferring children to appropriate facilities in the mainland as soon as possible, and in urgently providing them with appropriate care and protection. Decisions of evacuation and relocation of children should be based on a thorough assessment of their best interests and after considering the views of the child throughout the process.

Taking into consideration the existing exceptional conditions and until progress can be made with relocation, the European States and Institutions should not fail to protect the most vulnerable people. **We call on European Union Member States to massively relocate² refugee and migrant children from the camps at the border between Greece and Turkey and from the Greek Islands as soon as possible,** giving precedence to the best interests of the child.

Protecting children caught in humanitarian emergencies must be a priority during the current pandemic. We must not turn our backs on the children trapped in refugee camps.

² See also FRA's publication from 17 March 2020 : [Relocation of unaccompanied children from Greece](#)