

Council of Europe
The Secretary General

Strasbourg, 2 March 2016

Dear Sir/ Madam,

In September I wrote to you and heads of government across Europe on the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, providing you with an overview of the most relevant standards and Court decisions, as guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights. I enclose here a set of proposals for immediate action to improve the protection of migrant and asylum-seeking children.

Last year an estimated 300,000 children arrived in Europe, many of whom were unaccompanied by an adult. According to Europol, at least 10,000 children have disappeared since the beginning of the crisis. Large numbers will have fallen into the hands of human traffickers or become victims of other forms of violence, abuse or exploitation.

Providing international protection to children fleeing war and persecution should now be a priority for all European governments.

The findings of the Council of Europe's *Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (GRETA) confirm that gaps persist in the identification of child trafficking victims across a majority of member states. In many countries, asylum-seeking children disappear within just a few days of being placed in reception centers.

It is essential to put in place rapid procedures for appointing legal guardians for unaccompanied children. Suitable, safe accommodation must be provided, in which children are placed under the supervision of adequately trained staff or foster parents. Children should not be placed in immigration detention centers, apart from in exceptional circumstances and for the shortest possible period of time. State authorities must pay special attention to the safety of girls in their care, who face multiple risks. When the age of a suspected child is uncertain, the presumption should be that he or she is a minor and should therefore be accorded special protection measures, pending verification of age.

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In these and the other areas referred to in these proposals, the Council of Europe will seek to assist member states, both through targeted support, providing expertise and facilitating the sharing of good practice.

My Special Representative on Migration and Refugees, Mr Tomáš Boček, will shortly lead a fact-finding mission to some of the areas which are under most pressure. He will seek to view first-hand the situation for migrant and asylum-seeking children in particular, liaising with other international and humanitarian organisations, so that we can ensure that our anti-trafficking assistance and other efforts to protect children affected by the crisis are tailored to suit the present need. I will keep the Committee of Ministers updated as we progress.

Yours sincerely,



Thorbjørn Jagland

To the Heads of Government of
the 47 member states of the
Council of Europe

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