

EU boosts child migrant protection efforts

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Brussels - The EU on Wednesday announced steps to better protect child migrants running the risk of abuse as they come to Europe in record numbers, including avoiding placing them in detention centres.

Child protection groups welcomed the announcement from the European Commission and expressed hope the long-awaited measures would be carried out quickly.

Criminal activities

"One in three asylum seekers in Europe is a child nowadays," European Commissioner for Migration Dimitris Avramopoulos told a media conference, stressing they are vulnerable and need special protection.

More than 1.2 million new asylum requests were registered in EU countries last year, after nearly 1.26 million in 2015, according to official figures.

"We have to ensure that they are not at risk of being abused...that they are not exploited and do not go missing," Avramopoulos said.

"We also have to avoid that children are drawn into criminal activities or radicalisation".

The Commission, the executive of the 28-nation EU, said "everything must be done to provide alternatives to administrative detention for children".

Human Rights Watch reported in September that migrant children were being held in "deplorable" conditions for over a month on average, with some locked up in police cells alongside adults for lack of space.

The Commission called for deploying child protection officers at migrant reception centres in countries such as Greece and Italy and for bolstering the role of guardians for unaccompanied minors.

Exchange information

EU figures show that of the overall arrivals, about 90 000 unaccompanied minors entered the bloc last year.

The Commission said all children should have immediate access to legal aid, health care, psychological support and education.

It also called on all member states to set up steps to systematically report and exchange information on all missing children.

The European police agency Europol caused a stir more than a year ago when it announced that some 10 000 migrant children had gone missing, raising alarm that many of them could have fallen into the hands of traffickers for labour, sexual or criminal exploitation.

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