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Press centre

News note

UNICEF calls on Italian parliament to pass bill providing support for record number of unaccompanied refugee and migrant children

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A boy who is an unaccompanied minor looks across the beach in Trabia, Italy

ROME/LAMPEDUSA, 27 October 2016 –UNICEF is calling on the Italian parliament to urgently pass an historic bill that would strengthen support and protection for the record number of unaccompanied and separated children – at least 20,000 – who have arrived in Italy this year. Near daily reports of migrant drownings on the Mediterranean show clearly that passage of the bill cannot come a moment too soon for children risking their lives to reach Italian shores.

Since the EU-Turkey deal dramatically reduced the flow of refugees and migrants into Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean, the Central Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy has become the main route for those fleeing war, persecution and desperation, as well as the longest and most dangerous.

Over one recent 24-hour period on the small Italian island of Lampedusa – often the first disembarkation point for those rescued at sea – a three-year-old boy died of asphyxiation just after arrival; a young woman lost her life from severe burns caused by exposure to fuel in one of the boats; and a nine-months-pregnant woman in advanced labour was evacuated by helicopter to Palermo, Sicily. While in separate incidents, a teenage girl and two teenage boys with gunshot wounds, and four young people with third degree burns were evacuated off the island for emergency medical care.

They were among 4,300 people rescued by the Italian Coastguard (17 people were found dead on boats) on 25/26th October.

The draft bill C.1658, or 'Proposta Zampa', now before the Senate is the first comprehensive act on reception and protection of unaccompanied children in Italy. Together with other organizations UNICEF, has been strongly supporting the formulation of the bill for the past three years.

The basic principles of the bill are fully aligned with actions recommended by UNICEF to protect displaced, refugee and migrant children, including:

- Unaccompanied and separated children will not be subjected to "refoulement" or returns that may cause them harm;
- Reduce the time unaccompanied and separated children spend in first-line reception centres;
- Harmonize and improve procedures for age detection in a child-sensitive manner;
- Establish a structured and streamlined national reception system, with minimum standards in all reception facilities;
- Roll out extensive use of qualified cultural mediators* to communicate and interpreter needs of vulnerable adolescents; and
- Support foster care and host families for children as well as the timely appointment of volunteer guardians.

The Government of Italy has also allocated € 600 million to municipalities who bear the brunt of hosting migrants and refugees. The long-awaited funds will help caregivers, groups and associations who manage reception centres and facilitate activities for migrants and refugees. The Italian National Committee for UNICEF, as part of the Italian NGO Forum, has been campaigning for the Government to include such plans for adolescents "Legge di stabilità" (Financial Stability Act) for 2017.

On Lampedusa, UNICEF has supported the deployment of a gynaecologist and cultural mediator* to support the Italian health and sanitary services in the treatment of unaccompanied children and young women who may be pregnant or otherwise in need of physical, psychological care and support. UNICEF has also set up a child friendly space in the local hospital.

Fast Facts

- The Libya-Italy route is now the most deadly for refugees and migrants traveling to Europe, with one dead or missing for every 47 arrivals in 2016.
- In 2015 - when most took the far shorter Aegean route - the fatality rate was 1 in 269 in total.
- In 2016, at least 3,740 refugees and migrants have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea - 88 per cent (3,252) along the Central Mediterranean route.
- An estimated 660 children have lost their lives at sea this year alone. Many are buried in unmarked graves in southern Italy as attempts are made to trace family.
- So far this year, 157,000 (source: UNHCR, updated to 24 October 2016) migrants and refugees arrived in Italy by sea from north Africa, with record numbers of unaccompanied children among them – at least 20,000.
- 12,530 unaccompanied and separated children arrived in Italy over all of 2015.
- The total number of arrivals in 2016 (as of today) has already exceeded the total for 2015.

*Footnote – cultural mediators work as interpreters of cultural needs and practices

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About UNICEF

UNICEF promotes the rights and wellbeing of every child, in everything we do. Together with our partners, we work in 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action, focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of all children, everywhere.

For more information about UNICEF and its work visit: www.unicef.org⁴

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For more information please contact:

Sarah Crowe, Spokesperson, scrowe@unicef.org +41 79 543 80 29

Alberto Atzori, a.atzori@unicef.it +39 3394531912

Najwa Mekki, UNICEF New York, +1 917 209 1804, nmekki@unicef.org

Christopher Tidey, UNICEF New York, +1 917 340 3017, ctidey@unicef.org

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