



Save the Children



# **A TIDE OF SELF-HARM AND DEPRESSION**

The EU-Turkey Deal's devastating impact on child refugees and migrants

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### **Acknowledgments**

The report was written by Sacha Myers and Imad Aoun. Interviews with field staff were conducted by Sacha Myers and Imad Aoun. Case studies were collected by Sacha Myers. Photos are by Anna Pantelia and Sacha Myers. All are Save the Children staff.

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**To protect the identities of those who participated in the research and the refugees and migrants we interviewed, all names have been changed or withheld, and all locations anonymised.**

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Cover photo: Majida, 5, from Syria, is currently stranded in Lesbos with her mother, aunt and younger cousins. (Anna Pantelia/Save the Children)

*“We know this is not legal [...]. We have a right to find safety in Europe, this is international law.*

*I keep thinking: ‘What is this - Europe? Really? Is this really Europe?’*

*We come from a country where there is lawlessness and we come here and it's worse. It's better to die at home, at war, than to suffer in this humiliating way. I should have just died in Syria.”*

**Tarek\*, father of one from Syria, interviewed on Lesbos.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

March 2017 marks one year since the start of the European Union (EU) Deal with Turkey.<sup>i</sup> The Deal was introduced by the EU as a mechanism to reduce the number of “irregular” migrants and refugees arriving in Greece from Turkey, and continuing on to other parts of Europe, after the surge in numbers in August 2015.

As a result of the Deal, thousands of refugees and migrants are now stranded on five Greek islands: Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros, and Kos. They are unable to leave until their applications for asylum are processed.

Meanwhile, new asylum seekers continue to arrive on the islands. This is leading to congestion in the facilities on the islands and many refugees and migrants are now living in degrading, detention-like conditions with limited infrastructure and little information on their asylum cases. As a result, tensions are on the rise. Protests, demonstrations, violence and fires are now commonplace.

Of the 13,200 asylum seekers trapped on the Greek islands in these conditions, the United Nations estimates that 37 per cent<sup>ii</sup>, or more than 5,000, are children, including unaccompanied or separated children (UASC). Their childhoods have been put on hold as they’re held in legal limbo, waiting for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn.

This report outlines how the implementation of the EU-Turkey Deal is adversely affecting child refugees and migrants.

Interviews conducted with staff from Save the Children and our partner organization Praksis, who work on the islands, reveal the extent of physical and mental damage happening to child refugees and migrants as they spend their days behind barbed wire, without access to basic services, and under constant police surveillance. In addition to the traumatic events many children have already witnessed in their homeland, some have in the past year survived fires and seen dead bodies, while others have been caught up in or even arrested in protests, fights and demonstrations that frequently sweep the camps.

*A Tide of Self-harm and Depression* outlines the impact of the EU-Turkey Deal on children in eight key areas:

### **Depression and anxiety**

According to the observations of our staff, children stranded in the camps for long periods of time are starting to show symptoms of depression, distress and anxiety. Concerning behaviour includes enuresis (bed-wetting), clinginess, nightmares, disturbing drawings with negative messages and disinterest in attending classes and activities.

### **Self-harm and suicide**

One of the most shocking and appalling developments Save the Children staff have witnessed is the increase in suicide attempts and self-harm amongst children as young as nine. Suicide attempts sometimes happen in the camps in public, in clear view of children. Save the Children staff believe children are imitating each other and the adults in the camps.

### **Inhumane living conditions**

Children and their families in the camps are often fighting for the bare basics – a blanket, a dry place to sleep, nutritious food, warm water to bathe and access to healthcare. As a consequence, children are stripped of their dignity: many are dirty, have developed rashes and skin problems and have almost no privacy whatsoever.

### **Increase in aggressive behaviour**

One of the main trends seen by all Save the Children staff working with children in the camps on the islands is the increase in aggressive behaviour amongst children. Many lose hope that they will leave, which can lead them to become impatient, and verbally and physically aggressive.

Our staff said most unaccompanied children in the camps and hotspots have lost their patience and are not the optimistic children they originally met.

### **Drug and Alcohol Abuse**

Save the Children staff have seen children – particularly those who are unaccompanied – turn to substance abuse as a way of coping with the seemingly endless misery they face.

### **Safety**

Due to tensions in the camps, many children and their parents fear for their safety. Unaccompanied children are often targeted in fights and attacks because they are by themselves and lack a support network to protect them. Unfortunately, the police rarely intervene in fights or attacks. Instead, and in some cases, they have used unnecessary violence against refugees and migrants, including children.

### Family breakdowns

The behaviour of parents and their ability to handle the stress of being detained on the islands is having a big impact on children, particularly those under 10 when they are developing quickly. Children can understand if the parent is coping or not, and this impacts their physical and mental well-being. It also affects the relationship between parent and child.

### Smuggling and trafficking

For many people who have been stranded for almost a year, the wait has been too long and they are now looking for faster alternatives to get off the islands and make their way to safety elsewhere in Europe. Many are turning to smugglers and traffickers, seeing them as the only way out. This poses great risks for children, particularly unaccompanied children, who are in danger of being exploited and abused by traffickers and smugglers.

### Widespread failure

In parallel, the European Union is portraying the EU-Turkey Deal as a model solution to the refugee and migrant “crisis”. It is using the Deal’s framework as a sound template for cooperation with other transit countries such as Libya and Egypt.

This is despite the fact that one year after the implementation of EU-Turkey Deal, thousands of children remain stranded in Greece in urgent need of safety, care and protection, and in some cases without full access to formal education. Not only that, but as this report shows, their mental health is rapidly deteriorating due to the conditions created as a result of this Deal.

The EU is now also trying to adopt even tougher measures for the implementation of the EU-Turkey Deal. The Joint Action Plan developed by the EU Coordinator for the EU-Turkey Deal calls for detention as the appropriate measure for the further success of the Deal.<sup>iii</sup> The plan includes a proposal that asylum seekers eligible for family reunification, and vulnerable asylum seekers like unaccompanied or separated children, pregnant women, persons with disabilities and others, should no longer be exempted from the EU-Turkey Deal and should be subjected to the same considerations as other asylum seekers.<sup>iv</sup> This will prolong detention periods on the islands, as more applications would need to be processed, and will cause additional tension and frustration, as one of the constant sources of anxiety is the threat of being returned to Turkey.

### Recommendations

Save the Children calls on the EU and the Greek Government to take immediate action to protect the children stranded in the country and to prevent long-term harm.

We call upon **EU Member States** to:

- Honour their commitment to relocate and accept asylum seekers from Greece, with a plea to drop the nationality criterion for relocation, and reunify families separated by the current policies in place. A fair relocation mechanism should be established, and it should be based on genuine solidarity between member states, and taking into account preferences of both asylum-seekers and member states.
- Prioritise the immediate transfer of people from overcrowded sites on the islands to open facilities on the mainland that meet European law standards for reception, rather than pressuring Greek authorities to keep people on islands in substandard conditions.

We call upon the **Greek Government** to:

- End the illegal detention of child refugees and migrants and provide alternative measures which comprehensively protect the rights of the child.

We call upon the **Ministry of Migration Policy** to:

- Prioritize the identification and registration of unaccompanied children in the hotspots. Many are still not identified or are incorrectly registered as adults or as accompanied by another family.
- Jointly with the **National Centre for Social Solidarity**, urgently increase the accommodation capacity for unaccompanied children, including safe and appropriate community-based accommodation.
- Jointly with the **Ministry of Justice**, establish an effective and functional guardianship system for every unaccompanied child, and train guardians so they have the expertise and capacity to adequately support each child appointed to them.
- Jointly with the **Ministry of Education**, ensure the access of all children stranded in Greece to the formal schooling system, regardless of their legal status.

We call upon the **Ministry of Health** jointly with the **National Centre for Social Solidarity** to:

- Immediately transfer children with severe health and mental needs to appropriate care environments where they can receive the support they need by trained and experienced professionals. Also, funding must be allocated to mental health and psychosocial support programming in all refugee accommodation facilities.

We call upon the **Reception and Identification Service** and **Asylum Service**, to:

- Immediately provide in all the hotspots, basic, consistent information, including legal information and age-appropriate information for unaccompanied children in coordination with the European Asylum Support Office.
- Speed up the asylum, relocation and family reunification procedures, while at the same time respecting necessary procedural safeguards.

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>ii</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Operations Portal – Refugee Situations. Accessed on 13/03/2017:

<http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

<sup>iii</sup> European Commission, 2016, Joint Action Plan. Accessed on 27/02/2017 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/december2016-action-plan-migration-crisis-management\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/december2016-action-plan-migration-crisis-management_en.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.