

Refugee children making dangerous trip to safety in Europe without parents

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

09.28.15

Grade Level 7 Word Count 844



A child holds up a sign as migrants stage a protest in a stadium used for traditional Kirkpinar oil wrestling as they wait to walk down a highway toward Turkey's western border with Greece and Bulgaria, in Edirne, Turkey, Sept. 21, 2015. Photo: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel

BERLIN, Germany — A solemn-faced boy warily gazes about a jam-packed train station. Nearby is a little girl whose hair has not been brushed or combed for days. Just beyond, a group of teens are clustered around someone's smartphone, debating where to go next and how to get there. All of them have no adults in sight.

Aid groups and governments call them "unaccompanied minors." These children under 18 are making the dangerous thousand-mile journey across half of Europe without a parent.

They make up only a small portion of the tens of thousands of migrants and refugees currently crossing Europe. Children are between 4 percent and 7 percent of the total number of refugees, international organizations estimate. Yet, these youngsters pose a special challenge to those who are trying to help victims of war and persecution find safety.

And their journeys come at a point when the resources of nations and aid groups are stretched to the breaking point. For them, safe haven is growing harder to find.

Many Refugees Set Sights On Germany

Wealthy Germany is one of the most popular destinations for the migrants. The northern European country had thrown open its doors to asylum seekers for more than a week. However, the country is now stopping some refugees from entering. German officials said this is temporary and suggested that the country expects to take in as many as 1 million migrants this year.

Mazen Hassoun is a 16-year-old Syrian boy, who arrived in Berlin this month from the town of Mansurah. Raqqah, which is near his hometown, is the headquarters of the group Islamic State. The extremist group has overrun large parts of Syria and Iraq and has killed many people.

“My parents believed I had to get out of there before I was forced to fight for Daash,” he said, using the Arabic acronym for the group. “We didn’t have the money to bring the whole family, so it was decided that I would make the journey.”

Many of the youngsters are silent and terrified when they arrive. Remarkably quickly, they recover their high spirits — or appear to. On a recent day, a center in Munich, Germany, was filled with lively chatter — some in German, some in the children’s native languages, including Pashto, Arabic and Somali.

Days Of Laughter, Nights Of Terror

“They become children again,” said administrator Jutta Stiehler. “But at night, the ghosts come back.” The children have frightening memories, and these sometimes haunt them through nightmares and bed-wetting, she said.

Rimas is just 9 years old. She sometimes cried for her mother during the long journey from Syria through Greece, Macedonia, Hungary and Austria, her uncle said.

Her uncle said the sound of her nighttime sobs sometimes broke his heart. But there was something he feared even more.

“The worst were the times when I could tell that the two of them, she and her cousin Mahmoud, they were too frightened even to cry,” said Abdel Rahman Koweifi. He brought one child belonging to each of his two brothers on the long journey.

Journeys Filled With Danger And Fear

They experienced some terrifying moments. Their rubber raft overturned in the sea after setting out from

Turkey, but they were close enough to shore that they were rescued.

The Koweifi family had agreed that sending the two children to travel in their uncle's care might ultimately enable the whole family to come to Europe. The journey cost a total of \$4,500 for the three of them, Koweifi said. It's a choice many of those enduring Syria's civil war are making.

Aid workers say that youngsters who travel without their parents often feel intense pressure. Some families hope that the children will be able to get work and send back money. Others hope that asylum will lead the way for other family members to join them. In the course of the journey, unprotected youngsters can be attacked or robbed, or worse.

Michael Bochenek is an expert on children's rights with Human Rights Watch in London. "Desperate people do what they have to do to make these kinds of journeys," he said.

Family Looks Toward A Fresh Start — And Reunion

In Berlin, Koweifi was happy that he had been allowed to remain with his niece and nephew at a refugee camp. The children are able to call or text their parents at least once a day.

Their asylum paperwork has begun, though Koweifi expects it will take weeks or months before they know whether they will be allowed to stay in Germany. Of all the national groups currently on the move, Syrians have perhaps the best chance.

He recalled the tearful goodbyes in Syria, when he swore to his brothers that he would guard their children's lives with his own.

"I said that if one of them were to die, it would be like my own death, but much, much worse," he said. "I look at them, and it is hard to believe we are safe, and perhaps we will all be together again — maybe not so soon, but someday."