

UNICEF urges European Union to protect refugee children

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Geneva: The UN Children's Fund (Unicef) on Friday urged all European Union (EU) member states to fully protect refugee children.

Unicef said children already make up a quarter of all asylum seekers in Europe so far this year. In the first six months of this year, 106,000 children, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, sought asylum in the EU -- an increase of almost 75 percent since the previous year, Xinhua news agency reported.

"Protecting refugee and migrant children from harm, especially as winter approaches, has to be at the very heart of Europe's response," said Yoka Brandt, Unicef deputy executive director.

"All these children, who have already suffered so much, have the right to protection and to dignity. Now is the time to make those rights a reality," Brandt added.

The UN agency urges the EU member states to keep family units together at all times, with family tracing and reunification programs in place for children who are arriving unaccompanied or have become separated on the journey and to make sure the provision of professional support and advice for children and their families that safeguard children's rights, whatever their legal status, at every step of the process.

Unicef called on continued efforts to reduce the threat from smugglers and other risks and sufficient financial investment in child protection systems, services and capacities so children are supported by trained child welfare experts, with the same high standard of care provided to children across all member states.

In addition, Unicef highlighted the needs of designing relocation and resettlement programmes and reception facilities that are child-focused, including adequate provision of healthcare, learning and play and support and counselling to address the traumas children have experienced on their journey.

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