

Some 300 children drowned trying to reach Europe so far this year

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Refugee children hold signs on board the Ocean Viking ship sailing in the Strait of Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea, after being rescued by European maritime-humanitarian organisation SOS Mediterranee [File: Vincenzo Circosta/AFP]?

United Nations, July 17 (RHC)-- At least 289 children are known to have died at sea in the first six months of this year while attempting to reach Europe, according to the United Nations children agency (UNICEF).

The figure is nearly double the number recorded in the first half of 2022, the UNICEF said on Friday, adding that the children made the perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea driven by conflict and climate change.

Verena Knaus, the UNICEF's global lead on migration and displacement, said the true figures were likely to be higher as many shipwrecks on the Central Mediterranean leave no survivors or go unrecorded. An estimated 11,600 children made the crossing in the first six months of 2023 – nearly twice as many as in the same period in 2022.

In a news briefing at the UN headquarters in Geneva, Knaus said that in the first three months of this year, 3,300 children – 71 percent of all children arriving to Europe via the central route – were recorded as unaccompanied or separated. “This is three times higher than the number in the same period last year. Girls travelling alone are especially likely to experience violence before, during and after their journeys,” she said.

The agency decried what it called “preventable deaths” stressing the need for expanded safe, legal and accessible pathways for children to seek protection in Europe. It said many governments were ignoring or standing by silently when nearly 300 children – equivalent to “an entire plane full of children” – perished in the waters between Europe and Africa in just six months.

Along the way, they can be exposed to detention, deprivation, torture, trafficking, violence, exploitation and rape. “These children need to know they are not alone. World leaders must urgently act to demonstrate the undeniable worth of children's lives, moving beyond condolences to resolute pursuit of effective solutions,” said Knaus.

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