

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Surge in deadly sea crossings from Lebanon to Cyprus as economic crisis pushes hundreds of thousands more children into poverty

Beirut, 14 October – Hundreds of people have made desperate journeys by boat across the Mediterranean to reach Cyprus in recent months, as the economic crisis deepens in Lebanon. September saw a significant uptick in crossings with 230 people travelling on five boats pushed back to Lebanon after attempting the journey to Cyprus by sea.[1]

Their journeys were among the 21 attempted sea crossings made from Lebanon between July and September,[2] compared to 17 across the whole of 2019.[3] The perilous journeys have claimed the lives of several people already this year, including children.

“We started to count the days until our death while drinking sea water”, one teenager told Save the Children about their desperate attempt to leave Lebanon.

The Syrian family of nine went through a harrowing attempt to cross the Mediterranean from Lebanon to Cyprus last month. They described helpless moments on board as the children watched their mother die, while other parents had to tie their children’s dead bodies to the side of the boat to avoid losing them at sea.

Khaled*, 12, was on board when his mother passed away on the eighth and final day of the journey. She was suffering from Diabetes.

“We sailed for about 20 hours until we were out of fuel and then [they] told us we were lost. We stayed for eight days without food or water. Then my mother’s health worsened.

“What I hated the most during those eight days was when the boat leader told us we got lost, and the thirst and hunger of the people. We were hopeless... desperate.”

The rise in families taking to the sea to escape Lebanon comes as the country of just over six million people is grappling with its worst peacetime crisis. Soaring inflation, a collapsing pound and shortage in essentials such as medicine and fuel amid an upsurge in Covid-19 cases have decimated people’s livelihoods.[4] Poverty rates have soared, with an additional 650,000 Lebanese children estimated to have been pushed into poverty over the past six months.[5]

Two months since the explosion ripped through the capital Beirut, Save the Children’s teams have recorded a 574% increase in requests for shelter and financial support among Lebanese communities.[6] August alone made up for 33% of all requests from all communities in the first eight months of the year.

Khaled*s older brother Raed*, 18, said when asked if he would consider leaving again.

“If I was presented with the same opportunity to travel now, at this very second, I would immediately pack my bags. Even for our education there is no future or hope here. There isn’t for the Lebanese, let alone for Syrians.”

Children, who were among the surge in families who took to the sea with their parents last month, recounted how they were stranded on the Mediterranean for over a week, with no food or water. Mothers on board resorted to trying to filter the salty water with their clothes to quench their children’s thirst.

The boat Khaled* was on was carrying 49 people set for to Cypriot shores, a journey of around 110 miles. On board were dozens of children and their family members, with barely any food and only four gallons of drinking water.

Khaled’s sister Baraa*, 19, who studied nursing, tried to provide care for two children, both under three years old, who were struggling for their lives in their mother’s arms. *“The small boy...started to have dehydration symptoms. I had done nursing studies and I knew. I was checking his pulse, temperature and breath; the boy was dehydrated. He died in my arms.”*

According to local media, the Cypriot Parliament has shortened the time that asylum seekers can appeal to any rejection of their application, and allowed authorities to deport asylum seekers directly after being rejected a status.[\[7\]](#)

Jennifer Moorehead, Country Director for Save the Children in Lebanon, said, *“These are the unimaginable but real stories of children who saw a child– or their own parents - die, on the very boat that was supposed to carry them to a better future.*

“Imagine how desperate the situation is, to drive families to take a chance on their own survival in order to escape the harsh reality. Families tell us they would do it again because they see no hope or future for their children in Lebanon. They can’t take another year like this.”

After having sold all their belongings to pay for their crossing, Khaled*, Baraa*, their father and siblings are now back in Lebanon. They are struggling to cope with the loss of their mother.

Khaled said:*

“I’m worried about going back to school and having the teacher ask me “are you the ones who tried to travel by sea and killed your mother?”

Save the Children calls for the Lebanese government to prioritise vulnerable children and their families with financial support packages. It also calls on Cypriot authorities to put the interest of child arrivals first and to offer them access to asylum and protection in accordance with international law.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

- Save the Children is providing families including Khaled's with Case Management and cash assistance services. Three children from the family have also been registered at the public school. Psychosocial support is also being provided to help children cope with the situation.
- Save the Children's helpline has seen an increase of around 3,800 requests in the month following the Beirut Port explosion. Analysis of the needs shows that the majority of those requesting aid are in need of shelter or cash transfers.
- The number of children who have been pushed into poverty is based on the total number of people as provided by UN ESCWA, and is calculated on the basis that half of the population mentioned are children.

[1] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/29/cyprus-asylum-seekers-summarily-returned>

2 https://www.unhcr.org/lb/13585-unhcr-and-unicef-urgent-need-to-address-the-root-causes-of-life-risking-journeys-from-lebanon-and-ensure-swift-rescue-of-people-distressed-at-sea.html#_ga=2.8127482.958519951.1602179382-207894769.1589918770

3 <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2020/07/UNHCR-Lebanon-2019-Q4-Operational-Update.pdf>

4 <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/banking-finance/452203-lebanons-inflation-nightmare-intensifies-amid-economic-crisis>

5 Based on UN ESCWA's estimates

https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00268_pb15_beirut-explosion-rising-poverty-en.pdf

6 Save the Children's data

7 <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/09/18/house-passes-three-laws-to-better-manage-migrant-flow/>

Bei Interviewanfragen wenden Sie sich bitte an unsere Pressestelle.

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Über Save the Children

Im Nachkriegsjahr 1919 gründete die britische Sozialreformerin und Kinderrechtlerin Eglantyne Jebb Save the Children, um Kinder in Deutschland und Österreich vor dem Hungertod zu retten. Heute ist die inzwischen größte unabhängige Kinderrechtsorganisation der Welt in über 110 Ländern im Einsatz. Save the Children ist da für Kinder in Kriegen,

Konflikten und Katastrophen – seit 100 Jahren und darüber hinaus. Diese Kinder zu schützen, zu stärken und zu fördern ist das zentrale Anliegen der Organisation. Die Schwerpunkte der Arbeit liegen in den Bereichen Schule und Bildung, Schutz vor Ausbeutung und Gewalt sowie Überleben und Gesundheit. Save the Children setzt sich ein für eine Welt, die die Rechte der Kinder achtet. Eine Welt, in der alle Kinder gesund und sicher leben und frei und selbstbestimmt aufwachsen können.