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**UNHCR commends Cyprus for saving the lives of 115 refugees in distress at sea**

Monday 7 September 2015 - UNHCR commends the Cypriot authorities for their prompt and successful search and rescue operation yesterday that saved the lives of 115 Palestinian and Syrian refugees fleeing the devastating war in Syria. Among those rescued were 42 under-age children, some of whom travelling alone without their parents or relatives. Most of the refugees lost their meagre belongings at sea and came without shoes or additional clothing.

The refugees were placed at the tent camp in Kokkinotrimithia on the outskirts of Nicosia, save for three families with special needs who were taken to the more appropriate reception centre at Kofinou village, though more people with special needs were identified. While the authorities are doing their best to meet the immediate basic material needs of the rescued refugees at the Kokkinotrimithia camp, the tent facility does not, and cannot, offer reception conditions in accordance with common EU legislation.

“Refugees who have lost everything and suffered enormously both before and during their flight should be welcomed into a dignified and caring environment,” said Damtew Dessaegne, the UNHCR Representative in Cyprus. UNHCR therefore urges the Government to place all the rescued refugees in the Kofinou Reception Center where the living conditions are generally better than those at the tented Kokkinotrimithia camp. As far as UNHCR is aware, the Kofinou Reception Centre is presently operating with its less than half capacity and should be put to good use for its intended humanitarian purpose.

Europe is facing its biggest refugee influx in decades. More than 300,000 people have risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea so far this year. Over 2,600 did not survive the dangerous sea crossing. The majority of those who have come to Europe originate from conflict zones like Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan and are simply running for their lives. What we see in Europe today is therefore primarily a refugee crisis. And this crisis requires a massive collective efforts by all governments across Europe to design and implement a common strategy based on responsibility, solidarity and mutual trust. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees stressed, “no country can do it alone, and no country can refuse to do its part.”

Despite the growing number of people in need of international protection arriving in European shores, it is important to highlight that 86% of refugees remain in developing countries. So far in 2015, Cyprus received 1,025 asylum applications. This represents 0.2 % of total applications lodged in the EU.

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