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## **UNHCR deplores loss of life in the Aegean Sea, amidst worsening weather conditions**

UNHCR deeply deplores the loss of life for the umpteenth time in two tragedies in the early hours of today when at least 42 people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, including 18 women, 17 children and 7 men have been reported dead off Farmakonissi and Kalolimnos islets near Leros and Kalymnos islands, in South-East Aegean, as the weather worsens and desperate refugees in search of safety, take extraordinary risks, lured also by discounts offered by smugglers.

UNHCR staff received survivors at the ports of Kalymnos and Leros and are assisting them to meet their basic needs, including accommodation in hotel rooms, counselling, liaison with authorities and communication with families who are abroad.

Despite a temporary decrease in arrivals in recent days, a surge was observed in the last 48 hours with more than 3,000 people arriving per day to the Greek islands, amidst stormy weather conditions. Newly arriving refugees told UNHCR that the smuggling rates had halved in recent days. This discount acts as a grim enticement to take extraordinary risks given worsening weather.

According to the Hellenic Coast Guard, at least 60 people have now died in the Greek territorial waters of the Aegean Sea since the start of the year, while at least 10 people are missing. Tens of more people have lost their lives in Turkish territorial waters since the beginning of the year. Only yesterday (21 January), media reported the loss of at least 12 people off western Turkish coasts, while trying to reach the island of Lesbos.

*"It is tragic that refugees, including families with young children, feel compelled to entrust their lives to unscrupulous smugglers in view of lack of safe and legal ways for refugees to find protection. This is a sad testament to the desperation people are feeling, but also to the utter disregard for human life shown by those who organize these hazardous trips",* said Philippe Leclerc, Acting Representative of UNHCR Greece.

Since the beginning of the year, the Hellenic Coast Guard, assisted by Frontex and private vessels, have attended to a number of distressed boats taking on water, deflating dangerously, experiencing engine failure, or running out of fuel. UNHCR wishes to commend the Hellenic Coast Guard, as well as other actors, for their efforts to assist and rescue hundreds of human lives, in very difficult and often life-threatening conditions.

UNHCR reiterates its call for a robust reinforcement of search and rescue operations in the Aegean Sea, as well as the opening of more legal avenues for refugees, through enhanced resettlement from Syria's neighboring countries and humanitarian admission, family reunification, humanitarian visas, and other schemes. With more legal pathways to Europe and elsewhere, fewer people in need of international protection will be forced to resort to ruthless smugglers and undertake perilous irregular journeys.

In 2015, a record number of some 860,000 people, mostly Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis, reached Greece by sea. During the same period, more than 700 people died or went missing in the Aegean Sea (including both Greek and Turkish territorial waters). So far in 2016, some 38,000 mostly refugees have reached the Greek islands.

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