

Tragedy in Lesvos: 21 dead at sea and 6 missing in attempt to cross from Turkish coast

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It is with great sadness that UNHCR received the news of the tragic ship wreck in the open sea of Lesvos island, which occurred in the early hours of Friday 14 December, when a small boat carrying 28 Afghans trying to reach the island's shores capsized. According to information of the Greek Coastguard, 21 dead bodies have already been recovered from the sea or found in the area of Thermi. UNHCR has visited the only survivor so far, a 16 years old boy, who is hospitalized at the local hospital of Mytilini. According to his testimony, the boat carried 6 more persons, including two women with their babies. Search and rescue operations are ongoing.

It should be noted that since mid-August 2012, when the Greek-Turkish border crossing through the Evros region became particularly difficult, refugees and migrants have attempted to reach the islands of the Aegean as the only means to enter Greece and Europe, confirming UNHCR's considerations for a shift to more perilous crossings.

UNHCR highlights that control measures at the borders should be combined with guarantees for the protection of refugees, in line with States' international protection obligations. Borders must be kept open for persons fleeing war and persecution.

In order to enable the identification of persons with international protection needs, in the framework of mixed migration movements, it is imperative that the Greek law 3907/2011, establishing first reception procedures at the entry points of Greece, be fully applied.

In this particularly challenging moment, UNHCR applauds the humanitarian initiatives of solidarity undertaken by the local society of Lesvos, in relation to the coverage of needs for hundreds of refugees and migrants reaching the island during the last months.

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