

OVER 10,000 MIGRANT CHILDREN MISSING

EUROPOL FEARS KIDS MAY BE EXPLOITED

THE HAGUE: Over 10,000 unaccompanied migrant children have disappeared in Europe, the EU police agency Europol said yesterday, fearing many have been whisked into sex trafficking rings or the slave trade. Europol's press office confirmed to AFP the figures published in British newspaper The Observer, adding that they covered the last 18-24 months. The agency's chief of staff Brian Donald said the vulnerable children had disappeared from the system after registering with state authorities following their arrival in Europe.

"It's not unreasonable to say that we're looking at 10,000-plus children," Donald said, adding that 5,000 had disappeared in Italy alone. "Not all of them will be criminally exploited; some might have been passed on to family members. We just don't know where they are, what they're doing or whom they are with." Donald said there was evidence of a "criminal infrastructure" established over the last 18 months to exploit the migrant flow.

The Observer reported that Europol found evidence of links between smuggling rings bringing people into the EU and human trafficking gangs exploiting migrants for sex and slavery. "There are prisons in Germany and Hungary where the vast majority of people arrested and placed there are in relation to criminal activity surrounding the migrant crisis," Donald said. Over one million migrants and refugees, many fleeing the Syria conflict, crossed into Europe last year.

"Whether they are registered or not, we're talking about 270,000 children," Donald told the paper. "Not all of those are unaccompanied, but we also have evidence that a large proportion might be," he said, adding that the 10,000 is likely to be a conservative estimate. He said many of the children are "visible",

and not "spirited away and held in the middle of forests".

'Most Vulnerable Group'

Raffaella Milano, Save the Children's Italy-Europe program director, said that "unaccompanied minors who travel without adults are the most vulnerable group of the migratory flow". "Many minors, in fact, make themselves 'invisible' to the authorities to enable them to continue their journey in Europe, for fear of being sent back," she said. Many children arrive first on the Greek islands before making the journey to relatives across Europe.

Laura Pappa, president of the Greek charity Meta-Action, a group accompanying children who travel without relatives, said they "face a destiny that is worse than that of the rest of migrants waiting to be relocated". She said they often have to wait for around seven months to be reunited with relatives, and that procedures can be slow and complicated. "There are some people that present themselves as uncles and take the children. It's not easy in this mess to cross check the identity of the 'uncle'." Pappa said the group has helped 3,000 children reach family, but that it "is not enough".

Escalating Tensions

Britain is one country that has said it will take in migrant or refugee children who have been separated from their parents. Despite the constant risk of death and deportation, migrants continue to stream into Europe, risking their lives to escape poverty, repression and conflict. Many children are among the refugees and migrants who have lost their lives making the perilous crossing in the Mediterranean.

In the latest tragedy, the Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies of



LESBOS, Greece: This file photo taken on Nov 4, 2015 shows refugee and migrant children in a field next door to the Moria camp on this Greek island, waiting to be registered in Mytilene. — AFP

women and children were washed up on a beach after their boat sank, leaving at least 37 people dead. Tensions are escalating across the continent over the increasing numbers of migrants, with many right-wing groups calling for more immigration restrictions and

tighter borders. On Saturday, Swedish police said dozens of masked men believed to belong to neo-Nazi gangs gathered in Stockholm and handed out leaflets calling for attacks against young unaccompanied migrants. And anti-fascist and far-right pro-

testers clashed in a southern German town where unknown assailants threw a hand grenade into a refugee shelter on Friday, as the country scrambles to integrate the over one million asylum seekers it welcomed last year. — AFP

PLUMMETING OIL PRICES MEAN CHEAPER AIRFARES

NEW YORK: Plummeting oil prices have led to falling plane ticket prices - and prospects for an even bigger bonanza of consumer-friendly fares in the coming months, airline industry experts say. With fuel prices down by two-thirds from the dizzying heights of mid-2014, when oil topped \$100 per barrel, the once cash-strapped airline industry is now reaping record profits. Increased competition also have helped coax down once stubbornly high fares, the experts say.

"We've seen typical domestic prices drop about 14 percent over the past year," Patrick Surry, chief data scientist at Hopper, the airfare prediction app, told AFP. "The drop in fuel prices is a major factor, along with increasing competition from low cost carriers, both domestically and internationally," Surry said. Experts say fuel makes up about a third of an airline's costs. With oil and jet fuel costs down two-thirds since last year, airlines can expect to reduce their overhead by about 20 percent.

Some of the best bargains are for air fares to popular US travel destinations like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, cities where competition is stiff. Good deals can also be had on routes to the southwestern US energy hubs of Houston and Dallas, where the slowdown in the oil business has led to discounted air fares. Some companies said they are using the windfall in fuel costs to reduce debt and to make needed reinvestment in their infrastructure. "We are utilizing our cash to continue to secure our future," said Gerry Laderman, senior vice president at United Airlines. "In 2015, we prepaid \$1.2 billion of debt, including \$300 million in the fourth quarter."

Likewise, Richard Anderson, CEO at Delta, said of his company: "Our focus on our long-term goals is unwavering. We will continue to reinvest in the business at an appropriate level to sustain long-term growth." The US Bureau of Labor Statistics in a report earlier this month (January) said air fares by foreign travelers on US airlines fell 15.0 percent in 2015, the largest cal-

endar-year drop since the index was first published in 1987. The decline in ticket prices was steepest for air travel to Latin American and Caribbean (down 17.8 percent), but there were also big drops in fares to Asia (down 14.6 percent) and Europe (down 11.7 percent).

Cheap Fares to the Olympics?

Travel industry experts said that the relatively low prices were likely to continue throughout 2016, including an anticipated 23 percent drop in the price of airfares to Rio this summer, just in time for the Olympic games. But there will be plenty of bargains for those traveling to other destinations as well, said Scott Kirby, president of American Airlines. "There's lots of low fares in the market," the airline CEO told reporters. "Consumers are having a field day in this environment," he said. American, which emerged from bankruptcy two years ago, is just one of several major airlines posting record profits over the last few quarters.

Pocketing the Savings

Not all of airlines' fuel cost savings have gone back into the pockets of passengers, however. "Of course, there's no reason that they have to pass this (the savings) directly to consumers," said Surry. But even with some companies pocketing or reinvesting a good deal of the savings, they "are definitely trickling down," he said. And the high-flying airline industry is likely to continue passing along a good portion of their saving, experts said. "So long as we avoid full recession, US airlines are likely to see yet another historic year of profitability in 2016," said David Fintzen, an aviation analyst with Barclays.

The International Air Transport Association, IATA, noted that the picture is not entirely rosy. Some airlines, it said, will not benefit from the full impact of falling fuel prices because of a sharp rise in the value of the US dollar in recent months. Some airlines have been hurt by hedging policies that led them to lock in future fuel supplies at higher prices. — AFP

MALALA SEEKS TO RAISE \$1.4BN TO EDUCATE SYRIAN REFUGEES

LONDON: Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai will seek to inspire world leaders at a conference in London on Thursday to commit \$1.4 billion this year to give Syrian refugee children access to education, she told Reuters yesterday. Heads of state and government and ministers from countries around the world will converge on London for the "Supporting Syria and the region" conference, which aims to raise funds for humanitarian crises caused by the Syrian war.

Some 700,000 Syrian children living in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon and in other Middle Eastern countries are out of school, according to a report issued by the Malala Fund, which campaigns and fundraises for educational causes. "I have met so many Syrian refugee children, they are still in my mind. I can't forget them. The thought that they won't be able to go to school in their whole life is completely shocking and I cannot accept it," Malala said in a telephone interview. "We can still help them, we can still protect them. They are not lost yet. They need schools. They need books. They need teachers. This is the way we can protect the future of Syria."

A Pakistani teenage education activist who came to prominence when a Taliban

gunman shot her in the head on her school bus in 2012, Malala continued campaigning on the world stage and in 2014 became the youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner. Now 18, she lives in Britain but devotes much of her time and energy to the cause of education for Syrian refugee children. An accomplished public speaker who brought a United Nations audience to its feet in a celebrated speech in 2013, she hopes to make a powerful impact at the London event.

'We Can't Wait'

"I'm hoping to encourage and inspire world leaders to take action. I'm not going to wait. We can't wait. It needs to happen." She will appear at the London conference alongside 17-year-old schoolgirl Muzoon Almellehan, who will be the only young Syrian refugee to address world leaders at the event. "Without education we cannot do anything," Muzoon said on the same call as Malala. She said she was working hard on improving her English so she could complete her schooling in Britain and go to university, but also wanted to dedicate herself to "my sister" Malala to the cause of education for fellow Syrian refugees. — Reuters

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