

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN: CROSSING THE EXTERNAL BORDERS OF THE EU IN SEARCH OF PROTECTION

*Frank Felix,
Deputy Director,
Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs*

On 9-10 December 2010, the Belgian Immigration office, the Belgian Secretary of State for Asylum and Immigration and the federal police organised an **expert seminar** entitled “Unaccompanied Children: crossing the external borders of the EU in search of protection”.

With influxes of unaccompanied minors increasing significantly in recent years, this issue has risen rapidly up the EU agenda, culminating in the adoption by the European Commission of an **EU Action Plan** on Unaccompanied Minors for 2010-2014. This Belgian Presidency event aimed to bring together key experts from a wide variety of fields to discuss practical issues related to the implementation of the strategic priorities set in the Action Plan. Participants included representatives of national and international civil society groups such as Save the Children, international organisations such as UNICEF, the European institutions and agencies, and various services within Member States such as the police, authorities responsible for migration and asylum issues and child protection services.

The event began with a plenary session, during which the European Commission gave a presentation reminding participants of the key elements and guiding principles of the Action Plan, noting that the key issues raised by unaccompanied minors should always be how to provide such children with protection in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure their best interests are fully taken into account. The EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency also presented the results of a study it has done outlining the key challenges concerning the protection of unaccompanied minors in 12 EU Member States.

Participants were subsequently divided into three separate working groups, where experts shared examples of **best practice** on key challenges related to unaccompanied minors. The first focused on issues related to the detection of vulnerable children at the EU border, and featured interventions by representatives of a variety of organisations active at borders such as FRONTEX, the Spanish border police and Brussels Airlines. The second working group addressed the issues surrounding age assessment of unaccompanied children such as how to ensure that procedures used are implemented in a child-friendly manner and considered the need for EU-wide guidelines on this issue. The third group considered the protection of unaccompanied children, with a particular focus on how to ensure that protection is offered from the first encounter with the minor through effective cooperation between all relevant services. Presenters again provided the perspective of a variety of relevant actors, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Dutch Guardianship Organisation (NIDOS) and a Belgian reception centre specialised in caring for unaccompanied minors.

The seminar resulted in a series of **recommendations** aiming to guide states in providing unaccompanied minors with the special protection and assistance to which they are entitled under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and on providing them with a durable solution, based on an individual assessment of their circumstances and taking their best interests as the primary

consideration. At the closing session of the event, the Belgian State Secretary for Migration and Asylum issues, Melchior Wathelet, presented these recommendations to Istvan Ordog, representative of the Hungarian Presidency, who assured participants that it would prioritise the issue of unaccompanied minors and the implementation of the EU Action Plan.

The Recommendations of the Event are available at: http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/europegroup/europegrp_pubs.html

The Commission's Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors for 2010-14 can be accessed at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0213:FIN:EN:PDF>