**Millions of Child Refugees Do Not Attend School in Adopted Homeland**

**By Nikolia Apostolou, *USA Today* on 10.26.18**

ATHENS, Greece — Sixteen-year-old Abdul Rashid will attend school for the first time in Greece this month, even though the Afghan refugee has been in the country for almost three years. He says he expects it to be a struggle, especially given the language barrier. "It's very important to learn the language of the country you're living in," Abdul said in English. "So now I'm learning Greek. But it's very difficult. It's very different from our language."

As parents and kids return to school in Greece, thousands of children who arrived in the Mediterranean country during the refugee crisis that began three years ago have been staying home, whether in an apartment, house or shipping containers in a refugee camp.

Four out of 10 children between 5 and 17 weren't enrolled in school in Greece, according to a UNHCR report on refugee children's education. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds had the worst enrollment rate, with only four out of 10 enrolled, while only one out of 10 children living on the Greek islands was enrolled in school.

Abdul, who speaks Dari and English, and is learning Greek, hadn't gone to school since leaving Afghanistan. When he first arrived in Greece he was trying to reach Germany with his family, where his brother was already living. But he got stuck in Idomeni, a Greek town on the Macedonian border, in 2016 when the European Union shut down the free flow of migrants through the Western Balkans – starting in 2015, more than a million refugees flowed into Europe.

He spent a year expecting to be reunified with his brother in Germany but the reunification program, according to UNHCR numbers, has been virtually frozen this year. As another year passed, Abdul didn't know he could attend public school in Greece or even how to enroll because no one provided him with that information. His plight is common.

Half of the world's refugees are children, according to a UNICEF report. Of those who are of school age, more than half are not in the classroom. That means 4 million children around the world are out of school. Last year, the number of out-of-school refugee children increased by 500,000, according to the latest UNICEF report.

Germany, Italy and Greece have taken the lion's share of refugees arriving in Europe. While Italy is still lagging behind in processing the new arrivals or getting the children into school, Germany has recognized it's a problem and tried to integrate the kids into the classroom with special help to address their unique needs. It's had mixed success so far.

In Greece, experts are hopeful that more children will attend school this year. They said the Greek government's policy is now to integrate and school these children. Even so, the Greek Ministry of Education didn't have numbers available on how many refugees enrolled in school this year.

"We're expecting an increase in the teenagers that have enrolled, and that's thanks to (the ministry appointing) new education coordinators for refugees and the NGOs that helped refugees with the paperwork in order to enroll," said Savas Kalokairinos, a social worker for Elix, a Greek non-governmental organization where Rashid has been taking Greek language courses this summer. Elix caters to 2,500 refugee children and their parents, offering them Greek, English, math and physics courses.

There are still plenty of hurdles to refugee children's education, like red tape and teachers who don't know how to teach Greek as a second language. But also, many migrants are highly mobile and move from place to place – from camps to apartments in different cities in the middle of the school year. Others find smugglers and continue their journey to Western Europe.

Parents often don't facilitate their children's education, either. "Some 70 percent of the parents have never entered a school in their lives, so it's hard for them to teach their children how to behave in school," said Kalokairinos.

In Eleonas, one of the refugee camps in Athens, Fariba Khodadadi, age 9, switches from English to Greek easily and sometimes uses both languages in one sentence. Fariba looks forward to starting school this month for a second year at the 87th Public Elementary School of Athens, where her favorite subjects are math and Greek. Starting this month, every day, International Organization for Migration school buses will arrive at the Eleonas refugee camp to take Fariba and the 133 other kids to nearby schools.

For the first time in her life, Fariba went to school last year in Greece. She started walking her way from Afghanistan to Europe with her family before she was even of school age. "It was cold, and my legs hurt," Fariba said. "I was 5 years old."

She tries to explain how her family had to leave Afghanistan because of violence. She gestures digging, placing something in the area she's dug, and then shouts "Bam!" and spreads her arms toward the sky to imitate a bomb explosion. Then she goes back to highlighting in green the vowels and in pink the consonants of a page in Greek she's found.

Teachers at the camp said NGOs like Elix have been crucial in helping kids learn. But because the funding for the Elix program ends in December – European Union funds for the program will go to the Greek government – many refugees hope their experiences in Greek schools will be positive. Abdul isn't afraid. "I'm going to make it," said Abdul, highlighting that someday, he wants to become a journalist. "Here it's good. There's peace. In Afghanistan, we'd know that there was a war going on by looking outside our home before leaving for school. If there was no one on the streets, we wouldn't go to school that day."