

Migrant children at US border have right to protection and 'be with their families': UNICEF chief

Separating children from their families is in no-one's best interest – the head of UN Children's Fund [UNICEF](#) said on Tuesday – pointing to “heartbreaking” stories of infants who have been reportedly removed from their parents after entering the US from Mexico illegally.

In an appeal to the US regarding its recent policy change cracking down on migration at the border with Mexico, Executive Director Henrietta Fore said in a statement that children who were in need of international protection “have the right to be protected...and be with their families”.

She underlined how for decades the US Government had provided support to “uprooted children” from Syria or South Sudan, Somalia, or Haiti, before warning that detention and family separation can create “toxic stress” which can impact on children's long-term development.

Ms Fore added that any youngsters forced to flee their homes should have access to essential services and be with their families, since this gave them “the best chance at a healthy, happy and productive future”.

No appropriate reason to detain or jail children – *Joel Millman, IOM*

Echoing that message, UNICEF spokesperson Christophe Boulhierac, in Geneva, said that immigration and children's rights were not incompatible.

He told journalists: “I think our main role here is to make the point... that what's happening is not right and, and, more than that, immigration enforcement and protecting the right of children are not a zero-sum game.”

Research showed that taking children into custody without their parents had an “immediate” and negative effect on their wellbeing, Mr Boulhierac said.

He highlighted research which showed that children who have not seen a parent for one month after the parents' arrest “experience more frequent changes in sleeping habits, anger and withdrawing from their family”, compared with children who had seen their parents within the same period following their arrest.

Responding to journalists' questions, Mr Boulhierac confirmed that the US is the only country which has signed but has yet to ratify the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

He cited Article 9 of the international accord, which specifies that a child “shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will” except after judicial review and only if it is “necessary for the best interests of the child”.

On the same issue the UN Migration Agency [IOM](#) said that it agreed “almost 100 per cent” with the UNICEF statement.

“We feel in general no migrant should be detained for being a migrant,” IOM spokesperson Joel Millman said, before adding that there was “no appropriate reason to detain or jail children”.