

Photo Of Dead 3-Year-Old Syrian Refugee Breaks Hearts Around The World

By Hannah Bloch / NPR
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A Turkish paramilitary police officer carries the body of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, found washed ashore near the Turkish resort of Bodrum early Wednesday. The boats carrying the boy's family to the Greek island of Kos capsized. His 5-year-old brother and mother also lost their lives.

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Editor's Note: The photos in this story may be distressing to some viewers.

The numbers associated with today's migration crisis are huge: 4 million Syrians fleeing their country; 3 million Iraqis displaced. But it was the image of a solitary child — a toddler in a red T-shirt, blue shorts and Velcro sneakers, found face-down on a Turkish beach — that shocked and haunted the world this week.

The photo, which first appeared in Turkish media, sparked outrage, distress and no small amount of soul-searching. It was widely shared on Twitter with the hashtag, "KiyiyaVuranInsanlik" — Turkish for "Humanity Washed Ashore."

The drowned boy was 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, from Syria, part of a group of 23 trying to reach the Greek island of Kos. They'd set out in two boats on the 13-mile Aegean journey, but the vessels capsized.

Aylan Kurdi's 5-year-old brother Galip also drowned, as did the boys' mother, Rehan. Their father, Abdullah, survived. In all, five children from that journey are reported dead.

Aylan Kurdi's family, Syrian Kurds, had fled Kobani, a city along the border with Turkey that has been contested between ISIS and Kurdish fighters and undergone hundreds of airstrikes. They'd applied for legal migration as refugees to Canada, where Abdullah Kurdi's sister, Teema, lives and works as a hairdresser. But their application had been denied, Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch, tells NPR's Steve Inskeep.

"Their only option was to put their lives in the hands of the smuggler," Bouckaert says.

Bouckaert was among many who shared the photo of Aylan Kurdi on Twitter.

"What really touched me was the little sneakers," he says. "I'm a father of two boys myself... I realized that his parents had dressed him that morning for a very difficult journey."

Bouckaert acknowledges that "It's a very disturbing photo, but I think we should be offended that children are washing up dead on our beaches because of the failure of our politicians to provide safe passage... rather than by the photo itself."

In Britain, where just 216 Syrian refugees have been accepted so far, reaction to the photo put Prime Minister David Cameron on the defensive. "We will do more," he said Thursday.

The United Nations estimates that some 2,500 people have lost their lives on risky sea journeys as they try to escape violence and repression at home. Like all numbers associated with the migration crisis, this one can be hard to fathom. But the message of Aylan Kurdi's photo seems clear enough: The world needs to do better in addressing migrants' needs, safety and dignity.

"We really need a wakeup call that children are dying, washing up dead on the beaches of Europe, because of our collective failure to provide them safe passage," Bouckaert says. "People fleeing Syria are legitimate refugees and they should be welcomed in Europe and the rest of the world."

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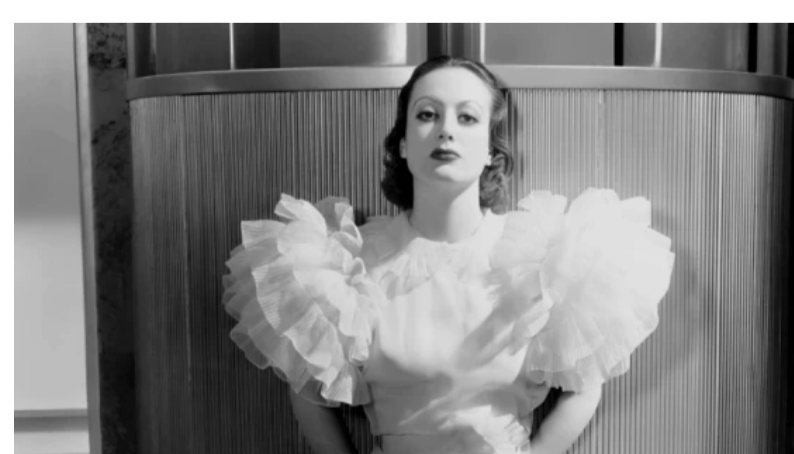
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