

# Voices of Afghan children

- A study on asylum-seeking children in Sweden



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic Countries

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Photos on the cover are accredited to UNHCR.  
The children shown did not participate in the study.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over a period of four months, a total of 42 unaccompanied children from Afghanistan who had sought asylum in Sweden were interviewed on why they left Afghanistan and how they came to Sweden.

The findings of the study support the general assumption that unaccompanied children from Afghanistan have mixed motivations for leaving Afghanistan and neighboring countries to come to Europe. Economic and social hardship in combination with protection concerns influenced the decision to migrate.

Afghan children on the move are vulnerable for a number of reasons. Some suffer from past traumatic experiences in Afghanistan. The children's stories show how they were subjected to various forms of abuse in the form of forced recruitment, child labor under exploitative conditions, fear of physical abuse, but also, how the prevalent generalized violence affected them directly and indirectly.

Moreover, the report also shows how Afghan children are subject to violations of human rights and humanitarian concerns during travel for reasons related to their illegal status, such as, being exposed to organised crime, physical abuse and child labor. In countries like Iran, Turkey and Greece, unaccompanied children are not guaranteed access to the territory or asylum procedure and they are at risk of being detained and returned at the point of entry before a determination of their best interests and their need for protection has been undertaken by the competent authorities.

In around half of the cases, the neighboring countries Iran and Pakistan constituted the initially intended destination. The rest of the children, who initially intended to go to Europe, only stayed for a week up to less than a year in neighboring countries, as a step towards their continued journey to Europe. The study shows that very few children had the initial intention of specifically going to Sweden. Whereas the choice of initial destination (Iran and Pakistan) often was based on a rational choice of where the best opportunities for survival may be found, the final place of destination seems frequently to have been decided upon during travel in Europe.

The mixed backgrounds and motives behind the Afghan children's movement from Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, serve as a reminder of the complexities of labelling unaccompanied children from Afghanistan as "anchor children" and "economic migrants". Indeed, as indicated by the stories of the children, they may have been sent to Europe as a means to protect themselves and/or the rest of the family. These complexities need to be carefully considered by authorities when assessing the protection needs of Afghan children.

Upon arrival in Sweden, the overall standard of the municipality accommodation centers visited, and the qualifications of the staff working with the children, were perceived as high. Due to the increasing number of unaccompanied children and to ensure that their needs continue to be met, it is nevertheless recommended that the Swedish Migration Board continues its efforts to conclude additional agreements with the municipalities for the reception, and accommodation of unaccompanied children.

Based on the results of the research, and taking into consideration the current situation in Afghanistan, Swedish authorities are recommended to continue to carefully assess asylum claims submitted by unaccompanied children from Afghanistan in child-sensitive procedures which take into consideration relevant and updated child-specific country of origin information and include a review of child-specific forms of persecution in the past or a risk of such persecution in future.

With regard to children who are found not to be in need of international protection, Sweden is recommended to carefully review the feasibility of return to Afghanistan in each individual case before considering such action. This requires, among other things, that the authorities carry out a comprehensive best interest determination and make serious efforts to trace family members in Afghanistan. Furthermore, if tracing is successful, an assessment of the willingness and ability of the child's family, or other care-givers, to provide appropriate long-term care should be made.

The information obtained through the interviews provide a snapshot of the challenges facing children without caretakers on the move, but it remains difficult to draw general conclusions based on the information obtained in such a small sample group. It is nevertheless hoped that the data provided will prove an insight into the significant hardship faced by Afghan children coming to Sweden. The findings and recommendations of the study may serve as background information to state and municipality officials involved in the refugee status determination and integration of Afghan children.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Aim and Scope

There is currently little available information about Afghan asylum-seekers and the reasons for their movements to and within Europe. In Sweden, the lack of information became even more apparent in light of a large increase in arrivals of Afghan unaccompanied children the past two years. Against this background, UNHCR's Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic countries, with funding from the Swedish Migration Board, conducted a research project focusing on Afghan unaccompanied children.

This report is not a UNHCR position *per se* and does not reflect the official views of the Organisation, but is research aimed to provide information about Afghan children arriving in Sweden. The study aims to increase the knowledge and understanding of the problems facing Afghan unaccompanied children in countries of origin, transit and destination, as well as, of "onward movers", mainly from Iran and Pakistan, and the conditions upon arrival in Sweden. The main conclusions of the study will be shared with the participating partners and will be used as an advocacy tool to bridge any gap in the protection and assistance provided to Afghan children on the move. It is hoped that the assessment will shed a light on some of the problems and risks faced by unaccompanied children on the move in order to better be able to meet their needs and identify possible solutions to their problems.

Moreover, the study describes the conditions in the country of origin and reasons for departure, travel routes and the situation in transit countries and the reception conditions upon arrival in Sweden. In particular, the study seeks to increase the knowledge of, and understanding for, the different hazards faced by unaccompanied children from Afghanistan during their travel to Europe based on their own stories of why and how they migrated to Sweden.

The selection of children interviewed aims to reflect the demographic make-up of the unaccompanied Afghan children in Sweden in regard to their age, gender and ethnicity. Unaccompanied children living in municipality accommodation facilities, as well as in Swedish family homes were included in the study.<sup>1</sup> However, the selection of interviewees was limited to children who had received a final decision on their application for asylum. The reason for this was twofold; to separate the refugee status determination process from UNHCR's interviews, and, to identify children who were likely to be better psychologically equipped to share their experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> One child lived together with his mother following completion of family reunification procedures.

A variety of selection procedures were applied in order to reach out as widely as possible among the group. Children were primarily identified through their guardians and with the assistance of the Swedish Afghanistan Committee and local Afghan associations.<sup>2</sup> However, initially little interest was shown by the guardians or their children. Reach-out to the children therefore had to be facilitated through municipalities with a high density of Afghan children. A total of 26 municipalities and their respective accommodation centers were contacted, out of which nine replied positively. The municipalities who chose to participate in the study were Eskilstuna, Skellefteå, Stockholm, Knivsta, Uppsala, Filipstad, Söderhamn, Mjölby and Härnösand.

Due to the limited interest of the children to participate in the study, all children were allowed to participate regardless of when they left Afghanistan. The participating children left Afghanistan for neighboring countries (primarily Iran) between 2005 and 2008 and from there to Europe between 2007 and 2009. There is not sufficient data to draw any conclusions on why a large number of children left Afghanistan and/or neighboring countries for Europe between 2007 and 2009.

The study has been carried out in parallel with UNHCR research ongoing in a number of other countries. It is envisaged that the different studies will complement each other.

## 1.2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, as well as a quantitative research methodology, with the emphasis placed on the qualitative aspects. A qualitative approach was found best suited for this type of study since it can convey the children's life stories and their subjective feelings, thoughts and experiences regarding their difficult and dangerous journey. Interview questions were of semi standard character.<sup>3</sup> The children were invited to speak relatively freely around certain themes, but could choose not to respond to certain question in case they were not able or willing. Since not all the children responded to the same questions, it is not possible to provide exact percentages of how many experienced any particular practice.

As part of the qualitative approach, the study is based on participatory assessments, a practical methodology used by UNHCR to promote participation by refugees, including children, to inform planning and decision-making. In the participatory assessment methodology, focus is traditionally placed on semi-structured discussions in smaller groups or individually, as well as, on group discussions in larger focus groups. Therefore, the children were invited to indicate whether they preferred to participate in individual interviews or in focus group discussions. Few children were, however, willing to engage in

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<sup>2</sup> A guardian in Sweden is an independent care taker appointed by the relevant authority to advise and represent the child in all planning and decision-making processes concerning the child.

<sup>3</sup> The primary interview techniques consisted of open-ended questions allowing for further responses through follow-up questions during the interview. Kvale, S. *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 1997.

discussions with other children on topics of common concern. One focus group discussion comprising five boys, most of Hazara ethnicity, clarified that the sensitive information shared by children was better suited to the framework of individual interviews, allowing for trust to be built between the interviewer and the child, under conditions of calmness and safety. As a result, the current study builds on 42 individual interviews with children of age 15 to 17. In addition, the study included a few children who had arrived as minors to Sweden, but who had now turned 18. Although the qualitative approach constitutes the core element of the study, quantitative data are used in a complementary manner. Statistics on general asylum trends and practices were provided by UNHCR and the Swedish Migration Board.

In November 2009, UNHCR Stockholm and the Swedish Migration Board undertook initial discussions concerning the design of the study, selection of focus groups and the geographical scope of the study. Meetings were also held with staff from the Swedish Migration Board's Reception Unit and Embassy Section concerning the modalities of the study. In addition, UNHCR met with the Swedish Afghanistan Committee, through which a meeting with Afghan associations in Sweden was organised.<sup>4</sup> During the latter meeting, the associations were informed about the exercise and purpose of the study to which they expressed their support and they disseminated information about the study to children in their communities.

The interview team was composed of one UNHCR consultant and one Farsi-speaking interpreter with a background in sociology. The interpreter was involved in all aspects of planning and carrying out of the study in order to facilitate her understanding of the subject matter during interviews and increased the quality of the outcome. Interviews were held in Farsi, the national language of Iran and the first language of Afghan immigrants in Iran. Since most of the children had spent a considerable time in Iran, there were no major difficulties involved in their understanding. However, some children expressed feelings of pride to be in Sweden and preferred to conduct interviews in Swedish.

The questions posed to the children in relation to their reasons for leaving Afghanistan were formulated taking into consideration UNHCR's "Guidelines on Child Asylum Claims".<sup>5</sup> They did however not comprise all the elements of refugee status determination, nor were they carried out with a view to establish the facts of the children's asylum claims or credibility. The researcher did not examine the asylum decisions taken by the authorities in the cases of the interviewed children or the legal grounds for their residence permits.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Swedish Afghan association ([www.afghanha.se](http://www.afghanha.se)), The Swedish branch of the Afghan Penn Club ([www.farda.org/english/index.html](http://www.farda.org/english/index.html)) and The Afghan Cultural Association ([www.afghanan.se/s\\_01.htm](http://www.afghanan.se/s_01.htm))

<sup>5</sup> "Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Afghan Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan", United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, July 2009. Available at [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6477ef2.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6477ef2.html).

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that most children were not familiar with the legal basis underlying their residence permit. When asked whether they would like to share their decisions after having consulted with their guardian, none of them were willing to. One rejection decision was sent to the consultant following completion of the interview.

As a consequence, no conclusions can be drawn with regard to the Swedish authorities' assessment of the cases. The protection concerns raised by the children should therefore only be seen as an indication of what risks children may face in Afghanistan.

The study is using an inductive approach, implying that the analysis of the empirical data took place once the gathering of material had been finalized. Measures to safeguard the reliability and validity of the study were applied throughout, not least by obtaining, interpreting and analyzing the received data in a neutral and unbiased way, thereby preventing distorted results.

### **1.3 Challenges and Limitations**

A number of factors may explain the children's general reluctance and unwillingness to participate in the study. These factors are inter-related and can be linked to practical and psychological factors pertinent to the individual, as well as, to groups of children and adults forming part of the children's integration network.

Some children explained that they did not want to participate because of past trauma. A number of children had received, or were currently undergoing psychological counseling, and were afraid to revive memories. Others were less direct in their explanations, claiming that they were occupied with school work and extra-curricular activities and could not see how they would benefit from participating. A number of children expressed sentiments of interview fatigue, explaining that they were exhausted from having told their stories repeatedly during and after the asylum procedure, including to authority officials, psychologists, academics and journalists.

The limitations of the study are acknowledged. Since the report primarily provides a profile of children who have received residence permits in Sweden, their reasons for leaving Afghanistan may differ from children with different background and profiles. It is however likely that their experiences with regard to their journey to Sweden also reflect that of unaccompanied children who have not applied for asylum, children in hiding, or children subject to transfer under the Dublin II Regulation.<sup>7</sup>

All children did not respond to all questions. Therefore, unless otherwise indicated in the report, the data presented reflect the replies given by the majority of children who did speak respond in regard to a particular topic. The empirical data is presented in concentrated form, sometimes containing quotes to illustrate the text. Moreover, the report aims to reflect the stories of the children without assessing their truthfulness or whether their claims are wellfounded. However, there are throughout the report, references to reports by UNHCR and other sources that collaborate or further explain the claims.

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<sup>7</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national.

#### **1.4 Ethical considerations**

The children were reassured that the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses would be respected. The language and concepts used in the interviews were adapted to suit the child's age, stage of development, and educational background, all of which varied from one child to another. Interviews were furthermore designed to prevent the children from sharing information which may embarrass them, make them feel uncomfortable or make them relive traumatic experiences. The children were able to bring the interview to a close or change their mind at any given point.

## 2. Afghan Unaccompanied Children in Sweden

The last couple of years, Sweden has witnessed a substantial increase in arrivals of unaccompanied children from Afghanistan. In 2008, this trend was reflected by a 117 percent increase as compared to 2007, which means that unaccompanied children represent 44 percent of all asylum-seekers arriving from Afghanistan. In 2009, 46 percent (780) of all Afghan asylum seekers were unaccompanied children. 98 percent of those applications were submitted by boys, most of whom were 15-17 years of age and belonged to the Hazara ethnic group.

The grounds for protection in first instance in 2009 were divided as follows; of 438 granted decisions, 15 Afghan children were granted refugee status following a review in lined with Chapter 4:1 of the Swedish Alien's Act (2005:716). 84 were granted subsidiary protection because of torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Chapter 4:2.1). 243 unaccompanied Afghan children received subsidiary protection due to the existence of an internal armed conflict in the province of origin, alternatively because of other severe conflicts in the country of origin (Chapter 4:2.2). Finally, 95 were granted residence permits based on particularly distressing circumstances (chapter 5:6).<sup>8</sup> According to UNHCR statistics the overall protection rate for unaccompanied Afghan children in Sweden amounted to 90 percent in 2009.

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<sup>8</sup> References are made to the provisions of the Swedish Alien's Act in place prior to the amendments introduced in January 2010 when the EC qualification Directive was transposed.

## 3. The Situation in Afghanistan

### 3.1 Places of Origin and Ethnicity

All but one of the participating children were born in Afghanistan. A clear majority originated from the central eastern province of Ghazni (mainly Jaghori district), followed by its neighboring province, Maydan Wardak and the more southern province of Oruzgan. Other provinces of origin included Helmand, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kunduz and Kandahar. One child was born in Iran. The children were mainly Shiia Muslims of Hazara ethnicity, with the exception of one Uzbek and one Tajik.<sup>9</sup>

It turned out that quite a number of children were not familiar with the geographical location of their province of origin when presented with a map illustrating Afghanistan, and even less so with regard to more specific places of origin at district level. It is worth noting that a few children mentioned Ghazni as their province of origin, but they identified a village or town situated in another province as their specific place of origin. In these situations, clarifications were made and in most cases it could be concluded that the town or village that had been indicated on the map was the actual place of origin.

### 3.2 Economic, Social and Education Factors

*I went to school for almost two years in Nad Ali, but sometimes it is closed. When the Taliban are not there it is open so that all children can attend school, but when the Taliban come back to Nad Ali, children can no longer go to school.*

16-year-old Hazara boy originating from Nad Ali, Helmand,  
left Afghanistan in 2007.

A majority of the children grew up in small rural societies or villages in mountainous areas, where the closest town was far beyond walking distance. The children described the social and economic situation in their places of origin as dire, with widespread poverty, weak or non-existent governance and a lack of social services. They lived in small clay houses without electric heating. The children and the adults therefore had to spend considerable time collecting wood for heating. Many children grew up in small-scale farmer families, some of them owned land or cattle, primarily cows, goats and sheep. A few children were raised in families where the father had employment elsewhere in Afghanistan, either doing business in a nearby town, or enrolled with the Afghan military forces. In these situations,

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<sup>9</sup> The children's ethnic belonging and reported place of origin correspond with information obtained from UNHCR Kabul that the western districts of Ghazni, of which Jaghori constitutes one, are dominated by the Hazara ethnicity, while the eastern districts by ethnic *Pushtun*, with some mixed populations (including *Tajiks*) in and around the provincial capital and in the northern districts adjacent to Wardak.

the children were left with increased economic and social responsibilities for the rest of the family, in particular by assisting in the family's farm.

Most children spent their days assisting their parents or other relatives with farming while periodically attending school. The children described their schools as make-shift buildings, without teaching materials and a low quality of teaching. Some children emphasized that it was not proper schools because Mullahs and priests were responsible for instruction, whereas others with similar experience did not raise this as an issue. Many said that they did not know whether the school in their place of origin had been run by governmental employees or by religious leaders. The experience of a 16-year-old boy from Helmand differed from the other children in that he raised corruption among teachers as a problem, explaining that "it was a corrupt system, if you had the financial means you were given high grades and could proceed to the next level, but if you had no money you could not advance."

Around half of the children reported to have attended school periodically, ranging from a period of two to six years. Some children said that they had only attended school on an ad hoc basis, because of the presence of the Taliban in their home area. The children said that the Taliban did not agree to children attending school, why typically teaching ceased during the periods when the Taliban were active in the area. In a few cases, a change in the child's family composition forced the children to discontinue school. Such a change was mainly due to the sudden death of the father of the family, or that he had to find employment elsewhere in the region, leaving the eldest son with increased responsibilities. Others said that they had quit school as a result of problems faced by their fathers. A few children reported to have quit school due to incidents involving threats or abductions of children by the Taliban on their way to and from school.

Various reasons of economic and religious nature were given to explain why some children had not attended school at all. In particular, economic reasons were attributed to children's inability to attend school due to the fact that their parents could not pay for school materials and travel costs to and from school. Some children put forward that their parents had kept them from attending school because the teachers had different religious views than they did. A few children claimed that their parents did not share the religious views of teachers, but that they nevertheless had to attend school due to "pressures" of an undefined character.

The experience of one 17-years-old boy originating from Ghazni was different in that because his father did not accept the education provided in the school, he was home-schooled. He said: "I do not have any brothers so I was the man of the house. We had books at home and my father had studied a lot so he helped me with English when he was home."



### 3.3 Family Composition and Age

Most of the interviewed children left Afghanistan for neighboring countries (primarily Iran) between 2005 and 2008 at ages varying from thirteen to fifteen. The age of children when leaving Afghanistan did not differ depending on whether they had lived with parents or other care-givers in Afghanistan. However, those who left together with an adult, were generally somewhat younger than those who left for neighboring countries unaccompanied.

With regard to the family composition, a slight majority of the children claimed to have been orphans when they left Afghanistan. Either both or one parent, normally the father, had died as a result of the war or fighting with the Taliban. In a few cases, the mother had reportedly passed away following illness. In these cases, the children and their younger siblings were taken care of by the maternal uncle and only a few by the paternal uncle.<sup>10</sup> Other care-givers were neighbors in the place of origin or employers. Most of the children without parents left Afghanistan for Iran on their own at age twelve to fifteen.

Out of the children with parents left in Afghanistan at the time they left for neighbouring countries, an equal number of children had either one or both parents left. Smaller numbers of these children left for Pakistan and/or Iran together with one or both parents at a young age, the rest by themselves at age thirteen to sixteen.

In a few cases, the children were separated from the only parent still alive, normally the mother, during their flight from Afghanistan to a neighbouring country. It is worth noting, that in some of these cases, the children reunited with their missing relatives while in Sweden through tracing activities carried out in Afghanistan and neighboring countries.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.4 Intended Places of Destination

The children were asked where they had intended to go when leaving Afghanistan. The question assumes that there was some level of decision-making process regarding the place of first and final place of destination at the time of leaving Afghanistan. With a few exceptions, this assumption was confirmed, although the preciseness of the intended first and final place of destination was limited to "Iran or Pakistan" and "Europe" as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult to assess to what extent the initial intentions expressed by the children were their own, their care-givers' or both. the child's perceived intended place of destination may furthermore not correspond to that of his parents' or care-givers' while in

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this claimed practice differs from the customary practice in Afghan society where this would normally be the task of the paternal uncle. *C.f. "Children on the Move between Afghanistan and Western Countries,"* United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, March 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Tracing activities are normally carried out with the assistance of the Swedish Red Cross and parents (normally the mother) were found located in Iran.

<sup>12</sup> There are exceptions of parents who made the decision to send their children to Europe without the child's knowledge.

Afghanistan, but reflect the actual place of destination. Based on the replies received, the children or their parents' or care-givers' initial intentions can nevertheless be divided in two groups; those who left for neighboring countries and those who intended to go to Europe.

Around half of the children and their care-givers intended for the child to go to Iran or Pakistan. This group of children came to stay in (mostly) Iran for periods ranging from one to ten years. The profile of the children without an expressed initial intent to go to Europe varies, with some going to Iran at an early age together with their families, and others on their own. Children leaving without family members spent an average of two years working in Iran, while children leaving with parents or other care-givers primarily resided in Iran for extended periods of time ranging from a few years up to ten years. The latter group represents those who stayed for the longest periods of time in the neighboring countries.

Slightly less than half of the children thought that they or their parents had had the initial plan to go to Europe, only transiting through Pakistan or Iran as a step towards the continued journey to Europe. Most of them left Afghanistan without an adult and stayed in Iran for a few months up to less than a year before continuing to Europe. Despite the intention only to transit, quite a few ended up taking on employment in Iran, sometimes working for a smuggler, to finance the onward journey. Others explained that they mostly stayed indoors while waiting for an opportunity to leave the country. Only a small number of this group of children went directly to Europe without staying in a neighboring country. One 17-year-old boy, originating from Maydan Wardak, explained that his sister decided that he was going to go to Sweden already when he was in Pakistan. In the case of four children, the intentions could not be identified.

Most of the children, with either parents or other care-givers in Afghanistan, were assisted by them in making the practical travel arrangements. They contacted the smugglers and paid for the journey. Many children said that the practical arrangements had taken place without their knowledge. However, in general, they did not give the impression of having been coerced by relatives or other adults into leaving Afghanistan.

Whereas, initial intentions could be identified for most children, a definitive and more specific decision on the final destination was normally not taken in Afghanistan or in neighboring countries, but was, depending on the individual case, decided during the journey by the child, the smuggler or another adult. Many children claimed not to have known their final place of destination until they had already arrived in Sweden. This was typically the information provided by children who said that they had travelled in confined conditions all the way to Sweden. Others said that they found out during the journey that they were heading for Sweden. In none of these cases, the children seem to have been part of the decision-making process. It was normally the smuggler who took the decision, possibly in consultation with the children's relatives.

In a few cases, the children made the decision to go to Sweden on their own, based on information received by migrants and other persons they met during the journey. These children described the selection of country of final destination as a process. Several children made up their mind to go to Sweden as a result of several factors, including the difficult situation children face in countries, such as Greece, and general information on the situation in different European countries provided by other migrants and staff working for non-governmental organisations in transit countries.

### **3.5 Family Separation during the Travel from Afghanistan**

Although a majority of the children were not able to describe where they crossed the border to neighboring countries, the ones who did referred to Nimroz as the most frequent crossing point.<sup>13</sup> A few children said that they had been separated from their mothers and/or younger siblings on their way to neighboring countries. In a few cases, the separation took place when the Taliban arrived during night in the transit provinces in the south of Afghanistan. Several children reported to have been separated from family members when they were placed in different vehicles under the pretext that reunification would take place upon arrival.

To every new place we arrived we had to be isolated in small houses or rooms. One used to collect people in different groups and then the groups were transported onwards in trucks, cars, and etcetera. During one occasion, when I and my [two]brothers were in such house or room and we said to the smuggler that we would very much like to be together when travelling from there but the smuggler tells me that it does not really matter that much. You will anyways arrive in one and the same place once you arrive in Iran. And it was nothing I could question. It was just to obey orders and you cannot dispute because it would get very problematic. I had to obey and adapt. This incident was the start to what led my brother to disappear.

This quotation illustrates the case of a boy, who was separated from his brother, during an exchange of vehicles on the journey from Afghanistan to Tehran. Upon arrival in Tehran, the boy asked the smuggler what had happened to his brother, but was told that the smuggler did not know. The boy explained that there was no use continuing to ask the smuggler, he would not know since the smugglers were regularly exchanged and the travellers were too numerous to keep track of.

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<sup>13</sup> UNHCR studies and qualitative fieldwork support that Nimroz is the most frequent crossing point for irregular migrants to Iran due to the fact that the long Nimroz border is “the more porous and easiest access point to Iran”, *Cooperation Towards Solutions; Research Study on Afghan deported from Iran*, ILO-UNHCR August 2008, p.30.

## 4. Reasons for Leaving Afghanistan

### 4.1 Mixed Motivations

When asking the children for the reasons why they left Afghanistan, initial reference was commonly made to the lack of security and the dire economic situation in the country. The children would typically say that they “had no future in Afghanistan”, referring to the high unemployment rate, low wages, widespread poverty and few prospects for education as major factors to migrate to neighboring countries in search of a better future. The children’s accounts confirmed their knowledge of economic pull factors in Iran in terms of labor opportunities and the fact that average salaries were much higher than in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup>

However, once the researcher posed questions relating to potential protection concerns in Afghanistan, many children revealed additional reasons underlying their departure relating to security problems of a more individual character. It became apparent that while many children did not volunteer to talk about sensitive issues, once they felt comfortable and the questions were formulated in a comprehensible way, they spoke out more freely. Several children described practices in Afghanistan from the perspective of other children’s experiences. This was, for instance, the case of one 16-year-old boy originating from Maydan Wardak, who explained that to the researcher that “children in Afghanistan are sometimes brought away by wealthy people who let them stay and dance for them. They use them sexually. They must dance for them if they are young and beautiful. And they use to decorate their feet and tie a bell around their wrists”.

Although all children raised economic and social hardship as one reason for flight, only a few children actually said that they had left Afghanistan for purely economic reasons. Most of the children, who participated in the study, seem to have left Afghanistan for reasons relating to conflict and insecurity and individual risks associated to their ethnicity, age and gender. The protection-related concerns did not seem to differ between children without parental care-givers or those with one or two parents at time of departure from Afghanistan.

Whereas recent studies on population movements between Afghanistan and Pakistan suggest that the current Afghan migrant population “consists mainly of temporary and cyclical migrants who travel for a mixed variety of reasons, influenced by social, cultural

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<sup>14</sup> Recent studies confirm that the monthly wage levels are four times higher in Iran (mean of USD 323) than in Afghanistan (mean under USD 80), see ILO-UNHCR Cooperation Towards Solutions; Research Study on Afghan deported from Iran, August 2008.

and economic factors” none of the children said that they had returned to Afghanistan after having left the country.<sup>15</sup>

It is not easy to assess to what extent the children financially support relatives in Afghanistan through remittances, only a few said that they send remittances to family members in Afghanistan through, what was referred to as, “Afghan-owned private companies.” Although not explicitly mentioned by the children, it does not seem likely that their decision to choose Iran over Pakistan was influenced by geographical considerations since most children originated from the south-eastern provinces bordering Pakistan rather than western provinces bordering Iran. Their choices were nevertheless likely to be influenced by the Hazara’ traditional links with Iran, not least based on similarities in religion and language.

In some cases, the children were reluctant to respond to questions relating to their reasons for leaving Afghanistan. The hesitation on the part of children may be due to a number of reasons. In some cases, the child was very young when leaving Afghanistan and may simply have limited knowledge and recollection of the situation in Afghanistan and the reasons for their departure. In other cases, the children were clearly unwilling to reveal the factors triggering their flight, expressing feelings of restlessness. A few explained, in a forthright manner, that they did not want to revisit memories once forcing them to leave their home country. The following human rights-related concerns were identified among the children willing to tell of their experiences.<sup>16</sup>

## 4.2 Generalized Violence

*At night, we normally took off to the mountains to seek protection. We were very frightened... half of the year we spent in the mountains under a period of four to five years.F<sup>17</sup>*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Nahala, Jaghori, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in mid 2008.

A majority of the children reported to have been adversely affected by the general violence, predominantly in the eastern and southern provinces, often with reference to specific

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<sup>15</sup> ILO-UNHCR Cooperation Towards Solutions; Research Study on Afghan deported from Iran, August 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Although, most children left Afghanistan a couple of years ago, these practices are still prevalent as show in the recent report by the special Representative of the Secretary General on Children in Armed Conflict, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), February 2010 Misson Report by the Special Representative of the Secretary-Children for Children in Armed Conflict on visit to Afghanistan, 26 February 2010, available at: [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0e143b2.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0e143b2.html) [accessed 13 June 2010].

<sup>17</sup> Throughout 2008, the situation in all districts in the province of Ghazni, was considered unsafe according to UNHCR. Reports indicate intensified counter insurgency activities, possible military operation and indiscriminate attacks by anti-government elements. C.f. “Afghanistan Security Situation relating to Complementary Forms of Protection”, “Update on the Situation in Afghanistan and International Protection Considerations”, UNHCR, updated versions dated 25 February, 31 March, 18 June and 6 October 2008.

clashes between Pashtuns or the Taliban and the American forces in these regions. While a few children had lost one or both parents as result of the fighting, there were several accounts of where the children and their families were caught between the opposing sides in the ongoing conflict in their place of origin. They were often forced to temporarily leave their homes and when they later returned, they found that their house had been confiscated. In the words of one 15-year-old boy from Oruzgan:

I was eight years old when I lost my father in the war. I do not know to which group he belonged. My mother had already then lost her left leg from an explosive... in 2006 our area [Orozgane Khas in Oruzgan] was attacked by air by the US forces. An explosive hit our house and my mother died.

Other children gave examples of how their life was negatively affected by the presence of the Taliban in the place of origin. An example was provided by a boy from Ghazni, who said that: "the fighting groups could knock on our door and force us to cook for them. We had not choice but to do what they said. Sometimes we also had to provide them with blankets." Another example was given by a 17-year-old boy originating from Helmand, a province which according to UNHCR, suffered from indiscriminate attacks by anti-government elements, and threats by the Taliban or the so-called "Anti-Government Elelents" in 2007:<sup>18</sup>

There were about fifty Hazara families in the area of Sayed Abad, but in all directions surrounding the families' houses, there was presence of Taliban which made life very difficult and limited...there were a lot of Pashtun and Taliban around them...the Taliban, being Sunni, asserted their control and power by hitting us [the village population] and calling us names.

Although a majority of the children typically would say that Afghanistan is "a war-torn country where different groups fight against each other", quite a few children were not able, or did not want to, provide any detailed accounts of the actors of the conflict, claiming not to remember or know the names of the groups confronting each other.

### **4.3 Physical Abuse and Threats**

*Children were raped and kidnapped. It was a very war-torn area, the Taliban used to take children as hostage. They took children and elderly. Those who are not religious...they take children on whom they attach bombs which they detonate.*

15-year-old Hazara boy originating from Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 2001.

A majority of the children reported of the prevalence of threats, physical abuse and kidnappings by the Taliban and unknown criminal groups against children on their way to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

and from school in their places of origin.<sup>19</sup> As previously indicated, the threat of abductions effectively deprived some of the children of access to education in their home villages and limited their freedom of movement. Although only one of the children had actually been kidnapped on his way to school, a number of the interviewed children said that they had been afraid to walk to and from school. The adults in their surroundings had told them to be careful when they walk to school and the children tried to accompany one other in larger groups. The children were not able to say whether or not the Hazara ethnic group was particularly at risk of abduction at that time. Neither were they able to specify for what reasons kidnappings occurred, nor by whom. Instead they referred either to the Taliban or to “mixed criminal groups”. One 16-year-old boy from Payno, tried to explain:

First, a lot of money was required enabling you to rent a bus to get to school. And we did not have that. Then there were many kidnappers who had formed a business based on kidnapping children on their way to school...they consisted of mixed criminal groups and some took children as hostage or to rape or kill them. Yes, I know a few children who have experienced this.

Another 16-year-old boy from Nad Ali, Helmand, claimed to have been captured by a Taliban group on his way home from school. The boy, who said that he was only one in a larger group of children who were captured, could not explain for what purpose he had been taken, but emphasized that he thought the Taliban had “gotten angry” since they had previously told him and his friends not to attend school. This boy managed to flee after a few days in captivity and left Afghanistan shortly after.

#### 4.4 Forced Recruitment

*The Taliban wanted us to conduct war together with them. We realized there was no way out...it was not only me, but children in my age living in this area. We did not want to join, so after the Taliban had threatened me twice, my father sent me to Iran.*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Muqur District,  
Ghazni left Afghanistan in 2008.

Several of the children reported to have been at risk of being forcibly recruited by armed groups, including by those associated with the Taliban, and to know of other children who had been recruited. In a number of cases, the children said that a parent or another care-

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<sup>19</sup> It can also be noted that actually being in school was also something that caused fear. As an example, throughout 2008, there were reports that 607 attacks on the Afghan education system were carried out, including arson and the murder of teachers. According to recent studies, attacks on schools and the general insecurity throughout the country have serious negative impacts on the education sector and insecurity causes more parents to keep their children home from school in fear of their safety. "Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan", Marit Glad, November 2009, study conducted by CARE on behalf of the World Bank and the Ministry of Education, with the Assistance of CoAR/OSDR.

giver had advised them to leave Afghanistan before they reached the age where they risked being recruited by Taliban. In the words of one 17-year-old boy from Jaghori, Ghazni:

[My mother] saw that I was becoming older which meant a risk of falling in the hands of the Taliban, and for them to exploit you in different ways. So she was afraid that I would need to fight with them so she told me it was not good for me to stay in the area, that I had to leave so that I could live and be free...the Taliban used to make visits in the homes of people with elderly children and if they saw that you had the capacity to co-operate with them they could capture you. It was because of this risk that my mother told me it was better I left.

A few children were aware of instances when children from poor families had been sold by their parents to the Taliban. These children were reportedly used by the Taliban to carry out suicide attacks with body-borne improvised explosive devices.

A majority of the children mentioned the risk of being recruited by the Taliban on the way to school. One 16-year-old boy originating from Helmand, was at the age of thirteen taken by Taliban on his way home from school and placed in a prison-like room. When asked why he thought he had been captured, the boy replied that he was not certain, but he thought they might have wanted him to join the war against the Afghan police forces. According to the boy, it was common in the village that the Taliban took children between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. When this boy was asked whether he had thought of reporting the incident to Afghan police authorities, he replied that: "No, I could absolutely not report the incident to the police. I was very afraid since the Taliban were so many and co-operated with the Pashtuns living in the village. The police were not always present so if I would have reported to the police there would be problems for my family, for my brothers."

#### **4.5 Child Labor**

Whereas a few children described how their families had been threatened to assist the Taliban by, *inter alia*, providing them with basic materials and food, three children claimed to have been abducted and recruited for child labor by the Taliban, two of them in the narcotics business. In all of these cases, the children were involuntarily taken by, who they referred to be the Taliban, without the knowledge of the child's parents. The children gave accounts of how they had worked under constant fear, physical violence and also suffering from the psychological constraint of being separated from their parents. All of the children, said that they worked long hours and were not allowed to go to school during this time. One boy described how he had to lift heavy loads for the construction of houses when he was thirteen years old. After a month, he managed to escape.

We [the interviewee and two adult captured men] were breaking rocks which we mixed with clay and we transported tools for house building... I do not know where the place was located, I could only see sand and high mountains. There



was nothing there...they hit me a lot and if you opposed to working and said you were tired, they hit you even more, they told us to work harder and kicked us from different directions.”

In another account, a boy was taken away by a group of Taliban when he was seven years old to work in the nearby poppy fields. He stayed there for six to seven years without pay. This boy was subjected to physical abuse in the form of punches and he was regularly told to convert from Shiia to Sunni. The abusive treatment in combination with the harmful labor, led to permanent physical injuries. When he was asked whether he tried to report to the local police authorities, he replied that:

The Taliban were in strong control in our area because they had their houses around the village. The Hazara people were few in numbers and we lived in the middle where we had our land. The Taliban threatened us and hit us and it happened that they brought away Hazara, both adults and children to work for them as unpaid labor. The Taliban came once to our house when I was seven or eight years old and I was very young and my uncle was not home and they brought me with them to work at the poppy fields. But I was so small, I could not really work so then they hit me and that is the reasons for which I have still problems with my arm.

Two of the children described how they managed to escape from the work by pure luck, the third boy escaped by going to Iran.

#### **4.6 Retaliation**

Children as young as eleven years old reported to have been targeted by their father's adversaries. Most of these cases initially involved threats by Pashtun groups against the child's father as a result of his affiliation to the Afghan forces. In some of the cases, the children did not know the details surrounding their father's death. After the father's death, many had been warned by friends of the father or neighbors that they were also at risk of being killed. A few children explained that after their father's death they had been afraid and isolated themselves in the house without daring to go outside.

One 17-year-old boy from Jaghori, Ghazni, whose father worked for the Afghan military, explained how he and the rest of his family were affected by his father enrollment in the military.

My dad used to go away periodically to work for the Afghan forces. At one point, my father and his group were captured by the Pashtuns. They were criminals and had guns. Shortly after fighting broke out between the Pashtuns and the Afghan government's troops. My dad then shot a relative to one of the Pashtuns in our village. The man died... My father came home and he was really frightened. My dad did not tell what had happened, he is a quiet man, but then

he told my mother and she told me. My father left again to work. When he had been away for several weeks we started to get worried. One day, my father's best friend came and visited us and said that my dad had been shot on his way to Jaghori. My father's best friend was very kind to us, he said we had to move from the area to prevent being killed, and yes they were going to take revenge on me, the son of my father.

Another boy left Afghanistan after his father had been forcibly recruited by the Taliban. The story of this boy illustrates how the recruitment posed problems for the family by the village population. The boy's father, who was very much liked by the people in the village and acted as a kind of in the village. Once he started to co-operate with the Taliban, the entire village turned against the family, who had to move away.

## 5. Stay in Neighboring Countries

### 5.1 Transit in Iran and Pakistan

80 percent of the children had stayed in Iran, mainly in Tehran, on an irregular basis before moving on. Only seven children had stayed in Pakistan, for periods ranging from a few weeks up to five months. Six of these children, who initially left Afghanistan for Pakistan, later continued to Iran. One child's profile differs in that he spent most of his childhood in Pakistan, and went straight from there to Europe.

When comparing the intended place of destination *i.e.* neighboring country versus Europe, with the length of time spent in neighboring countries (excluding the ones going directly from Afghanistan to Europe) it becomes apparent that the children who originally had the intention to go to Europe transited for the shortest period of time in neighboring countries, normally between a few weeks up until less than one year.

On the other hand, children who intended to stay in neighboring countries normally stayed 1-3 years. Finally, the group of children travelling accompanied by their parents at a young age, stayed for periods ranging from 7-10 years in neighboring countries before they decided to go to Europe on their own.

### 5.2 Employment Conditions

*It was a factory sewing bags and I worked there for three to four years. I got severe pain in my back which forced me to stop working in the factory. You sit behind the large sewing machine on a chair. That is why I have glasses. You work hard all the time. The legs and the hands are in constant motion. It is difficult to stretch your legs. I was young and did not care much. My legs hurt and my eyes became red. They gave me a week off but I never came back. In my place no one told me what to do, I was definite, and decided everything for myself.*

18-year-old Hazara boy originating from Gharzoob, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan at age five.

A majority of the children, who participated in the study, had worked in Iran, mainly in unskilled or low-skilled professions in the construction and manufacturing sector, or on the streets. The most common work included weaving carpets, sewing clothes, and collecting garbage. Whereas some children worked in the same place for several years, others relied on sporadic employment opportunities. A common practice was that children waited in the traffic roundabouts in larger Iranian cities for employers to offer them jobs. The children worked together with Afghan adults and other children staying irregularly in Iran, as well as with persons of other nationalities. It was not unusual that the children worked twelve hours per day with salaries ranging from 30 to 60 USD per week. The children reported

that they worked under very physically demanding conditions, which resulted in health problems with eyes, hands and legs.

The salaries were paid directly to the children, or, or those children who had care-givers, the salaries were paid directly to that person. A few children who arrived in Iran at a very young age referred to their employer as an adult they trusted. In these cases, the employers normally kept the children's salaries on their behalf.

Despite the hard work and low salaries, in general, the children did not complain about their treatment during the interviews, but explained that the employment conditions and salary levels were relatively good as compared to the prevailing conditions in Afghanistan.

### **5.3 Discrimination on Economic and Cultural Grounds**

*I spent ten years in Iran and was not allowed to attend school for a single day...but when I arrived to Sweden I was allowed to attend school and this is not even a Muslim country.*

18-year-old Hazara boy originating from Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 1998.

The children's illegal status in Iran had a significant impact on their situation and added to their general vulnerability. They explained that they faced the same discriminatory treatment as adults regardless of how long they had stayed in the country. With regard to economic discrimination, the children described feeling subordinate to the Iranian population, primarily by being excluded from social benefits, such as the Iranian health assurance and the food coupons system. Although a few children had attended school in Iran, most explained that they did not have access to education because of their illegal status, but also because they felt that the Iranians did not want to mix their children with Afghan children.

### **5.4 Vulnerability Caused by Detention and the Risk of Deportation**

*[T]he police came to our workplace on three occasions. We were able to bribe them to free us the two first times, but on the third occasion, the police officials presented us with an ultimatum to deport the boys if they saw them in the factory.*

16-year-old Hazara boy originating from Navabad, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan with his brothers in 2005.

In the interviews, the children described that the threats of detention and deportation forced them to stay in confined living conditions for periods of time ranging from a few weeks up to several years. They said that the Iranian police authorities conducted regular patrols in areas with a high density of Afghan employees, forcing the children to run and hide. One child claimed that Afghans were regularly transported by police officials to a

number of camps along the Iranian-Afghan border prior to deportation. The boy explained that the length of stay in these camps depended on the ability of the migrant to finance his/her travel to Afghanistan.

Children residing in Iran without care-givers said that they did not trust adults, but fully relied on themselves, their friends and employers for their survival. They were normally accommodated either outside, or in their actual working place, often sharing rooms with adult irregular migrants. Others spent nights in the streets looking for temporary shelter. Some children never left their working place, but asked other Afghan migrants, who had registration cards, to assist them in buying foods and other errands. Some of these children went out during the night, a few only once or twice per month.

Several children described repeated imprisonment with threats of deportation. Occasionally, groups of irregularly staying Afghans were deported, apparently in order to intimidate others. The children also claimed that those who had been imprisoned would only be released once a fine had been paid. In a few cases of children accommodated by their employer, the employer stepped in and paid the fine. However, this did not result in any long term solution since the release was combined with the issuance of a prohibition to return to the working place and threats of deportation. The precarious situation faced by the children created a dependency relationship between the children and their employers in that many children depended on them for their economic survival and safety against deportation to Afghanistan.

Those who had transited through Pakistan also described long working days with limited possibility to move freely and a constant fear of being arrested and detained by the police. As an example, one 16-years-old boy from Maydan Wardak gave an account of how he was sold by a smuggler in Pakistan to another smuggler at the age of 13, shortly after having paid the first smuggler to go to Iran. This boy was reportedly forced to work and sleep in the smuggler's restaurant, serving tea and cleaning, without being allowed to leave the building. This boy expressed strong feelings of despair and fear when he described the long working days, the inability to see anything outside of the workplace and the physical abuse by the male employer in the form of kicks and punches.

A particularly distinguishing feature of these children's stories was their concerns relating to the security situation in Pakistan (in the Quetta area), which restricted the children from moving around freely. As an example, one boy of age 17 from Maydan Wardak, who had moved to Quetta at age 9, explained that "there were a lot of problems there [in Quetta]. When we arrived to Pakistan there was no security there either. My sister did not allow me to go outside and play with the other children, we were afraid. We had a poor economy and when I was eleven I started to wave carpets."

## 5.5 Organisation of Travel from Neighboring Countries

*I had the intention to reach a place where I could live in freedom. To live like a human being. To spend your days and night in a working place and never go outside is really difficult. After two years I got very tired...it was worse than a prison for me. It is like a dead person...either I come to a free place or I die.*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Khaz Oruzgan, Oruzgan,  
left Afghanistan in 2005.

A majority of the children left Iran to go to Europe between 2007 and 2009 at the age of 15 or 16. Most of the children were assisted by an adult who organised the journey from Iran through smugglers' networks. A few children had relatives who knew the smugglers. A couple of weeks would normally elapse from the point in time when a smuggler was contacted until the journey started. In general, the children described the organisation of travel without emotion, simply explaining that once a decision to travel had been taken, the only thing left to do was to go.

Some children described the initial contact with the smuggler as similar to that with a travel agency, in terms of seeking information about different travel routes, final destination and prices. Normally, the smuggler gave no or little information prior to departure of what the conditions would be like during the journey, how the child would be cared for, what travel routes would be used and what would be the length of the journey. A number of children reported to have been told by smugglers that the journey across the Iranian-Turkish border would last for four to five hours and then it turned out to take several days.

The children possessed a certain degree of awareness of the potential dangers of the journey, through information received through their own contact networks. A number of children had acquaintances, who had tried and failed to go to Europe, or, knew of others who had failed and even died during the journey. The children also said that they had been aware of the risk to be imprisoned, deported, to fall off the mountain, to be left behind, and to suffer from loneliness, hunger and thirst. A few children had discussed with other children and adults what routes to take and what one should bring. A few were advised to bring good shoes and warm clothing for walking in the mountains, and to bring water and food. The kind of preparations undertaken seem to have varied, depending on the time of the year the travel took place. A majority were aware that the journey would be tough, but explained that it was worth taking the risk since the outcome of the hazardous nature of travel depended on "luck".

## **6. Arrangement of and Conditions during Travel (Iran-Turkey)**

### **6.1 Places of Departure and Destination**

For the majority of interviewees, the first stretch of the journey took place in larger groups from Meydan Azadi bus station in Tehran to Van, Turkey. The children described how they travelled by bus to Salmas, a town in the north-western Azarbaijan province close to the Iranian-Turkish border. From there, the children crossed illegally over the mountains, by foot and by truck. They were accompanied by smugglers in groups comprising from five to 120 persons, but normally 20-30 persons, single men and boys of different nationalities. If there were police controls in the area, the passengers were ordered to leave the truck, and walk for various lengths of time, before they were picked up by the truck again. The travel took place at night. The days, the travellers spent in hiding, resting and waiting for the roads to be secure to travel again the following night.

### **6.2 Accommodation and Food Distribution**

The children spent the days sleeping and resting in the mountains, in stables and behind rocks, to avoid being discovered by officials on both sides of the border. One boy claimed that “they were sleeping like the animals” referring to the lack of physical shelter and protection. These conditions made the children feel exposed and frightened.

Most of the children said that no food or water was distributed during the journey in the mountains. They said that thirst was the most common problem during the walks. Several children mentioned that other travellers, children and adults, had been forced to discontinue the journey because of exhaustion or from having run out food or water and were therefore left behind by the rest of the group. The children were visibly affected by these stories and expressed guilt at having left others behind in the mountains.

### **6.3 Hardship Faced Crossing the Iranian/Turkish Border**

*During the journey between Iran and Turkey, we were 30 persons, young single men. Two persons were killed. Twelve persons fired at us. It was the Turkish police. We sought protection and the police came after us with torches. In order to be able to find back one's smuggler, passwords were used. My smuggler's password was 'potato' in Dari.*

15-year-old Hazara boy originating from Uruzgan,  
left Afghanistan in 2007.

The children told harrowing stories of how they crossed the Iranian/Turkish border. The steep and slippery mountain environment, in combination with inadequate material supplies during travel, led to physical exhaustion and extreme mental stress. In addition, the physical threats by smugglers, state officials and criminal groups made the children live in constant fear. The children described how the smugglers organised the walk to reduce the length of travel in order to ensure that they would not run out of food and minimize the risk of being discovered by border guards or the police. The children were told by the smugglers to walk in one single file, to keep an even pace and not to stop and block the road for others in the group. The smugglers carried guns and threatened the children that they would shoot them if they said that they were too tired to continue walking. The children were told to keep silent and to prevent gravel from falling down off the mountain, which would make noise. The travellers were also prohibited from smoking or using torches.

Several of the children interviewed claimed to have seen some twenty dead bodies along the road. They were thought to be people from previous groups who had crossed the mountains. A majority of the children, who participated in the study, reported to have lost members of their group during the crossing, something which was not always realized until dawn when the group gathered to rest. The children believed that the missing persons may have fallen down the slippery mountain or stopped because they were too exhausted to continue.

During the interviews, most children indicated that there were generally more risks on the Turkish side of the border than the Iranian, due to strengthened police controls. They gave accounts of how they had suffered from the constant threat of being caught and deported by the Turkish police. Several children mentioned that their groups had been approached by policemen on the Turkish side of the border, upon which the smuggler ordered the group to quickly scatter, hide behind rocks for hours and then continue travel by crawling one by one. A few children described how the Turkish police had fired their weapons against their entire group comprising some 10-20 travellers, killing some travellers and causing separation between friends and siblings. One 17-year-old boy from Maydan Wardak, said that he lost his brother in the mountains during the scattering of their group. The brother managed to return to Iran, from where he was deported to Afghanistan. He is currently living in the streets of Kabul.

According to one 16-year-old boy from Ghazni, different possible outcomes faced those who were not strong enough to continue the journey in the mountains. He said:

We heard that some travellers died from physical exhaustion, others managed to reach a nearby village where they received advice from private persons on what to do. Some travellers tried to disappear in the mountains, but ended up in the hands of Iranian or Turkish kidnapping groups known to take hostages. Some handed themselves over to the Turkish police in order to be deported to Iran. Quite a few persons were told to travel back and forth between Iran and Turkey



and during the exchanges between the smugglers, they fall in the hands of the Kurds.

Several children were aware of the prevalence of kidnapping groups in the Turkish mountains and their practice. When they have captured somebody, they contact the relatives in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan or Europe over the phone. The relatives are threatened that they have to pay a ransom or their captured relative would lose a limb, like a hand or an ear. The exact sums to be paid are decided from case to case, but the children's impression was that the kidnapers are "smart" and know the relatives' capacity to pay for the children's release. A few children reported to know of a number of children who had died as a result of not being able to pay the kidnapers. These children were not able to provide any details on whether they had died from being left behind or were actually killed by the kidnapers. One boy from Quaragh Bagh, Ghazny described what happened to a friend of his:

The Turkish police captured and deported us and just when we arrived to the Iranian border they released us. One of my friends, who is now in Norway, was captured by the Kurds. When he was going to the toilet, he managed to escape. It was during the night. The Kurds had told him that either you come forward or we kill you. It was dawn and then he runs towards the high way. He managed to get a ride to Iran, for 50 000 Toman he arrived in Teheran...these Kurds have done a lot of embarrassing things...my friend, if you cannot pay, they take you aside, they take a bottle which they insert in the orifice, they call the family and tell them they have to pay the sum. At the same time they push the bottle interchangeably hard depending on the person's willingness to cooperate or not.

Whereas none of the children had been caught in the mountains by Turkish police officials, several children were caught and detained by Turkish police officials, primarily in Van. One of these children, a 16 years old boy from Ghazni, was together in a group comprising 70 persons deported by Turkish state officials to the Iranian border at night. Lost in the mountains he and his group of travellers got caught by kidnapping groups. The boy was released upon payment of a ransom.

Sometimes when you enter into Turkey, there is a risk to be caught by Kurds who are co-operating with the PKK. I have experienced it, but it was easier for me because I was allowed to pay a lower sum of money for my release. But I have heard that there are persons who are caught who need to pay large sums to get released. They have had their fingers cut if when they have not been able to pay. [The kidnapers] ask whether you have relatives in Europe or Iran, they want their telephone number in order to put pressure on the family members to make the payment.

This boy indicated that the Kurdish kidnapping groups wanted to know to which smuggler each traveller belonged. He thought that his ransom sum was set lower because

the kidnapper knew his smuggler. Two other children were aware of this practice, but did not know the reason why the smugglers and kidnappers were in contact with one another.

A few children explained that the kidnappers generally knew when groups of migrants leave a certain location and at what time they will arrive at the next destination. Based on this information, they wait for groups of migrants to come and, upon their arrival, tell the travellers that they are the new smugglers and the travellers should come with them. A procedure involving the use of passwords between smugglers, as well as, between smugglers and children, serves to minimize the risk of being abducted by kidnappers during the travel. The procedure would typically be that the smuggler makes a phone call to the next smuggler in line, through which information on the size of the group of travellers, the time of arrival and a password is shared. The same password is also shared with the travellers. Once the travellers arrive together with the driver, one migrant is sent out to share the passwords.

All of the interviewed children who talked about the risk of being abducted by kidnapping groups in the mountains, also expressed how the fear had affected them and their relatives back home.

#### **6.4 Risks Faced during Travels by Truck**

*Have you ever found yourself under a truck? Have you ever considered the size of the tires of a truck? I know one persons here in Sweden who has travelled by truck to come here and when he sees a truck he can get paralyzed and stares in an apathetic way at the truck and he tells me: Can you imagine that I have travelled for 36 hours under a truck, can you imagine that I, without food or water, have tried to cling to a little bar and can you imagine every little stone jumping towards your face, the pain it would cause you if it just happened once; how much it hurts to travel during all these hours...can you imagine that you just want to let go and give up."*

18-year-old Hazara boy originating from Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 1998.

Once having crossed the Iranian-Turkish border area, most children reported to have arrived in Van, from where they travelled onward to Istanbul. However, a few children claimed to have continued from there to Izmir and Norte by bus. Once in Van, larger groups were formed and travel took place by bus or truck to Istanbul. More than half of the children described that the journey between Van and Istanbul took place under confined conditions inside the truck. As a result, many said that they did not know what places they passed when crossing the country. They constantly feared police controls.

In Turkey, travel took place by truck together with other children and adult men of various nationalities, mainly Afghans, Kurds, Arabs, Pakistani and Bengali. Some children gave an account of how the driver and the smuggler were placed in front of the truck with the passengers in the back, while others said that the smuggler normally drove in a car in front,

or behind, the truck. As a result, it was not possible for the children to communicate with the smuggler most of the time. The children's stories differ in that some claimed only to have stopped for breaks when there was an exchange of smugglers, whereas others said there were shorter breaks during the journey. During the breaks, a few children explained how they had tried to complain to the smuggler that they were exhausted or wanted to know where they were, but that the smuggler would hit them to keep quiet.

The children described the trucks as either completely closed, covered by plastic sheeting, or as open. In terms of how they perceived the physical environment, the temperatures varied depending on the vehicle and season, as well as on the suitability of the child's clothing. A majority of children who took this route described the air inside the truck as stifling, with strong smells of sweat and excrements. The passengers had extremely little space inside the truck. A few children explained how they had to sit on top of one other with their legs up for up to 36 hours, sometimes covered by boxes containing fruits or vegetables, with no stops for shorter breaks.

In most of the cases, there was no toilet in the truck, but the smugglers provided them with an empty water bottle per person for urination. Little or no food or water was provided, seemingly to keep urination under control. One boy did however say that he had been provided with sufficient food and drink and that he was travelling in a truck where there was a toilet. The adult co-travellers also constituted a threat to the children. The children described how they were threatened by adult co-travellers with knives who tried to get more space in the truck.

## **6.5 Accommodation in Turkey**

*Most of the houses are empty but sometimes there where a man or a woman living there, I do not know if they owned the houses or if they were like us.*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Jaghori, Ghazni,  
leaving Afghanistan in 2008.

Once in Turkey, the children were accommodated in houses, cellars or small rooms for different lengths of time. A majority of the children did not know to whom the houses belonged, but a few thought that they belonged to a smuggler or to private persons. A number of children told similar stories of having stayed in a cellar in Istanbul for periods ranging from a few days up to two and a half months. The travellers stayed for various lengths of time in different stop-over locations, but they were not able to explain what selection criteria the smugglers applied when deciding who could leave and when.

A few children described how they had stayed in a cellar in Istanbul. Although they had travelled separately and at different times, they described the conditions in the cellar in a similar way so it seems likely that they actually described the same place. They described poor sanitary conditions with 40 children and adults of different nationalities, including

Iranians, Kurds, Indians and Pakistani, in two rooms comprising 25 square meters each. The travellers, including the children, were allowed two toilet visits per day at set hours. They slept on carpets on the floor. The children were not allowed to go out and the small windows were painted in black to ensure that no one could look in. There was electricity and tap water, and the children were provided with just sufficient amounts of food to survive.

The children explained that they were constantly waiting for other passengers to arrive to the cellar and join the group, and that the smugglers would find suitable travel routes not blocked by police controls. This is who one of the children described waiting in the cellar: "The fooled us all the time. We asked them; when shall we go to Istanbul? They said; tomorrow. And then they said no, unfortunately not, we do not have any car and we have nothing to go with and then we had to stay another day and then they asked again how long we shall stay and then they said: tonight we will leave, but we didn't. It was difficult to keep track of the days."

## **6.6 Vulnerability caused by Detention and the Risk of Deportation**

*There were two departments and we were placed in cells, there were several persons in each cell. There were six persons in every room comprising around 15 square meters each. We were not allowed to use the toilet placed inside the room, we could visit the toilet once per day. The room had a barred window...they filled in our identification details on a paper which was sent to Ankara and we waited for deportation to Afghanistan.*

16-year-old Hazara boy originating from Jaghori, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 2007.

A few children described how they had been imprisoned or detained in Van and Söke by Turkish police officials for the purpose of deportation to Iran and/or Afghanistan. One boy aged 16, originating from Ghazni, said that he had been apprehended by Turkish police officials, together with his group of travellers comprising 70 persons, when passing through Van with a truck. This boy spent one week in detention facilities, described as poor with unsatisfactory sanitary conditions. Other accounts confirm his story, and also that there were no interpreters available and no one provided any information on how to seek asylum, or how to contact UNHCR.

The children were frequently searched by the police for money and several boys reported to have been physically abused during this time. One boy said he was not provided with any legal assistance or interpretation. He explains:

When I was going to a prison in Van I saw the UNHCR symbol. I saw it from within the prison. I wanted to go there but it was not possible. There was no phone, nothing. When you arrive, you get body searched and if you bring a telephone it is taken from you... I have been in contact with several persons in

Van and they have not been able to get any help from UNHCR. ...I know of one person who I met in Van and he had gone to the UNHCR office to apply for refugee status. He did not receive it. Then he had travelled to Istanbul and from there he wanted to go to Greece. But he was captured in Istanbul, imprisoned and deported to Iran via Van.

The children detained in Van told similar stories of having been transferred by Turkish police officials in groups of adults and children to the Iranian side of the border nighttime. The deportation took, seemingly, place without the knowledge of the Iranian police authorities, since at the Turkish-Iranian border, they were left behind to find their one ways in the mountains. One boy aged 16 from Maydan Wardak mentioned how he and his group of travellers had been threatened, kicked and hit with rubber tubes by the Turkish police, reportedly as a means to deter them from returning to Turkey. Among the children deported to Iran, a majority managed to find their ways back over the mountains and cross the Iranian-Turkish border. One boy was deported back from Iran five times before he eventually managed to cross and continue his journey forward.

## 7. Arrangement of and Conditions during Travel (Turkey-Greece)

### 7.1 Places of Departure and Destination

With a few exceptions, the children travelled onward with the assistance of smugglers from Istanbul.<sup>20</sup> Normally, they were handed over to a new smuggler, on whom they had to rely for accommodation and the onwards travel. Typically, the journey took place from Istanbul by car or bus, to one of the departure locations close to the Aegean Sea, mainly Izmir and Assos. From there, the children took boats to the Greek islands of Chios and Lesbos, and then continued by boat to Athens.<sup>21</sup> A majority of the children could not tell from where in Turkey and to what islands they travelled. A majority did however recall arriving at Mytilini, which is the main city of Lesbos, by rowing for five to eight hours by the torchlight of the smuggler as the only point of reference.

In most cases, travel took place in inflatable rubber boats with space for four to five persons, while a few used motorboats. A smuggler was always present in the motorboat, but most of the children who travelled by a rubber boat seem to have travelled alone without a smuggler. There were a few exceptions of children who travelled together with the smuggler in a rubber boat or, who bought their own boat to travel to Greece, together with other travellers. Most children crossed the waters in smaller groups, mainly together with children of the same age, with the exception of one boy who travelled in a group comprising 37 persons including women, girls and adult men of different nationalities.

### 7.2 Hardship Faced Crossing the Aegean Sea to Greece

*Yes, we had life jackets, but they did not function very well. They made use wear cheap stuff, they do not care what happens to us, they say we have checked the weather forecast on the computer, the water is flat, you can swim without a boat, they lie a lot.*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Shirdagh, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 2008.

The children expressed feelings of fear when they described how they crossed the Aegean waters, revealing that this was the most dangerous part of the entire journey. They said that they either had been close to drowning in the high waves or from the boat taking in water. They also knew of others who had not managed to reach the shore but drowned

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<sup>20</sup> One boy travelled on a false passport from Istanbul to Athens arranged by a family he accompanied to Europe, and from Athens to Italy with ferry and finally with the assistance of a smuggler localized in Italy with car to Sweden.

<sup>21</sup> One child claimed to have travelled by boat directly from Istanbul to Greece.

during the crossing. A few children described how they hesitated before finally deciding to cross the water. Some explained how the smugglers had not listened to their hesitations. The dangers created ambivalent feelings in the children who, on one hand feared for their lives, whereas, on the other hand, they realized that it was not an option for them to stay in Turkey. Some said that other children belonging to their group had changed their mind when they failed to cross the sea. Some of them reportedly turned themselves over to the Turkish police authorities in order to get deported back to Iran.

Most children made at least two attempts before reaching Greece, with one boy trying five times. Although the level of determination on the part of the children constituted one factor for "success", other factors were equally decisive including the quality of the boat, the rowing capacity and mental state of mind of the entire group. Other factors they thought had influenced whether they would manage to reach the shore was the advice given by the smuggler to avoid being detected by coast guard boats and the weather conditions at the time.

To avoid being discovered by Turkish and Greek police, travel took place during night. The length of travel depended on the type of boat used and the distance covered. To travel with a boat with an engine was more expensive, but reduced the length of travel and there were fewer risks in terms of accidents and being apprehended by coast guards. Whereas the smugglers told the children to puncture the rubber boats upon arrival in Greece to prevent Greek police from forcing them back to Turkey, the smugglers returned with the motor boats to Turkey once a group had been left on Greek territory.

The smugglers also told the children to throw away their cell phones in case they were arrested to ensure that their phone numbers did not fall into the hands of the police or the border guards. The children were furthermore instructed not to bring anything made out of metal to prevent the Greek boarder guards' radar equipment from discovering them. A few children were told by the smuggler to walk in pairs upon arrival in Mytilini to avoid raising attention among the locals. Others were told by the smuggler to call him upon arrival in a specific location in Greece, so that he could instruct the next smuggler, based in Greece, to come and meet the group.

The children's responses do not provide any consistent information on whether they had to pay for each attempt separately, or whether several attempts were included in the initial price. Whereas a few children said that several attempts were included, other claimed that they had paid half price for the second attempt or that they did not remember. Failure to cross the water created additional mental strain on children in that they had to wait during uncertain periods of times ranging from a day to several weeks in between the different attempts. Depending on the length of the period, the children either slept in a nearby forest or returned to Istanbul to re-connect with their smuggler.

### 7.3 Apprehension at Sea by the Greek Police

*Many died during this stretch. They confiscated our oars and punctured our boats.*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Maydan Wardak,  
left Afghanistan in 2008.

A third of the children undertook at least two attempts before they succeeded in crossing the Aegean waters. A majority of the interrupted attempts to reach land was due to arrests by the Greek coast guard, who the children referred to as “the police”. Several children reported to have been returned from Greece to Turkey either through so called “push backs” at sea or by deportation after being arrested inland. In none of the cases, did the children receive information about their right to seek asylum or the procedures for doing so. In some of these cases, the Greek police was described as having transported children by boat back to Turkish water where they were left to row to the Turkish mainland. In other cases, the Greek police reportedly punctured children’s boats and left them on the open sea. In these cases, Turkish patrol boats came to their rescue.

Upon arrival in Greece, a few children claimed to immediately have been placed in detention in Mytilini, with a few subsequently were deported to Turkey by boat. Several children described how they were deported from Greece to Turkey and by Turkish authorities by truck to Iran. In all of these cases, Greek authorities seem to have transported the children to Turkey by boat at night leaving them at the Turkish border. In the words of a 17-year old boy from Qaragh Bagh, Ghazni:

We were a total of 16 persons on the boat deporting us to Turkey. It was a large motorboat; they took two row boats and placed above us to cover us. When we had passed Mytilini harbor, we were uncovered and the militia started searching our bodies for money, they looked in our belts, they threw clothes and shoes in the water. When we reached the Turkish side of the water we were divided into two groups in two boats and the police stuck needles in the boats. The boat started to take on water and we called for a larger boat. The Turkish police came and saved us. The Turkish police took our pictures; I think it was for documentation. We were lying on the Turkish beach...and next to us stood the police. We were a total of 22 persons, only children. The head of the Turkish police, the Gendarmia, was going to investigate who to bring along among us, but he was confused when he saw that we were all under-aged. I think the police did not know what to do with us...

There is no clear pattern in the children’s stories as to what cause of action the Turkish police undertake in these cases, a few children said that they were released upon arrival on Turkish mainland and others were placed in detention, released, or deported back to Iran.

Quite a few children were rescued at sea by Turkish police and deliberately left behind by the police on the Turkish shores, allowing the group to continue their journey. Others were



transported by Turkish police officials in large trucks to the Iranian border, where they were let off. The quote below illustrates the experience accounted for by several boys of being sent back and forth between countries once having been caught by state officials. For this boy the initial journey from Iran to Greece took seven months. Once in Greek waters, he and his group were apprehended at sea and transferred back to Turkey from where they were deported to Iran. The boy and his group waited for two months close to the Iranian border before they could resume the journey.

We were transported back to Turkey by the Greek coastguards. We arrived at night and we wanted to seek protection somewhere but then we were apprehended by the Turkish police who brought us inside large trucks out of the country...it was a very bitter situation and but what can one do? It felt like wherever I arrived there were just a lot of problems. But you have this driving force, that once, you will manage...we stayed at the Iranian border and my employer back in Iran co-ordinated with my smuggler so that we could resume our journey towards Europe.

Five children, who were apprehended and detained on Turkish mainland, were brought to a detention center in Söke.<sup>22</sup> Whereas two of the children were released, one boy managed to escape imprisonment in Söke together with four other children. The group went back to Istanbul, made contact with their former smuggler and made a new attempt to continue the journey towards Europe.

The rest of the children were released when they claimed to originate from Mauritania. In Turkey, persons who cannot be deported are released from detention with a document stating they have to leave Turkey and return to their home country on their own. One of the places to where it is not possible for Turkey to deport people to is Mauritania due to the unavailability of flights. Thus if you want to get out of detention and not be sent back home, to claim that you are from Mauritania would achieve this objective.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Söke is a small town close to the sea shore of Kusadasi and Davutlar national park which is located right across the Greek island called Samos. There is a gendarmes station in the region where apprehended illegal foreigners are held pending to be transferred to AYDIN Security Directorate Foreigners' Section's Guesthouse. Deportations have been carried out after the judicial and administrative procedures have been completed by the AYDIN Security Directorate. Kusadasi -Aydin area is known to be commonly used for illegal departure to Greece due to being one of the shortest points to Greece. A number of foreigners wishing to seek asylum contact UNHCR from detention in the mentioned region to seek assistance.

<sup>23</sup> Information received from UNHCR Ankara.

## 8. Stay in Greece

### 8.1 Vulnerability Caused by Detention and Deportation

*In Patras, everyone is dirty. They are black because they have tried to go with the trucks. I stayed in Patras for a week to check the situation... We were just outside the harbor, we did not get inside. We lived in a semi constructed house. Afghans live there. Smugglers have their houses for themselves.*

17-year-old Hazara boy originating from Mazar-i-Sharif,  
left Afghanistan in 2008.

While some children said that they did not know that they were heading for Greece, or did not even realize they had even been there until after their arrival in Sweden, others did not know where in Greece they had arrived. However, most children mentioned Mytilini, at Lesvos Island, as their first point of arrival. The children's actions upon arrival in Mytilini varied. Based on the smuggler's instructions, a few children presented themselves to the Greek police upon arrival in Mytilini. It should be noted that these children did not intend to seek asylum in Greece, but had understood they would need to stay in detention during a period before they could continue to travel to Athens. Other children were accidentally apprehended by Greek police officials when trying to cross Lesvos to catch a boat to Athens. Yet another child explained how his group was brought to a smuggler's house, immediately upon arrival, where they were accommodated for weeks awaiting the arrival of new passengers before the journey could resume.<sup>24</sup>

A majority of the children had their photos and fingerprints taken upon arrival in Greece, primarily at Mytilini police station from where they were transported to a nearby facility. The children described this facility as a "prison" or "camp" where they stayed for a period ranging from one day to seven months. The children claimed that they did not know why they were placed in the prison nor for how long they would have to stay there. Neither did they know why certain persons had to stay in the detention longer than others, or for what reason they were finally released.<sup>25</sup> One 17-year-old boy from Mazar Sharif described the situation:

We wanted to buy boat tickets in Mytilini to go to Athens. But at the station they say you need police papers to be able to buy a ticket. We therefore went to the police and said we need papers to buy a ticket. They asked us how old we are. I said I was thirteen. The others said they were 14 or above. We were placed in a

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<sup>24</sup> During this period more children of different nationalities arrived to the house. When sufficiently many children had arrived they were transported in a group of 30-40 boys in a truck.

<sup>25</sup> Although the "prison" or "camp" was not mentioned by name, presumably they referred to Pagani detention center on Lesvos, since it served as the sole detention center for irregular migrants on Lesvos until its temporary closure in October 2009.

camp. The others had to leave their fingerprints, but not me since I was only 13 years old. The camp was composed of one big hall room containing 60-70 persons. There were two toilets. We got the paper from the police. It said we had to leave Greece within one month. They did not ask if we wanted to seek asylum. There was no interpreter.

The children described the conditions in the “camp” or “prison” as “worse than for animals.” The facilities were overcrowded with migrants of different nationalities, such as Afghans, Somalis, Iranians, Iraqis and Kurds. One boy said that he had been apprehended by the Greek police and taken to Mytilini prison together with the rest of his group, including the smuggler of Turkish nationality, who was imprisoned together with the children for a period of seven months without revealing his identity.

The facility was not designed to separate children from adults and no one was allowed to leave the building. Their cell phones were confiscated which meant that the children had no opportunity to communicate with the outside world. Moreover, they described the hygienic conditions as sub-standard, with two toilets provided for 40 persons and no shower. The children said that they were only given a sufficient amount of food to survive. The police officials transported severely ill persons to doctors. Some of the children interviewed claimed to have been physically abused by detention staff who repeatedly asked them why they had come to Greece.

No information was provided on how to seek asylum, and the children do not appear to have asked. There was no interpreter or organisation providing advice and support available. Most children were given 30 days notice, within which, they were ordered to leave Greece to avoid deportation. The information was written in Greek and English and children claimed to have understood its contents.<sup>26</sup>

A few children were immediately returned by truck to Turkey, while others were deported directly from the detention centre in Mytilini to Turkey by boat, following the expiry of the 30 day notice. One boy said that he had been given the choice by Greek police officials to either be brought to Athens to apply for asylum or to get released and be brought to a Greek island, what name he could not recall.

The children released from Mytilini reported to have from Mytilini to Athens, explaining that Mytilini is the island from where one can travel by boat to Athens. A few children had worked in Athens and on different Greek islands. Some children travelled by themselves to Athens from Mytilini detention centre, others with the assistance of smugglers and, a third group, claims to have been accompanied by police officials.

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<sup>26</sup> The children’s accounts of conditions in Pagani are corroborated by previous UNHCR reports concluding on the overcrowded conditions and lack of appropriate services in the centre, ultimately leading the Greek Government to close the center in October 2009.

## 8.2 Accommodation and Employment

Accommodation in Athens was provided either in the smuggler's own house, in guest houses or, for those without financial means, in parks and under bridges. The children explained that in the parks, information was exchanged among travellers regarding travel routes, tickets and preferred countries of final destination. A few children found work in Greece to finance their onward travel in Europe. The children waited in traffic roundabouts where they were offered short-term low-skilled jobs in Athens, as well as, on some of the Greek islands. The work included carpentry and fruit picking. The children participating in the study did not know on what island they had worked. They described how they travelled from Athens to Patras either under buses, or by train, with the aim of reaching Italy by truck and boat.

In Patras, the children slept in tent camps established by irregular Afghan migrants without access to toilets or showers. As one 15 year-old-boy from Jaghori explained: "We were in a smuggler's house in Patras and then we were under the control of the smugglers so they gave us food and we could not go outside, we were under the control of the smugglers because we were illegal." Most of the children spent a few days, up to several months, in Patras before they succeeded to hide beneath the trucks unnoticed. Those who had a smuggler, said that they had been forced by the smuggler to go inside and under the trucks.

The onward travel to Italy took place either in groups assisted by a smuggler inside the truck, or spontaneously. Some smugglers were said to be "friends" of the truck drivers, who allowed the children to embark the truck at night with the assistance of the smugglers. They covered the children with packages and cardboard so they would be hidden in case there were police controls. The children described travelling seated or lying down, in a little space above the tires of the truck. The drivers, who were unaware of their presence above the tires, sometimes "pushed a button which made the tires rise", which resulted in that the person placed above the tire was squeezed. Due to the stress and the danger this posed to children, they explained that the preferred space among the travellers was above the truck's loading area, which allowed children sufficient space to lie down.

Moreover, the children complained of violence at the hands of Greek police officials and fear of being deported to Turkey and onwards. Some children reported of physical abuse in connection with police arrests in Patras harbor area. One boy from Quaragh Bagh, Ghazni, explained:

After Athens, we went to Patras. At that point in time I had 2-300 USD. I managed to get under a truck, in the back of the truck close to the spare tire. But I got stuck there and police officials came and hit me. They did not help me away from the tire, they just hit me and then they disappeared. I managed to break away and then I disappeared as well.

This boy said that he was assisted by an organisation, he did not recall the name, to visit a hospital. He was also informed that due to his illegal status he could not bring charges against the police officials. Some children said that they were not given any assistance in Patras, whereas others said that they had received food from a nearby church.

According to one interviewee, the official closure of the migrants' makeshift camp in Patras in July 2009 has increased the cross-over to Italy from Crete.<sup>27</sup> A few children claimed that unaccompanied children increasingly cross to Italy from the island of Crete or from Korinthos, in north Peloponnese, following the closure of the makeshift camp in Patras.

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<sup>27</sup> Due to the considerable attention paid to the situation of irregular migrants in Patras during 2009, the Greek authorities decided to demolish the camp in July, 2009. "Observations on Greece as a country of asylum", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) December 2009.

## 9. Organisation of the Smugglers' Networks

### 9.1 Organisation of Networks

*There are hotels, hostels where only migrants live. If you spend time there you can be sure to meet the right person, and I got to know that this was the right person because he called the first smuggler and talked to him, I received the mobile and talked to him and he said: Yes, go with him and trust him.*

18-year-old Hazara boy originating from Shirdagh, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 2009.

The children did not know the nationality or ethnicity of the smugglers, but thought that they must be of different nationalities since they are present in different countries. Based on the children's stories, it seems likely that the smugglers were adults, mainly Afghans, Iranians, Turks or Kurds. Many children were of the view that the smugglers guiding them through the Iranian Turkish border were of Kurdish ethnicity and of Iranian and Turkish origin.

The smugglers were organised in trans-national networks in the countries of origin and transit. According to the children, the smugglers were closely connected and changed *en route*, primarily prior to check points within a country and at territorial borders. The children talked of smugglers as an intertwined, but yet dispersed, system of persons with close co-operation. The co-operation was described as professional and it was understood that the smugglers may not necessarily know each other than by profession.

Based on the accounts of the children, it seems like the smuggler networks operate on several levels. One level of smugglers consists of those permanently based in the country where the travel is initiated. A second level represents smugglers who accompany children from one destination to another. These two levels of smugglers were in regular contact with each other to ensure that the children arrived safely at each new destination and to confirm the receipt of payment for the continued travel. The children indicated that the second layer was typically smugglers of Afghan nationality, alternatively of the nationality of the country where they were operating. A third level of smugglers consists of a large number of persons providing different kinds of assistance, including transportation, accommodation in houses (primarily in Turkey), deliverance of food and other necessities.

The handover of the child from one smuggler to another often took place under stressful conditions. Many children were not familiar with the details on how and when smugglers changed. Others explained that the hand-over took place half an hour before a police control inside Iran and Turkey, enabling the smugglers to change and avoid the check point. This seems to have been the practice where travellers were forced to walk to avoid checkpoints and trucks would pick them up afterwards. It is also likely that a change of

smugglers took place in locations where the identification of alternative travel routes required local expertise. It is worth noting that the children frequently used the expression of “belonging to a smuggler”, confirming the strong dependency and power relation.

The smugglers were described by the children in negative terms. They referred to them as violent and threatening persons who did not care about the well-being of children. Their stories show how the smugglers exploited the children’s lack of knowledge about their whereabouts and their fear of state officials and criminal groups out of economic self-interest.

The smugglers played the double-faceted role of being both the exploiter and the provider in that the children at the same time had to fully rely on them for their survival and continued journey. Several children said that they received advice from the smugglers on what routes should be taken to avoid being caught by state officials in Iran, Turkey and Greece, and how they should avoid having their finger prints taken upon arrival in Europe.

Since state officials posed a real threat also to the smugglers, it is however difficult to ascertain whether these risk reduction measures were applied as a means to enhance the protection of children, or to protect the smugglers and their continued business. There is nothing in the children’s stories to suggest that the smugglers’ financial self-interest had a positive effect on the level of treatment of the children during travel since assistance was kept at a minimum level required for survival.

## **9.2 Travel Costs**

A considerable number of children said that they did not know the price of the entire journey. Typically, one sum was paid for the journey between Iran and Istanbul and one for Istanbul to Greece. A majority of children were not able to say how money was raised and what the cost was for travel from Afghanistan to Iran or Pakistan. Considering their young age, as well as, the fact that most children were assisted by an adult in making the travel arrangements from Afghanistan, this may indeed be an area where children lack detailed information. Of those who replied to the question how money was raised, a majority said that their family had indebted themselves among their relatives and friends in Afghanistan or that money was raised from revenues gained in connection with the selling of property or land in Afghanistan. It seems the ability to raise money in Afghanistan determined the destination.

A majority of the children said that the journey from the neighboring countries to Europe was financed through their salary, or directly by their employer. One 17-year-old boy from Nad Ali, Helmand, said that he had borrowed 2000 USD from an Afghan friend while in Iran.

There was a period when I paid part of the money to him. A little share remains and I try, little by little, but I do not have any money, how could I send? I have a

computer and every month some of my money, 200 SEK, is used for the computer, internet and then I have my mobile and clothes and then I try to save a little to be able to pay back the loan. I call my friend sometimes and he asks: 'What happens with my money?' Then I reply: 'In the end of the month, in the end of the month, I'll send...' We will see how it will work out. First I have to go to school, learn the language, get a job, it will take many years before, you get tired from paying back a loan and this poor fellow, he gets tired from lending out money, and he will never do it again.

The children were more aware about the sub-payments that were made for the distance between Iran and Istanbul and between Istanbul and Greece. The sums paid by the children varied considerably. One child claimed to have paid up to 5000 USD to go from Iran to Istanbul. Yet another child said that he had been allowed on a truck for free, since there were already many paying travellers going with the truck. Most of the children said that they paid 3-4000 USD for the whole journey from Afghanistan to Sweden. As illustrated by the statement of a 15-year-old boy from Jaghori, Ghazni, some children thought that a higher price implied less hardship during travel.

There are those who pay up to 4000-5000 USD from Iran to Turkey, the more you pay, you get to travel in smaller trucks, more frequently by car and you have to walk less. We were divided in different groups. At the first stage we were 100 persons, then we were re-grouped depending on the sum one had paid.

Only one child said that the smugglers allowed children without enough money to pay less. During the interviews, the children indicated that the smugglers had threatened and abused them because they did not have sufficient money. One child from Beshut, Maydan Wardak, said: "I paid the smugglers at several occasions. Different sums depending on how much I had. Sometimes I did not have much, then they could agree to accept less money. In return you were told to behave and so on. I objected a few times but your life is in the hands of the smuggler".

The children provided different information with regard to whether food was included in the travel cost or added to the initial price. It would however seem that, during the journey between Iran and Istanbul, transportation, shelter and housing along the way was included, as well as, food and water. A few children said that the price included several attempts to cross the border, but many children did not know whether this was the case for them. One child reported that the travellers were divided into groups depending on how much they had paid for the journey. This practice was confirmed by a number of children who claimed that those who paid a higher price could to ride horses when they got tired. However, other children said that the smugglers rode horses when pointing out the direction of the group. Two children said that they paid 1000 USD from Iran to Turkey, which included ten attempts to cross the Iranian border to Turkey.



With regard to the journey between Istanbul and Greece, it varied whether the cost for transportation and the purchasing of boats from Istanbul was included in the initial price from Istanbul to Greece. Also within Greece some children had their housing covered for by smugglers, whereas others cared for themselves.<sup>28</sup>

### 9.3 Method of Payment

*We know their address since we got to stay there with him [in Turkey] and they want to do a good job because they do not want my [their] clients to go to someone else, so they have to try and make it good. The one who sends well, I will call my friends and tell them and say we went [travelled] in a very good way and he will be famous.*

18-year-old Hazara boy originating from Shirdagh, Ghazni  
left Afghanistan in 2007.

Many children said that they were unaware of how the payment had been organised in terms of from whom and to whom money had been transferred. This may indeed be the case for children assisted by adults to organise the travel. However, the children who stayed in neighboring countries unaccompanied should in principle be able, although perhaps less willing, to share details on how payment was arranged. Based on the children's accounts, several different payment procedures could be established.

The journey was normally paid in different installments by relatives or friends present in Afghanistan, or neighboring countries, when the child arrived at the different destinations. Upon arrival, the smuggler called the relative or contact person in Afghanistan or neighboring country and the child confirmed that he had arrived. The relative or contact person then effectuated the payment to the smuggler through an institution referred to as an "*Havaladar*", in Dari, literally meaning a "transferee of money".<sup>29</sup> In a few cases, this payment procedure had serious implications for the safety of children, in that they could be left stranded anywhere if the payment had not been effectuated in time by their contact person, or, the smuggler had not received information that the payment had been effectuated.

Using the *Havaladar* system was reportedly also the practice in Istanbul and Athens. No mention was made to whether *Havaladar* also is used in Sweden. The children said that the payment procedure resulted from a general lack of trust vis-à-vis smugglers. A *Havaladar* has a reputation of being reliable in that they do not pay the smuggler if the child does not arrive to the agreed place of destination. One child said that he had received money "through the bank" while in Athens, by his relatives visiting a *Havaladar* in Iran. Some

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<sup>28</sup> The cost indicated by the children for the different stretches of the journey were: Iran-Turkey: 400 USD-5000 USD, Istanbul-Greece 500 USD-2000 USD, Istanbul-France: 1000 USD, Greece-Italy: 1400 USD.

<sup>29</sup> The use of *Havaladars* has been subject to previous studies carried out in "Cooperation, remittances, and kinship among the Hazaras", Monsutti, Alessandro, *Iranian Studies*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 2004, pp. 219 - 240.

children thought that the payment was effectuated directly by a relative to the first smuggler, without any involvement of a *Havaladar*. In these cases, the smuggler called a relative or the child's contact person at a certain destination to confirm that the child had arrived. The payment was then made by the child's relative to the first smuggler residing in Afghanistan. It seems in many cases, the relative in the place of origin and the smuggler were acquainted or friends.

Whereas fees were normally paid upon arrival, some children said that they had initially paid a smaller amount of money in Afghanistan or neighboring countries and an additional larger sum upon arrival in Istanbul through a *Havaladar*. A few children also indicated that they had to pay in advance for the cost of transportation in Istanbul to get to Greece. In a few cases, the children paid for the journey between Iran and Istanbul beforehand. The smugglers handed over the children to the next smuggler in line together with lists of names indicating the names of the travellers and previous smugglers and the payment. The smuggler in the new location used the list to verify to what group, and previous smuggler, each person belonged. One child said that the smuggler who received the group at a new destination would always call the previous smuggler to receive confirmation of the completed payment, which enabled the next phase of the journey to resume.

Another problematic aspect was that the children carried large sums of money on them making them vulnerable to robbery and assault. One 16-year-old boy from Jaghori, Ghazni, explained:

I had a friend who got stuck in Söke. We were a total of six persons, amongst them I and my friends and my friend ate his money. First you break the bills of money into small, small pieces and then you put scotch tape around them... Another way is to wind a thread round the bills before you swallow them, the thread is left in the mouth and throat and then you can take off your clothes without making it visible and then you pull up the money. The police started to understand the habit of swallowing money.

The practice of carrying money during the journey varied widely, with a considerable number of children stating that they did not need any money during the journey since everything was covered for by the smuggler. Others described inventive ways through which large sums of money, varying between 100 USD to 3000 USD were concealed for lengthy periods.

When asked why the children thought the smugglers kept what they promised in terms of bringing them to the agreed destination, the children said that the smugglers depended on their good reputation for their business, and the children will tell others intending to leave for Europe which smugglers are trustworthy, and who are not.

## 9.4 Contact Networks and Support during Travel

*During the journey between Iran and Greece we had lost three to four friends so we used to tell each other we need to keep our mood up or otherwise we will go under. So then we tried to joke and be gay and we used to say we will all die but at the same time we tried to be cheerful and gay to provide each other with energy.*

16-year-old Hazara boy originating from Jaghori, Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 2006.

The children's contact networks during the travel consisted of contacts between children and co-travellers, between children and smugglers, as well as, between children and parents/care-givers or other relatives or friends in Afghanistan or neighboring countries. From a child's perspective, it is essential to look at what assistance or support such networks enabled and how and if they affected the travel. The children's stories are consistent with the way they describe the journey as an isolated period of time, with little or no possibility to communicate with the outer world.

Some, but far from all, of the children said that they had a cell phone during the journey. However, the lack of connectivity, and the fact that the smugglers and the police confiscated the telephones, meant that the telephones could not be used for large stretches of the journey. The children used their telephones to know what time it was, to call contact persons who paid the fees and to contact the smugglers if there was a problem. Quite a number of children explained that they did not have their own telephones, but were allowed to borrow the smugglers' to inform their relatives or contact person of their arrival at a certain destination.

A few children travelled together with one or several other children during the main part of the journey to Sweden and became friends along the journey. A few children explained how such relationships provided physical and moral support in ways which seem to have facilitated the travel on a psychological level. Although, in general, little help was offered to and by those travelling, some of the children's stories indicate that the level of contact and assistance between travellers (children and adults) varied depending on the hardship faced during the journey. The least contact seems to have been established among children on the journey between Iran and Turkey.

The communication in the truck between Iran and Turkey and inside Turkey seem to have been limited due to the stressful conditions in the truck and the fact that the passengers were of several nationalities and spoke different languages. When asked if, with whom, and, about what, the children spoke when spending long periods hidden, the children said that they talked with others of what was happening and how long they would have to stay in one particular place.

Some children seem to have established closer contact with other children and adults starting from Istanbul. This was particularly the case for children crossing the Aegean Sea

without the assistance of smugglers, forcing them to create groups and to co-operate under harsh conditions. Once having reached Greece, the communication among the travellers seem to have been more open and focused on sharing advice from others, adults and children, on how to travel further and which smugglers you can trust. In general, little help was offered to, and by, those travelling together. Nevertheless, a few children found a friend or an acquaintance during the journey from whom temporary assistance was received in the form of holding hands and exchanging luggage. One 15-year-old boy from Maydan Wardak said:

I had to go with a truck at night and it was very cold. It was in December, we spent two hours in the truck. We were well seated but it was cold, I had no warm clothes. It was an open truck, there was no roof, we could see out. I was wearing a warm jacket and trousers, it was very windy. Many had become friends during the journey there and they sat together so that they would not freeze, but I was alone there.

Questions relating to contact with family members during the journey were perceived as sensitive, which may indicate a fear to reveal information about the parents. Although the children claimed not to have been in contact with their relatives during the journey, some said that the smugglers occasionally lend them their cell phones to call relatives or other contact persons in Afghanistan or last place of residence to inform them that a certain place of destination had been reached and thereby enabling transfer of money.

During these conversations, the children would typically not tell them about the conditions during the journey. One boy explained that he "did not tell his mother of the conditions during journey, but tried to play it down in order not to worry her." Another child said that he changed his mind during the journey and wished to return to Afghanistan, but he felt guilty towards his parents who, over the phone, told him that he had to continue the journey when he had reached so far. The boy explained that he decided to continue since his parents had sacrificed so much for him to be able to leave Afghanistan.

## **9.5 Travel Routes**

Few children were able or willing to give an account of how they had travelled from southern Europe to Sweden. Of those who did provide such information, a majority said that they had travelled without the assistance of a smuggler, hidden in trains, or with the assistance of a smuggler, by car or truck.

The children can roughly be divided into two groups. one group described the conditions during the journey as confined to the extent that they had no idea of where they were located until they arrived in Sweden. Some of them were able to tell what countries they had passed, once they had studied geography in school in Sweden. The other group of children could describe the journey in a detailed manner, including countries and cities they had passed, for how long and what happened in the various locations.

It is likely that children belonging to the first group indeed were unable to disclose details of their journey for the stated reasons, but presumably also for reasons relating to previous traumatic experiences and out of fear of disclosing information the smugglers had told them not to. It was understood that some children were afraid of how the information could affect their current stay in Sweden and maybe also the opportunity for their relatives to come to Sweden.

## 10. Reception in Sweden

*To start it was very difficult to get adapted, I felt alienated. I had to adapt to the culture. But after a while it went better. Sometimes I could not sleep at night. I lived together with others but had my own room and at night. I did not feel very well so I went to see a psychologist. We spoke once a week during a period of ten weeks and then I felt calmer.*

18-year-old Hazara boy originating from Ghazni,  
left Afghanistan in 2008.

The increase in arrivals of unaccompanied children in recent years has put pressures on the Swedish reception system. There is currently a lack of municipalities able to receive unaccompanied children, which has resulted in children being stranded in reception municipalities waiting for more permanent accommodation. Although reception conditions were not the main focus of this study, some general remarks can be made based on the researcher's observations and the impressions shared by the children.

The municipality accommodations centers visited were either so-called, permanent residence permit homes, "PUT boenden", for unaccompanied children with permits, or residences for asylum-seeking children. Most of the centers visited were located close to a city center, to schools and social services. Although some children complained of feeling isolated in their assigned municipality, the general impression is that such feelings were mostly an expression of the initial hardship of adapting to Swedish society and culture and not due to the actual place of accommodation.

The accommodation centers visited were all of high material standards, with shared kitchen facilities and social areas, and private or shared rooms or apartments. The children had daily access to the social areas, including TV and computer rooms, which were common to all the children. In some centers, newly arrived Afghan children were accommodated together with other Afghan children to create a sense of comfort and safety at the early stage of reception. The children felt that they got along across ethnic borders and that all Afghan children spent considerable time together.

Most reception staff had undergone some level of social work training and were normally available in the children's proximity 24 hours per day. Although each accommodation centre had its individual methodology on how to integrate children, most put the emphasis on encouraging the children to take responsibility to engage in the daily routines of the centre. Many centers were organised in ways to prepare the children for turning eighteen by successively increasing the child's responsibility until they would move to their own apartments. The daily activities included cooking, home work assistance and social

activities organised according to schedule. Most children went to IVIK<sup>30</sup>, a preparatory high school for migrants. The children were very pleased and proud to be able to attend school, but some complained of the lack of interaction with Swedish students, which hampered their knowledge of Swedish language, society and culture.

The background and experiences faced by the Afghan children put considerable responsibility on the staff and the reception facilities to respond to their various needs. Many of the interviewed children were clearly suffering from distress for various reasons. This perception was confirmed by the staff and guardians. The children faced problems of sleeplessness, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. Some of them had, or were currently receiving medication, sleeping pills and psychological counseling, mainly provided by BUP.<sup>31</sup> A majority of the children said they tried to dispel their thoughts by engaging in extra curricular activities, such as sports, drawing or computers. Only a few complained that there was not enough money in the municipality for them to engage in what they really wished to do, such as playing a musical instrument.

The level of contact between the children and the staff and their guardians varied, with some children being in regular contact with their guardians and others only having seen him or her on a few occasions. Discussions with the guardians revealed that there may be a need to clarify what the role of a guardian should encompass. In addition to the appointed care-taker, many children had one or several contact persons among the staff, out of which, one was always present. In some cases, the contact person at the accommodation centre was more important to the child than the guardian, probably due to their regular presence.

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<sup>30</sup> *Individuella programmets introduktionskurser för invandrare.*

<sup>31</sup> *Barn och Ungdomspsykiatri.*

## 11. Conclusions

### 11.1 Reasons for Leaving Afghanistan

Based on the results of the interviews, Afghan unaccompanied children seem to be part of mixed migration movements and to have various motivations for leaving Afghanistan expressed by a combination of fears, uncertainties, hopes and aspirations. Whereas only a few indicated to have left Afghanistan for purely socio-economic reasons, most left Afghanistan for reasons which appear to be linked to the security situation in Afghanistan and what may be individual persecution.

Although the study does not purport to provide any detailed account of the children's protection needs in Afghanistan, many of their stories corroborate the information contained in UNHCR's "Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection needs of Afghan asylum-seekers from Afghanistan" and a number of more recent studies on the impact on children of the armed conflict in Afghanistan as reflected *inter alia* by attacks on schools and hospitals and the lack of progress in criminalizing under-age recruitment in accordance with international standards.<sup>32</sup>

In light of the child-specific concerns raised by the children, it is worth emphasizing that a number of the forms of harm reported could in principle fall within the definition of persecution in the refugee definition contained in article 1(A) 2 of the *1951 Convention relating to the Protection of Refugees* or acts of child-specific or serious harm according to the *Council Directive on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals*. Some children claimed to have suffered from child-specific forms of human rights violations in Afghanistan including abductions, threats of under-age recruitment and forced labor. In a few cases involving the disappearance or killing of a parent or other persons on whom the child depended, the child may have a well-founded fear of persecution even if violence was inflicted against members of the child's family and the act was not targeted directly against the child. Other types of harm which may amount to persecution include the children's accounts of harm disproportionately affecting them as

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<sup>32</sup> "UN welcomes Afghanistan's commitment to protect children from conflict", UN News Service, 2 May 2010, available at: [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4be90fc3a.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4be90fc3a.html), UN General Assembly, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General," 10 March 2010, A/64/705-S/2010/127, available at: [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4bb44c5c2.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4bb44c5c2.html), "Mission Report by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict on visit to Afghanistan", UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 26 February 2010, available at: [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0e143b2.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0e143b2.html) [accessed 13 June 2010].



children, such is in the example of children being threatened and physically abused when attending school.<sup>33</sup>

In assessing applications of Afghan unaccompanied children for international protection, the Swedish authorities are therefore urged to continue to carefully review the claims submitted in light of relevant and updated child specific country of origin information, and applicable guidance.<sup>34</sup> In this vein, it is recommended that the Swedish authorities seriously consider the existence of a link between the harm suffered by the children and one of the persecution grounds in article 1 (A) 2 of the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and apply a child-appropriate threshold with regard to the nexus between general violence and ill-treatment and the risk for individualized ill-treatment. As highlighted in the study, the asylum process should specifically consider the age and maturity of the child, and the possibility that the child may manifest fears and experiences differently from adults and may have limited knowledge of conditions in the country of origin.<sup>35</sup>

The Swedish Migration Board has made laudable attempts to identify and issue reports containing child-specific country of origin information on Afghanistan, and to issue example decisions particularly on the situation of unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan in order to guide the adjudication of this type of claims. This practice is encouraged to continue.

## **11.2 Aspects related to Trauma during the Journey**

When assessing a claim for protection by an unaccompanied child, making a best interest determination, planning for reception and integration or, other durable solutions, it is important to bear in mind what the child may have been subjected to in the country of origin, during the flight and upon arrival in the country of asylum. Children travelling unaccompanied may have lost family members, in the country of origin, they may have been subjected to the consequences of conflict and human rights abuses, threats, lack of regular education, and poverty. They may have been on the move for long periods of time, where they were at risk of exploitation and abuse, separated from family members and experiencing things that profoundly affect them. Children's perception and understanding of what happens around them is different from how adults perceive the world and if the children have been frightened during the journey, they may be affected of the consequences for a long time to come.

The children's stories in this study generally indicate a pattern of abuse and exploitation throughout their journeys. Children with previous residence in Iran reported of being

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<sup>33</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Guidelines on International Protection No. 8: Child Asylum Claims under Articles 1(A)2 and 1(F) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*, 22 December 2009, HCR/GIP/09/08, available at: [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b2f4f6d.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b2f4f6d.html).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> "Statement of Good Practice", Separated Children in Europe Program, 4th revised edition, 2009, p. 35.

subjected to physical and psychological ill-treatment and regular threats of deportation to Afghanistan. They endured mental stress, fear, extreme weather conditions, physical violence and seeing their co-travellers die. Furthermore, the children's accounts of crossing the mountains show the extensive exposure they have had to various kinds of violations of rights sometimes putting their lives at risk. Out of reach of any protection or law enforcement mechanisms, the children found themselves in a strong dependency relationship vis-à-vis the smugglers requiring the children to fully rely on the smugglers for continued travel without being able to influence the conditions. Not knowing their location or what will happen next increased the mental stress for these children.

The physical safety of the children was also threatened by criminal groups, the police and border guards. Whereas the former seem to have kidnapped children for economic purposes, the state officials posed a threat in terms of possible deportation to Iran or Afghanistan. Children travelling alone also seem to have been exposed to physical threats by accompanying adult travellers. Also, upon arrival in the country of asylum, these children suffer from the separation from family members, fear of smugglers and uncertainty what the future will bear.

Many of the children were still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, having insomnia, nightmares and suffering from anxiety, because of their experiences. Upon arrival in Sweden and other countries, it is therefore of utmost importance that the reception and integration mechanisms are developed bearing in mind the possible trauma of these children and any symptoms they may suffer from, and that this is also taking into account when eligibility interviews are conducted and when best interest determination for durable solutions is made.

### **11.3 Return Prospects**

Although a considerable number of children interviewed had one or both parents in Iran, a substantial number seem to be orphans or genuinely to lack knowledge of their whereabouts. In other cases, tracing efforts have failed or the children have chosen not to initiate tracing activities, stating that there are no parents left to trace. This information supports the view that many of the Afghan children arriving in Sweden indeed are children who have been separated from either parents, or their previous caregiver, leaving them without any adult to provide for their well-being and protection in Afghanistan.

With regard to Afghan children who have been found not to be in need of protection according to the 1951 Convention or subsidiary protection regimes, following a determination including examination of child-specific forms of persecution and consideration of the best interest of the child, asylum authorities may decide to review the feasibility of return to Afghanistan. In this regard, UNHCR's 2009 "Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection needs of Afghan asylum-seekers", recommend that return of Afghans should not take place to areas other than where the person has family or community links, which in most cases will be the place of origin or

habitual residence. In the Guidelines, children are identified as one of the groups which may face particular difficulties upon return.<sup>36</sup>

UNHCR is aware that a number of European countries are currently considering establishing care centers in Afghanistan for the reception and reintegration of unaccompanied children without individual protection needs. In UNHCR's view, residential care is the least preferred form of care for any separated child. It should thus be the option of last resort, following an assessment of the child's best interest.<sup>37</sup> Such best interest determination must include serious efforts to trace family members. If family or care-givers are successfully traced, the family situation in the home country and willingness and ability of the child's family (parents or other family members) or other care-givers to provide appropriate long-term care needs to be carefully assessed<sup>38</sup> international guidelines stipulate that residential care should be temporary in nature and be used in conjunction with continued tracing efforts. <sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Afghan Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan", United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) July 2009, p.61 f.

<sup>37</sup> "Statement of Good Practice", 4th revised edition, Separated Children in Europe Programme, 2009, p. 40-43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "UN Guidelines on Alternative Care", December 2009, A/HRC/11/L.13.



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