



AFGHAN CHILDREN CANNOT WAIT



Save the Children

The case for investing in their future now

Afghan children cannot wait

In 2015, 90,000 unaccompanied children were registered as asylum-seekers in Europe. This is nearly ten times as many as in 2012.¹ Over half of them were from Afghanistan. A total of 178,000 Afghan asylum-seekers arrived to Europe in 2015, four times as many as the year before.

While many Afghans come to Europe, many more reside in neighbouring countries: 95% of Afghan refugees (2.5 million) are hosted in Pakistan and in Iran.² The situation for Afghans residing in Pakistan has deteriorated significantly. IOM reported recently that 600,000 Afghans – registered refugees and undocumented returnees – will return to Afghanistan before the end of the year. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, 225,000 Afghans have returned from Pakistan so far this year. They are fleeing violence, arbitrary arrest, detention and other forms of harassment in Pakistan.³

Afghans constitute the world's largest protracted refugee population.⁴ Half of all child refugees globally come from just two countries: Syria and Afghanistan.⁵ But in spite of these stark numbers, very few people seem to ask the question why so many people – so many children – from Afghanistan undertake the dangerous, often traumatising, 5,000 km journey to reach Europe.

As the international donor community gathers in Brussels to discuss their future support to Afghanistan, it is crucial to look at the broader context in which Afghan children live, and why they might choose to leave Afghanistan. This briefing tries to shed a light on who these children are, what they are running away from, and the risks they face *en route*.

Published October 2016. This brief is released ahead of the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan and the EU–Afghanistan high level dialogue meeting on migration (3–5 October 2016).

GROWING UP IN AFGHANISTAN

Despite some significant progress made in the last decade, Afghanistan is still one of the worst countries in which to be a child.

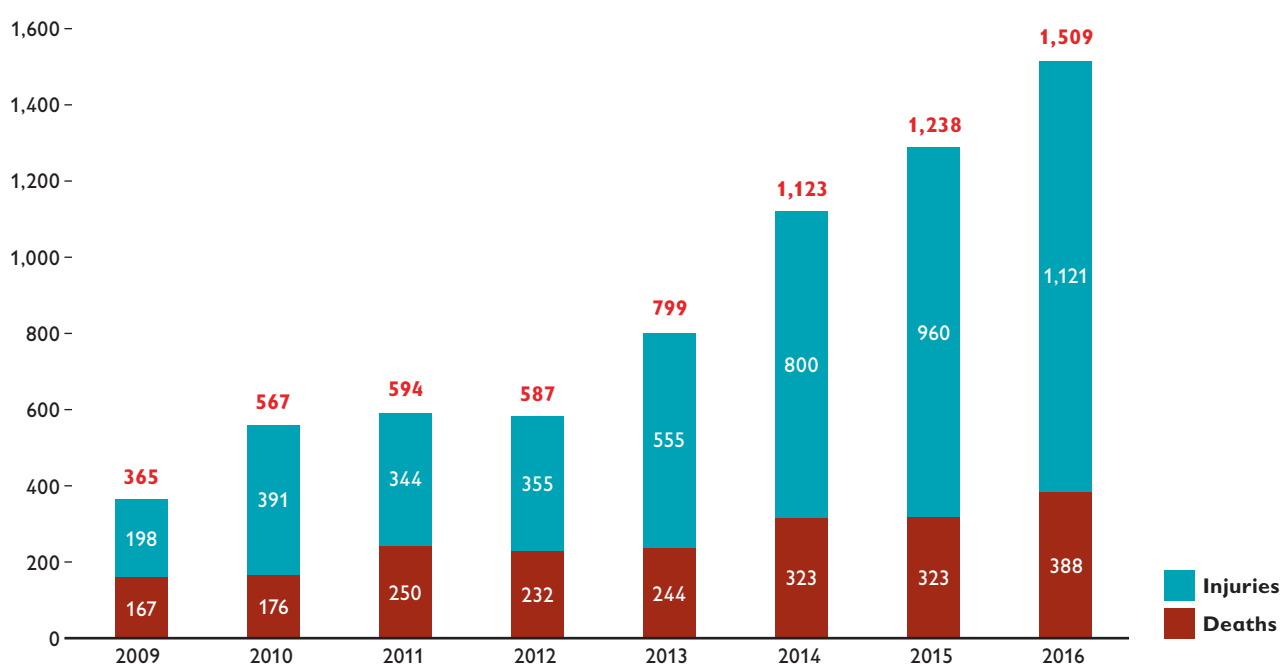
Conflict and violence have increased in the last two years. **2015 saw the highest level of violence since reporting by the UN Assistance Mission (UNAMA) started in 2009.** More than 11,000 civilian casualties were documented, including 2,545 deaths. The conflict is also increasingly affecting children: **in the first six months of 2016 nearly one in three casualties was a child.** UNAMA documented an increase of 18% in child casualties for that period compared to the same period in 2015.⁶ The increasing violence has led to a huge spike in internal displacement: **Amnesty International reported this year that internal displacement rose from 500,000 people in 2012, to 1.2 million people in April 2016.**⁷

The recruitment and use of children as soldiers has more than doubled compared to 2014: 116 cases of recruitment and use of children were reported in 2015. Children are recruited by the Afghan armed forces and police as well as by the Taliban and other armed groups. Children have been specifically recruited by the Taliban for suicide attacks.⁸

Although Afghanistan has made remarkable progress in reducing child mortality and extending access to healthcare, many challenges remain. The health statistics are alarming: **each year, 94,000 Afghan children die before the age of five**, with neonatal mortality comprising 38% of under-five mortality.⁹ Less than half of Afghan children are fully immunised. **Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of child malnutrition in the world, with 41% of children under five suffering from chronic malnutrition** and up to 10% from acute malnutrition. Across Afghanistan, every two hours a woman dies due to pregnancy-related causes.

Afghan children also face many different barriers to education including insecurity, poverty, lack of schools in remote areas, harassment on the way to schools and low quality of education. As a result, **Afghanistan has the highest level of gender disparity in primary education in the world, with only 71 girls in primary school for every 100 boys. Only 21% of girls complete primary education.** The general literacy rate in the country is 38%, with less than one in four adult women able to read or write.

CHILD DEATHS AND INJURIES IN AFGHANISTAN IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF THE YEAR, 2009–2016



Source: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2016). *Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016: Protection of civilians in armed conflict*

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN AFGHANISTAN

In March and April 2016, Save the Children surveyed 1,000 people in Afghanistan, of whom 52% were below the age of 15, to understand their attitudes towards corporal punishment, child labour, sexual violence and other practises such as early marriage.

- 91% of children reported experiencing some level of violence, mainly kicking, beating with objects, choking or burning
- 38% reported being exposed to the murder of a household member in the past year, 31% have lived in a place where they have seen people being shot, bombs going off or people fighting
- Rape and the most egregious forms of violence were reported by 18% of the children
- Sexual harassment was reported by 17% of children and 69% of adults
- 56% of children and adults reported having been involved in child marriage at the community level
- 75% of children were engaged in labour activities to supplement the household income or pay for school expenses
- 18% of children reported feeling vulnerable to recruitment into armed forces

Increasing violence, threats and intimidation left 103,940 Afghan children without access to education in 2015, and there is a rising trend in violence against education. UN records show a **110% increase in the number of threats and intimidation against education since 2013**.¹⁰

Economic prospects are bleak, with only 1.5 percent GDP growth in 2015 because of increased insecurity. Agriculture, on which 45% of the poor rely for their livelihoods, declined by two percent. **Almost 40% of the population lives in poverty. The unemployment rate in 2015 was 40%, a rise from 25% the year before, and a fourfold increase compared to 2013**.¹¹

Afghanistan has made a significant effort to develop policies on education and child protection, but these often remain poorly funded and implemented. The challenges ahead are huge, and with a budget largely dependent on foreign aid, implementation remains conditional on pledges made by donors.

WHY DO CHILDREN LEAVE?

Children leave for a number of complex and inter-related reasons including increased insecurity and the lack of economic and educational opportunities. They leave their families in search for a better life and a brighter future.¹² Especially in areas such as Kunduz, the increased violence has led to massive internal and external displacement.

According to a study commissioned by UNHCR in 2014, **children travelling on their own are mostly boys between the age of 13 and 17**. Sometimes the decision is made by the family, who will do whatever it takes to find the resources to cover their child's expenses, such as borrowing money or mortgaging property. In other cases children decide to leave on their own, either with the financial support of relatives or by gathering necessary resources on the road. Iran is often an intermediate stop, as relatives there can help children find a job to finance their journey. Some remain in Iran for months, others stay there for years.¹³

Many Afghan children living in refugee camps in Iran eventually decide to go to Europe.

This is partly because they face severe restrictions on freedom of movement in Iran, as well as restricted access to education, employment, Iranian citizenship, and marriage rights. In addition, Iranian authorities are forcing them to leave refugee camps and threatening to deport them to Afghanistan.¹⁴

Since the conflict began in Syria, Afghan children and young people living in Iran are increasingly at risk of being forced to go to Syria to fight ISIS.¹⁵

According to a profiling conducted by UNHCR in March 2016 of Afghans arriving in the Greek islands, 55% of arrivals were displaced in Afghanistan before leaving, and 75% left due to conflict and violence. 38% were Hazara and 37% Pashtun. 13% of them were students, interrupting their studies to depart to Europe.¹⁶

RISKS ON THE ROAD

Embarking on a journey to Europe without a parent or legal guardian is a huge challenge for children. As soon as they move children become highly vulnerable to discrimination, violence, abuse and exploitation, both during their journey and at their destination. They also face a number of challenges, including lack of access to basic services such as education, health, adequate housing, and protection.

In Norway, Save the Children interviewed 78 children coming from Syria and Afghanistan. The children who participated in this study say they lacked water, food and safe places to rest. They were exhausted, scared and afraid. Some were shot at, received death threats, almost drowned or were nearly killed. **Many saw other people being killed and some saw small children who had been left behind by their parents.** Many of them were maltreated by police, border authorities and smugglers. The unaccompanied children missed their families intensely. Most of them journeyed for weeks and some for months.¹⁷

ARRIVAL IN EUROPE

Sweden, Germany, Hungary and Austria received the largest number of unaccompanied children in 2015.¹⁸

For the children interviewed in reception centres in Norway, their main concerns were **access to education to facilitate their integration, insecurity about their status and fear of being returned.**¹⁹

Children arriving to Europe face an increasingly hostile climate. Médecins sans Frontières reported in July 2016 that **the number of consultations for violent trauma in Serbia have doubled since the borders were closed in March.**²⁰

Not only has violence at border crossings increased significantly, but many European Union (EU) member states are now also implementing policies that make children's status more insecure or facilitate their return to Afghanistan. While legislation allowing for forced and voluntary return of children has been in place for many years, this was very rarely implemented in practise. Now many EU member states have put returns at the centre of their asylum policies, with countries such as Finland designating **Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq as safe to return people to.**²¹

UPON RETURN

Children who are returned to Afghanistan also face many difficulties in reconnecting with their families and communities. **Coming back to Afghanistan empty-handed, without meeting families' expectations, is a potential source of stigma and isolation for returnee children, in contravention of their best interests.**²² Afghan young people who returned to Afghanistan after spending several years in the UK have reported that over the past few years some returnee Afghan children, as well as their families, were threatened, attacked, kidnapped or killed within their communities due to the children's returnee status, because they were thought to be either spies or rich people.²³

The Afghan government has very little sympathy for returned children, and there are insufficient systems and networks in place to protect them. Often they start living on their own away from their families and communities, making them even more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT, DONORS AND EU DECISION-MAKERS

WE URGE THE EU AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL DONORS TO:

- **Prioritise children’s wellbeing by ensuring support to Afghanistan focuses on investment in the health, education and child protection sectors.**

Specifically, we are calling for:

- **Maintained investment in public health, which has saved many children’s lives.** Over the past ten years, there has been a significant decrease in the rate of children dying under the age of five. Donor governments need to build on this success, and continue to commit to long term, sustainable health financing in ways that directly benefit ordinary Afghans. Sustained, predictable and long-term funding of the Basic Package of Health Services is critical to sustaining the gains of the last decade in terms of reduction of child and maternal mortality.
- **Increased investment in the education sector** to support the Afghan government’s efforts to expand the scale of education provision and the quality of education. In collaboration with the Afghan government, the EU and other international donors should focus their efforts on the 3.5 million school-age children who are out of school.
- Donors to step up their efforts to provide funding and technical support aimed at **strengthening national child protection systems.**
- **Support the Afghan government to ensure the full implementation of the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF).** In particular, the *Citizen’s Charter* national priority programme will be key to ensuring all vulnerable communities have access to health, education, clean water, energy, irrigation and farm-to-market roads.
- **Support the Ministry of Repatriation and Resettlement to develop a National Action Plan for the implementation of the National Policy on Displaced Persons.** The inclusion of internally-displaced persons, as well as returning migrants, in Afghanistan’s development plans, in line with the ANPDF, by respecting their civil, political, social and

economic rights as well as ensuring they have access to services and economic opportunities, is key to sustainable and inclusive development.

- **Exclude any conditionality based on migration control indicators in bilateral agreements with Afghanistan.** Afghanistan is a country barely coming to grips with its own security situation, as many reports, including by the EU, have demonstrated. Any kind of support to Afghanistan should be guided primarily by human rights and children’s rights, and include a strong focus on child protection, education, health and livelihood opportunities. Aid should never be used as a lever to gain concessions on return and readmission of Afghanistan’s asylum seekers and refugees, which might put people’s lives at risk.

IN RELATION TO AFGHAN CHILD AND ADULT REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EUROPE, THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES SHOULD ALSO:

- **Increase understanding of the root causes of migration.** Children move for various, complex reasons. The EU needs to invest more in research to understand the multi-faceted drivers of migration. This will allow for more targeted programming aimed at not only addressing root causes, but also reducing the risks faced by people on the move and in their home communities.
- **Facilitate safe mobility by opening and strengthening safe and regular channels to Europe,** both for those in need of international protection and other migrants, including through resettlement, humanitarian admission and humanitarian visas, family reunification, worker mobility across skill levels and student visas.
- In its General Comment No. 6, the Committee on the Rights of the Child clearly states that in the case of the return of unaccompanied children, “non-rights based considerations, such as those relating to general migration control, cannot override best interest considerations.”²⁴ **The EU should devise a formal procedure to define clearly what a durable solution for a child constitutes in its return policies,** taking into consideration the child’s best interests

and his or her views, while ensuring that the child's safety will be guaranteed both by the state and family members, where this is in their best interests. Return should always be on a voluntary basis. Where needed, returns should be monitored.

- **Stop any readmissions or removals of people by the EU that violate – or risk violating – fundamental rights and the rule of law, including the principle of non-refoulement.** Ensure access to protection, justice and effective remedy for all people in migration and asylum procedures.

WE ARE CALLING ON THE GOVERNMENT OF AFGHANISTAN TO:

- Make the **rights and protection of Afghan children a political priority**: they should carry out the necessary reforms and allocate the required resources to implement this. The government should **adopt a comprehensive Child Act** in order to ensure the rights of every Afghan child are protected, and ensure the Afghan legislative framework is aligned with all the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and better able to protect children.
- Internal displacements may often lead to displacements outside the borders of Afghanistan. In order to prevent such risk, the government of Afghanistan, in collaboration with other key stakeholders should **develop a National Action Plan for the effective implementation of the National Policy on Displaced Persons**. The National Action Plan should include child-sensitive interventions in the fields of health, nutrition, education and child protection.
- While the Afghan 2008 Education Act bans corporal punishment in schools, this form of violence is still very much alive, with dire psychological and physical impacts on children. **For Afghan classrooms to be free of violence, the Ministry of Education should train all teachers on positive discipline and include it in teachers' curriculum.**
- Poverty has led to the involvement of thousands of children in labour. More than a quarter of all children are engaged in child labour, including harmful work. As a result, every day, thousands of children across Afghanistan are endangering

their health, and potentially risking injuries or death. **Children's harmful labour should not be tolerated.** The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled should set up **a proper monitoring system to report child labour practices and enable the full application of the law banning harmful work for children.**

- Provincial and District Child Protection Action Networks, which play a critical role in monitoring children's protection issues at the local level and in responding to abuses that are being reported, are not fully operational due to the fact that they are under-resourced. **The Government of Afghanistan should ensure that Provincial and District Child Protection Action Networks are adequately resourced to improve the protection of Afghan children.**

MORE SPECIFICALLY, REGARDING MIGRATION ISSUES AND AFGHAN CHILD AND ADULT REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EUROPE, THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- **Conduct awareness-raising campaigns and activities on the risks associated with unsafe migration**; particularly in high-sending regions these are key initiatives to prevent unsafe migration of Afghan children towards Europe. The Government of Afghanistan, international and national NGOs and community leaders should take further steps in developing and implementing such initiatives.
- Currently there is an important gap in data on returned children to Afghanistan. As a result, it is very difficult to know what happens after the children's return to Afghanistan, especially in relation to protection risks and vulnerabilities faced by children. It is also very challenging to design structures and programmes which would adequately respond to returnee children's needs. **The Afghan government should ensure that data on each returned child is systematically recorded and adequately managed and monitored.**
- Being able to continue their education in Afghanistan is considered as a top priority for a majority of returned children. However, in practice, there are many barriers which prevent them from accessing further education, such as the lack of recognition of foreign education certificates in Afghanistan, the lack

of local language, educational expenses and also incidents of the military use of schools. **The Government of Afghanistan should increase efforts towards the removal of all barriers which prevent returned children from accessing further education and training opportunities in Afghanistan.**

- The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the stress and anxiety resulting from forced return as well as stigmatisation are factors that impact severely on the physical, mental and emotional health of children returned from Europe to Afghanistan. However, most returned children do not have access to adequate healthcare and counselling services in Afghanistan. **The Government of Afghanistan should ensure that**

returned children have access to adequate healthcare services, including counselling interventions delivered by well-trained and well-resourced professionals.

- Many unaccompanied Afghan children returned from Europe to Afghanistan do not have a legal identity. This is a major barrier in accessing protection mechanisms, basic services, and education. The Government of Afghanistan should increase efforts towards the registration of all children and their access to identity documents. **The Government of Afghanistan should pursue negotiations with Iran and Pakistan to ensure that children born in exile or who are living with their families in refugee camps in these two countries have access to legal identity and documents.**

NOTES

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7244677/3-02052016-AP-EN.pdf>

² UNHCR, *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees – Regional Overview – Update 2015–2016*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/542522922.pdf>

³ <https://www.iom.int/news/crisis-looms-amid-skyrocketing-numbers-afghan-returnees-pakistan-iom>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ <http://www.unicef.org/emergencies/childrenonthemove/uprooted/>

⁶ http://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2016_final_rev.1-9sept.pdf

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/4017/2016/en/>

⁸ United Nations General Assembly Security Council, *Children in armed conflicts – Report of the Secretary General, April 2016*. Available at: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/360&referer=/english/&Lang=E

⁹ http://www.countdown2015mnch.org/documents/2015Report/CDReport_2015_profiles_A-E.pdf

¹⁰ https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/education_and_healthcare_at_risk.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ <http://www.unhcr.org/548ea0f09.pdf>

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Unwelcome Guests – Iran’s violations of Afghan Refugee and Migrant Rights*, 2013. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/11/20/unwelcome-guests/irans-violation-afghan-refugee-and-migrant-rights>

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria*, 2016. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria>

¹⁶ <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/47675>

¹⁷ http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/rapport_hear_it_from_the_children.pdf

¹⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7244677/3-02052016-AP-EN.pdf>

¹⁹ http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/rapport_hear_it_from_the_children.pdf

²⁰ <http://statewatch.org/news/2016/jul/msf-balkans-violence.htm>

²¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-finland-refugees-asylum-seekers-afghanistan-somalia-iraq-safe-to-return-a7036501.html>

²² Refugee Support Network, *After Return – Documenting the Experiences of Young People Forcibly removed to Afghanistan*, April 2016. Available at: http://www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/sites/default/files/files/After%20Return_RSN_April%202016.pdf

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 6, Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin*, Thirty-ninth session 17 May–3 June 2005

Cover photo: Mats Lignell/Save the Children

WE’RE CAMPAIGNING for EVERY LAST CHILD. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, the chance to learn and be safe.