

The road from Kabul

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New UNHCR research investigates the motivations for and challenges associated with the migration of young Afghans to Europe.

An old Afghan proverb provides the title for a new UNHCR study which examines the experiences of unaccompanied Afghan children who have made the long overland journey to Europe. *Trees Only Move in the Wind* (meaning nothing happens without a good cause) attempts to explain why increasing numbers of Afghan children are encouraged and even obliged by their families to undertake this arduous and expensive journey, usually at the hands of unscrupulous people smugglers.

The risks involved in unaccompanied child migration are seemingly outweighed by the prospect of moving from a country affected by armed conflict, severe human rights violations, ethnic discrimination, unemployment and corruption to a part of the world which, in the eyes of these children and their

families, offers freedom and respect for human rights. Education and employment also serve as a strong motivation, as children who move to Europe are considered as a future source of financial support for family members remaining in Afghanistan.

Although journeys of the type undertaken by Afghan children are not unique (young Iraqis and Somalis are also involved in such long-distance journeys), the lack of accurate and up-to-date information about these children, plus current moves by European governments to return them to their country of origin, provided the impetus for the UNHCR study. Around 150 young Afghan boys (no girls could be found) were interviewed in six European countries in order to determine why and how the decision was made for them to leave

Afghanistan and to understand how they were treated (and mistreated) in the course of their journey.

While the specific circumstances leading to departure differed significantly from one child to another, the research demonstrated the difficulty of labelling the Afghan children as either 'refugees' or 'migrants'; in most cases, families has multiple motivations in sending their children to Europe.

Despite a common assumption that many of the Afghan children are orphans, the study shows that many of their parents are still living, and had paid up to \$US15,000 to smuggle their children across Pakistan, Iran and Turkey before entering Europe, usually by way of Greece. The frequent use of professional people smugglers puts the children at great risk. Payment for the journey is usually made in instalments; if payment is delayed at any point, the boy will often be forced to remain



Fourteen-year-old Babar prepares for another night in the cold under a bridge in Calais, France.

where he is – usually in unsavoury and dangerous conditions – until the money has been received. No-one knows how many young people set out on the road from Kabul but fail to complete the journey.

Surprisingly, some boys described their journey as an adventure, involving a night-time trek through the Turkish mountains. Others were less enthusiastic and described being robbed by armed police and locals, as well as being sent out on the Aegean Sea in small and overcrowded boats. Many of the boys were adamant that they would not have undertaken such a journey had they been aware of the treatment they would encounter at the hands of smugglers and authorities.

The lack of information available to the children was also revealed by the fact that some boys left for Europe without any real idea of where their final destination would be. Those who had a particular destination in mind tended to have a preference for Norway and other Nordic countries, where social welfare arrangements are known to be of a high quality,

states, some of which are currently considering the establishment of reception centres in Kabul so as to allow the children to be returned (on an involuntary basis) to their country of origin.

UNHCR is naturally concerned that this may lead to the removal of children who have a valid claim to refugee status or who for other 'best interest' reasons should be allowed to remain in Europe. Another disturbing aspect of this phenomenon is the anxiety experienced by young Afghans who are permitted to stay while they are children but who face the prospect of deportation as soon as they reach the age of 18. Unsurprisingly in these circumstances, some Afghans misrepresent their age, a situation which has led to the bizarre and inexact new science of 'age determination', often involving detailed skeletal and dental examinations. Those Afghans who are deemed to have turned 18 and who are sent back to their own country must live with the sense of personal failure and betrayal of their family, given the large

or (especially in the case of the Pushtuns) the United Kingdom, because of its well-established Afghan population, as well as the educational and employment opportunities that the country is thought to offer.

The arrival of unaccompanied Afghan children has become a matter of growing concern for European

amounts of money that has been invested in their westward journey.

A key conclusion to be drawn from this study is that responsibility for the plight of unaccompanied Afghan children in Europe rests with a number of different actors. As long as the Afghan authorities continue to turn a blind eye to irregular migration, families and communities will continue to encourage their children to undertake this hazardous journey. And they will find a means to do so while professional smugglers are on hand to profit from human hardship and insecurity.

The European states in which these children arrive also have legal and moral obligations that must be met more effectively. Many have failed to establish best interest determination procedures to protect the rights of Afghan children, while differences in service provision only serve to encourage young Afghans to travel on from one country to another. And while the 'removal and reception centre' approach proposed by some European governments should not be discounted for some of the young Afghans who have no need for international protection, many of the practical and longer-term issues associated with the strategy remain significant yet unresolved.

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No Entry!

Over the past 20 years, states have repeatedly closed their borders in the name of preserving security and relieving pressure on national capacity. Border closures present significant humanitarian consequences and an explicit denial of a refugee's right to flee their country of origin and seek asylum elsewhere. Prompted by recent border closures between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and between Somalia and Kenya, UNHCR has undertaken a study on the issue of state border closures in situations of crisis. Responding to formal, centrally authorised border closures poses significant political and operational challenges for UNHCR, forcing it to confront the

tension between providing protection and assistance, and to prioritise among its own complex interests.

'No Entry! A Review of UNHCR's Response to Border Closures in Situations of Mass Refugee Influx' examines the common characteristics among five case studies of post-Cold War border closures. It offers a comprehensive insight into the politics of border closures, with the aim of informing UNHCR's future policy-response framework so that it can be better prepared to respond to this ongoing dilemma.

Online at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pdes/>