

Schooled In Britain, Deported to Danger: UK Sends 600 Former Child Asylum Seekers Back to Afghanistan

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Hundreds of Westernised young men who grew up in Britain after fleeing war-torn Afghanistan as children have been forcibly returned to their home country due to what experts believe is an inhumane shortcoming in the UK asylum system.

The Bureau has established that in the past six years 605 individuals who had arrived unaccompanied in the UK as asylum-seeking children were deported to Afghanistan after their temporary leave to remain ran out on turning age 18. Hundreds of others are still in Britain awaiting a similar fate.

Those deported often spent several years in Britain learning impressive English, going to school, playing cricket, taking GCSEs and A-levels, and forming close bonds with new friends and foster families.

But they are wrenched from their new lives and frequently placed terrified on special charter flights, sometimes in handcuffs, to a country they no longer know, that many experts regard as dangerous – and with little support and money from the UK government.

In many cases, those deported no longer even know where their birth families live after years without contact. Their memories have faded after their time in Britain, and with their Westernised mannerisms and accents they are regarded with suspicion in Afghanistan. Some told the Bureau they have been left homeless, chased by the Taliban, kidnapped, ransomed and beaten.

Yet just last month, as gunmen and suicide bombers stormed the Kabul parliament, a British court ruled Afghanistan was a safe place for their return – to the astonishment of human rights groups and the Afghanistan government itself.

The number of unaccompanied child asylum seekers who arrived in the UK in the past nine years includes youngsters from Syria, Iran, Libya and Iraq, but by far the biggest group – more than a third, 5,500 – has been those from Afghanistan, a reflection of Western military involvement there since 2001.

The findings come from a Bureau investigation into the issue of unaccompanied asylum seeking children from Afghanistan.

The Bureau has spoken to children who came to the UK from Afghanistan, who were

encouraged to build lives in British society, only to have their lives turned upside down once the clock struck midnight on their 18th birthday.

It is at that point they lose the protection they enjoyed as children and their fight against deportation begins.

A major factor in their struggle is the issue of temporary leave to remain. The UK government, bound by international law, is unable to send asylum-seeking children back and so instead issues temporary leave to remain which lasts until six months after the child's 17th birthday.

The temporary leave, which often gives children a false hope of permanency in the UK, has been criticised by human rights organisations. They say the Home Office and lawyers are using the practice as a quick fix when children arrive instead of properly exploring their asylum claims. It means that when the newly turned adult does apply for asylum many years later, the facts are harder to recall, inconsistencies can appear as lies and formal claims to remain are more likely to be rejected. The Bureau found just one in five Afghans secure asylum at this point, while in some cases people are left waiting for more than four years for a decision.

Parliamentary 'concern'

In 2013, parliament's joint committee on human rights produced a report which noted: "The widespread granting of discretionary leave to remain, with further determinations delayed until just before adulthood, serves administrative convenience more than the best interests of children. We are particularly concerned because it appears that asylum claims are not being properly considered because of the availability of discretionary leave." The then Government did not accept the criticism.

Now both the UNHCR and senior officials inside Children's Commissioner's office have told the Bureau Britain's policy towards asylum seeking children needs to change. One senior official at the Children's Commissioner's office privately believes the system is "unfair".

Sarah-Jane Savage, Senior Protection Associate at UNHCR UK, said: "Children need a long-term, durable solution found for them, and certainly the idea that they would get something temporary until they were 18 does not fulfil that criteria."

Each year hundreds of teenage asylum seekers arrive alone in Britain and UK policy means they cannot be returned to their country of origin. Once on British soil they can apply for asylum and if they are instead given temporary leave to remain they are placed into the care of the state until they are 18.

They are usually attached to foster carers, go to local schools, develop relationships and become fully integrated in to UK society. Few keep contact with friends and family in Afghanistan, while many do not even speak their mother tongue language for years.

Once their leave runs out they revive their asylum applications. Often with no documents, lost evidence and faded memories many fail. The Bureau has found that just one in five Afghans secures asylum at this stage.

One who left Afghanistan when he was 15 was Abdul (we have changed his name at his request), who is now 23 and awaiting deportation from his home in north London.

He applied for asylum, telling the Home Office his mother paid for him to be smuggled alone out of his country after relatives tried to recruit him to the Taliban. But the Home Office quickly rejected his claim when he arrived after a long journey aged 16 and instead gave him temporary leave until he was 18.

He went to school, took GCSEs, made friends, got a girlfriend and established a life for himself but when the Home Office came to assess his claim again they did not believe his story and it said he should be deported.

Still forbidden from working, he has now appealed the decision and told the Bureau in an audio recording below: "It would be so dangerous to return, people are still looking for me. Now when I speak my language I use a lot of English, because I've forgotten words, so I would be found easily."

The Bureau found that Afghan children are more than twice as likely to be refused permanent asylum than children of other countries of origin. Since 2006 15% of all unaccompanied asylum seeking children were given refugee status, compared with just 6% of Afghan children.

Professor Susan Clayton, of Goldsmith's University in London, is a film-maker who has tracked scores of former child asylum seekers over the past decade, many of whom have been returned to Afghanistan. She said: "The method of removal is inhumane. These young men, they're pulled out of bed, not dressed, leaving all their all their belongings. They're taken barefoot, put into caged vans, there's guard dogs, then they are sent back from the cargo terminals in the middle of the night."

Case study: Hakim's return to Kabul

That is what happened to Hakim (name changed to protect his identity). He spent six years in the UK after arriving aged 13. He went to school, made close friends and assumed his life would be spent in this environment. But when he was 19 he was put on a charter flight and flown to Afghanistan. He was unable to find his family and ended up living in a derelict warehouse.

Hakim told the Bureau: "When I returned back to Afghanistan it was the worst situation of my life. No one helped me at all because I was completely different ... I was strange to them and they were for me. I dressed differently I was not able to communicate with anyone."

Hakim said he was kidnapped by thieves who demanded he pay a ransom to be released. He said after paying a portion of the demanded money he managed to escape. He now hopes to leave Afghanistan again.

He said: "I don't want to be kidnapped again, I don't want to be killed. I want live and have a family. Here the security situation is getting worse day by day."

It is what happens to them once they ordered to leave Britain that is of most concern to rights groups. Since 2010, there have been 82 charter flights between London and Kabul for failed asylum seekers, many of whom had grown up in Britain.

Dr Liza Schuster (left), a City University London academic based in Kabul who has interviewed about 100 returned "failed asylum seekers", said they are often seen as a source of both suspicion and money.

She said: “When you come back from Europe, especially if you’ve spent your adolescent years there, you’ve learnt different habits and behaviours. Those coming back after life in Europe are extremely traumatised and frightened by what they are faced with; they don’t know where to go, where is safe, or who to trust.”

Refugee Support Network is currently undertaking long-term research tracking the experiences of former asylum seeking children who have been returned to Afghanistan. It has found that a quarter of the boys returned have experienced harm or difficulties as a result of being viewed as “westernised outsiders”.

Afghan government concern

The charity has also noted that those forcibly returned often have issues with accessing the small amount of financial support provided by the the Foreign Office through the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The Bureau found from Freedom of Information requests just 37% of those forcibly returned between 2010 and 2014 received any kind of support from the IOM scheme.

The Foreign Office said: “The choice as to whether to seek this support remains with the individual, and not all returnees choose to take up this assistance.”

The Bureau also found that authorities are unable to identify and reconnect returned teenagers with their families. Over the past two years 228 Afghan children have asked the Red Cross to help trace their remaining family member, but problems in the country mean only eight have been successful.

The situation in the country also raises the question of whether people should be returned there. Last month, British lawyers for some asylum seekers brought a judicial review to try and secure legal recognition of the dangers in Afghanistan, but the Upper Tribunal ruled conditions were safe.

However, a recent report from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan found the first quarter of 2015 has seen a 16% increase in civilian casualties, marking the worst levels of violence since the end of the Taliban.

Even the Afghan government has asked the UK to stop ignoring pleas not to remove people to dangerous provinces. The Bureau has obtained a letter dated March 2015 from the Afghanistan embassy in London to the Foreign Office in which the Afghan Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, Hossein Alami Balkhi, argues that Britain is breaching a removals agreement between the two countries.

He told the Bureau last month: “There is an article in the agreement that the residents of insecure provinces should not be deported. The [British government] did not adhere to this agreement in the past, now they [say they] don’t consider it necessary and insist to leave it the way it used to be.”

A Home Office spokesperson said: “The UK has a proud history of granting asylum to those who genuinely need it, and every case is carefully considered on its individual merits. We take our international responsibility in cases involving children seriously and their welfare is at the heart of every decision made.

“Where people establish a genuine need for protection, or a well founded fear of persecution, refuge will be granted. If someone is found not to need our protection, we expect them to leave the country voluntarily. Where they do not, we will seek to enforce their departure.”

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