

Collection Children at Risk



# Invisible Travellers

Dossier on the  
**Unaccompanied**  
**Afghan Child Refugees**



PROGETTI D'AMORE PER I BAMBINI

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## **L'Albero della Vita Foundation**

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by Patrizio Paoletti, President of L'Albero della Vita Foundation

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# Introduction

## The Right To Life

**Contributed by**

Patrizio Paoletti

President of L'Albero della Vita Foundation

Afghanistan is currently experiencing one of the most painful and difficult periods in its entire history. After 30 years of conflict and with one of the most complex socio-political situations on the entire planet, the Country is currently unable to guarantee even the most basic of human rights and is regrettably at the top of the list of Countries that are least hospitable to children.

Of all the existing rights violations, the one that we wish to draw attention to at this time is the right to grow up in the hope of having a life that is worth living. This right to life (UNO Convention on children's rights - art. 6) encompasses all of the basic rights that adults are required to provide at all costs, so as to ensure that every child is able to reach his/her full potential and make his/her own special contribution to the world in which we all live.

It is precisely because this right is being denied that, driven by the intrinsic human urge to seek a better life, an ever increasing number of children and youngsters are leaving their Country of birth, their village and their loved ones in order to undertake the voyage to Europe: a difficult voyage, paved with many dangers, which could cost them their lives at any time, driven on by the hope of finding a better place in which to grow up, to study, to work and to build a new life for themselves. It is a voyage that may continue for years, and one which is begun as a child and completed as an adolescent, arriving as an adult.

Can we even imagine being one of these children, who leaves behind his/her loved ones and his/her certainties and heading off for an unknown future risking life and limb on a daily basis? Can we even begin to imagine being forced to work on some construction site simply in order to earn a plate of food, to then have to find some place to sleep in the gardens of Patras, cross over the high mountains along the border between Iran and Turkey on foot, float across the ribbon of sea separating Turkey and Greece all alone in a dinghy and then surreptitiously get aboard a ship bound for Italy, hanging onto the axle of some truck? What if we were that little man? What indelible memories would we be left with?

In the life of these invisible migrants, the experiences of this voyage land up changing their entire outlook on life: having to grow up so quickly will forever deprive them of one of their most basic human rights, namely the right to a normal childhood development.

What is needed is decisive and concrete action to support these youngsters, aimed at building a life of dignity and setting up a loving support system capable of turning these children into confident young adults that are able to look forward to the future.

This need, this commitment has to be met by all of the institutions and social welfare organisations throughout Europe. Therefore, this dossier constitutes an appeal for everyone concerned to accept personal responsibility for helping to overcome this social ambiguity that wells up within us when we are "separated from", and to strive for a sustainable development of humanity that ranges from understanding the social change of our times and investing in the future of the children, who are the real future of our world.

This appeal is also aimed at reaching the European institutions that have historically and cul-

turally been most committed to guaranteeing democratic protection for their citizens and have thus become shining beacons for all the Countries of the world.

Dealing with human difficulties has proven to be an extremely complex matter because it involves dealing with the future of the world. It has always been part of the “L’Albero della Vita” Foundation’s DNA to promote children’s and adolescent’s rights, above all to promote a new understanding of the right to life, in other words the right to become adults of the future with an awareness of one’s own capabilities, the value of life itself and of contributing to humanity as a whole, which is what makes our commitment sustainable. Sustainability is entirely dependent upon every individual’s ability to look deep within their own hearts, minds and actions in order to find those intimate and profound resources that drive them and spur them on to work for the common good.

Today more than ever before, “L’Albero della Vita” is committed to drawing the attention of institutions and individuals to the important issues affecting humanity and to promote this vision of life, of the future and of our co-existence.





## Chapter 1

### Unaccompanied Child migrants: from Afghanistan to Europe

#### 1.1 The never-ending war: reasons for going the migration route

For the past **thirty-plus years, Afghanistan** has not known the meaning of the word “peace”. Conflict after conflict has brought the Country and its people to their knees and entire generations of children have been born and have grown up in a Country that is at war.

**From the decade of Russian invasion** between

1979 and 1989, **through to the Taliban takeover**, there has been a continuous succession of civil wars and battles between different factions. The period prior to the start of the battles between the US-led International coalition forces, which subsequently became the Nato mission, and the Taleban forces, which had for almost a decade

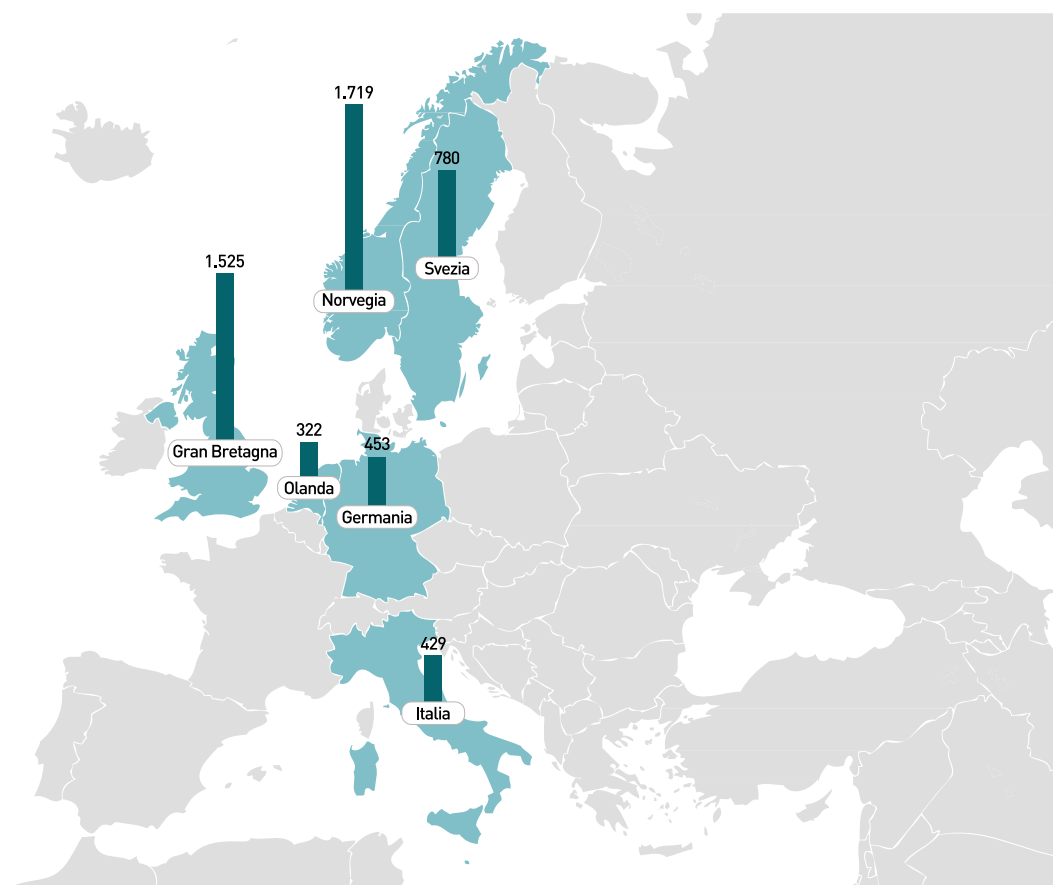
been dragging Afghanistan down into instability from which there appeared to be no way out, marked yet another chapter in the tragic history of a Country that paid the ultimate price, namely **more than one and a half million people dead, 1 million people injured and disabled and more than 6 and a half million refugees.**



**In 2009 alone, 1,050<sup>1</sup> children died as a result of the war** and approximately another **200-thousand were injured and/or permanently disabled**, partly due to the mines (around 1 million of them) that are still in existence throughout the Country. **Afghanistan has the second highest infant mortality rate worldwide** and no less than 199<sup>2</sup> children out of every thousand die before their fifth birthday. To these tragic statistics, we

still have to add those relating to the critical situation faced by women and those relating to child labour. In Afghanistan, **90% of young girls never receive an education** and 43% of women become child brides. Many young children are forced to work, often in order to settle family debts – more than 1,000 children are involved in illegal trafficking along the border with Pakistan – or as soldiers<sup>3</sup>. Even students are

**According to the UNHRC, in 2009 alone, more than 5,900 Afghan children sought asylum in Europe.**



**Countries with the highest number of asylum requests from Afghan youngsters**

No. of attacks on schools during 2009	610
No. of children who died in 2009 as a direct result of the war	1050
No. of Children injured or permanently disabled	200.000
No. of Afghans in exile	4 million

constantly at risk: in 2009 alone, there were some **610 attacks on schools in Afghanistan**, a tragic worldwide record. According to the most reliable estimates, **there are approximately 4 million Afghans living in exile**, although it is difficult to gather accurate data because many of the exiles living in neighbouring Countries such as Iran and Pakistan are not registered as refugees. These people have decided to leave for many different reasons, most of which eventually come down to the extreme uncertainty of life in Afghanistan due to the **armed conflicts, violence and ethnic discrimination, human rights violations, widespread poverty, unemployment and the lack of any public services**. The number of children leaving Afghanistan and arriving at the doorways to Western Europe is constantly increasing. In **2009**, more than **5,900 Afghan youngsters sought asylum in Europe**, as against 3,380 in 2008<sup>4</sup>. **Of all the children seeking asylum in Eu-**

**rope in 2009, 45% were from Afghanistan.** The Countries with the highest number of asylum requests from Afghan youngsters in 2009<sup>5</sup> included Norway (1,719), Great Britain (1,525), Sweden (780), Germany (453) and Holland

(322). **In Italy, in 2008 (the latest available figures) some 429 Afghan youngsters applied for political asylum.**



Shah Marai/Getty Image News



Warrick Page/Getty Image News

1.2 The characteristics of the child migrant

Generally males between the ages of 15 and 17 years, sometimes orphaned but more often with one parent still alive at the time of their departure from the Country. Although it is not easy to establish an “average” profile for the Afghan youngsters who decide to leave their Country of birth, there are nevertheless certain common features that enable us to make some assumptions regarding them. Thanks to a recent study conducted by the UNHCR<sup>6</sup>, consisting of interviews held in various European Countries including Italy, Greece, Norway, Holland, France and Great Britain, it has been possible to establish some sort of profile on the children that undertake the long journey from Afghanistan to Western Europe.

**Almost all** of the Afghan youngsters arriving in Europe are **males**. Very few are female, and then they are normally accompanied by a parent or an older brother. More than 70% of these child migrants are between 15 and 17 years of age. Almost two-thirds of the youngsters arriving in Europe have at least one parent still alive at the time of their departure from Afghanistan. Often this is the mother, while in many cases the father has been killed or has gone missing. **One-third of these**

**youngsters can be deemed to be orphans**, even though in many cases they have been raised by grandparents, older brothers or other close relatives. The ones that leave are most often the older children, leaving, on average, another two or three younger siblings back home, although some of these youngsters state that they have as many as six or seven siblings. Another significant factor is ethnicity. More than **50% of the child migrants are**

**The youngsters’ level of education is generally low: only about 30% of them has completed at least 5 years of schooling.**

not overwhelming Hazaran presence. It often happens that the ethnic distribution of child migrants living abroad is very different to the ethnic distribution percentages found in Afghanistan<sup>7</sup> itself, where the Pashtuns are in the majority (42%),

	% ethnic distribution in Afghanistan	% child migrants in Europe	Ratio of migrant population ethnicity and ethnicity in Afghanistan
Pashtun	42 %	33%	0.8
Tajik	27%	8%	0.2
Hazara	10 %	57%	5.7
Uzbeka	10 %	2%	0.2

Comparison of ethnic origin

**from the Hazara ethnic group**, while about **30%** belong to the **Pashtun** ethnic group and the remaining **20%** has **Tajik and Uzbek origins**. Furthermore, these percentages vary according to the individual Countries of destination chosen by the child migrants, who are attracted there by the presence of their countrymen from the same ethnic group. For example, in Great Britain we find mainly Pashtuns, in Norway mainly Hazaras, while in Italy there is a strong but

followed by the Tajiks (27%) and finally the Hazaras and Uzbeks (about 10% each). **The departing youngsters’ level of education is generally low.** Approximately half of them have completed about one year of formal education while **only about 30% have as much as five years of education** and the remainder have only received some informal education. Here too, ethnicity makes all the difference. In many cases, the children of Ha-



zaran and Tajik origin have had the opportunity to study further while the percentage of Pashtun children with at least five years of schooling is rather low. But even the routes chosen by child migrants and the characteristics of their voyage towards the West can be

very different, with a number of common features. In fact, **at least half of the youngsters leave for Europe only after having spent some time in Iran or Pakistan, in some cases more and in others less but often including a period of employment,**

accompanied by family members who subsequently return to Afghanistan, leaving the youngster with friends, relatives or employers who could help him to find money to pay for the voyage to Europe.

## 1.3 The pathway to hope

The migration routes between Afghanistan and Europe follow some very precise and almost obligatory directions. As revealed in the UNICEF survey entitled *Children on the move*<sup>8</sup>, the child migrants' voyage almost always starts either in Iran or even in **Pakistan** and then proceeds via **Turkey, Greece and Italy**. From here the routes split into two different directions depending on the final destination. One of these routes cuts across France and heads toward Great Britain or Holland, while the other cuts through Austria and Germany, heading for the Scandinavian Countries. There are now also two new routes via the East, bypassing Iran, cutting across Kazakhstan and finally heading towards Russia and from there on towards the Scandinavian Peninsula or Central Europe, across European Russia and the Ukraine. **The first stop for most of the child migrants is Iran, where there is** a large Afghan community of approximately one million people. The youngsters stopover

illegally in Iran **even for a number of months. They look for jobs** in order to pay the human traffickers that control all travel to Europe. Here the child migrants risk being discovered by the Iranian Police and being taken to detention camps to await repatriation. Once the traffickers have been paid, the voyage to the West begins, an experience that often puts the child migrants' very survival at risk. The young migrants have to cross **the mountains** between Iran and Turkey, covering long stretches on foot in order to avoid checkpoints. **From the Turkish border at Istanbul, they then have to travel hundreds of kilometres through the very heart** of Anatolia with its torrid summer heat and freezing winter chill. This is an extremely long and traumatic journey, which often begins with the migrant being forced to spend a number of days confined to a **false-bottom compartment of a truck or a bus** waiting for the traffickers to receive confirmation that

**The trip from their Country of origin to Europe is generally 5,000 to 6,000 km and the time it takes them to complete the trip varies from a number of months to several years.**

the migrants' parents or friends have paid the required fee. The worst time comes immediately thereafter, when the migrants are obliged to cross **the stretch of sea between Turkey and Greece in small rubber dinghies, at night** and at the mercy of the currents, with the added risk of either being intercepted by the Turkish police or being overcome by the conditions at sea. Once in **Greece**, the child migrants proceed on to **Patrasso where they wait, sometimes for months**, to surreptitiously board a **ferry headed for Italy (mainly Bari, Ancona or Venice)**, hiding in trucks and containers or

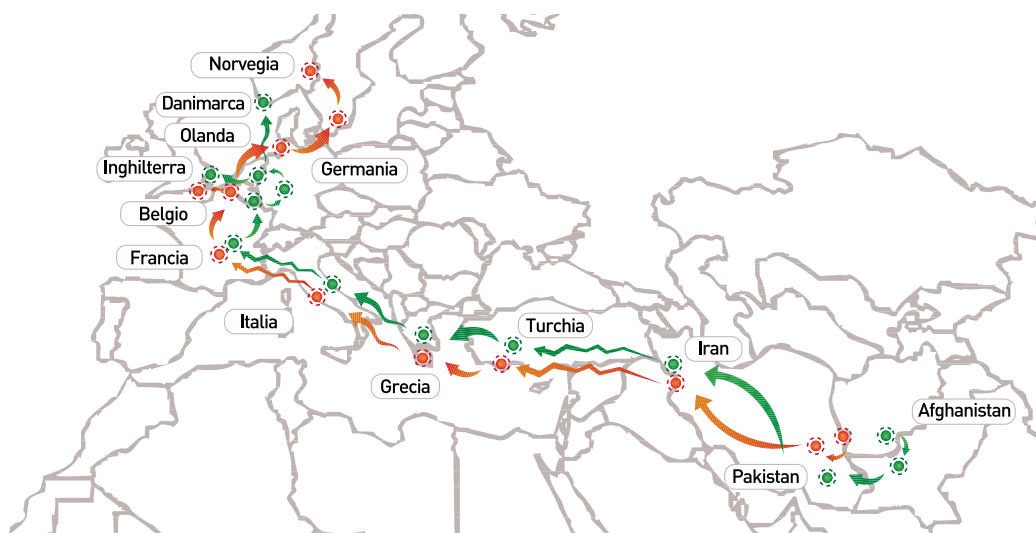
### clinging on to the rear axles of heavy duty vehicles.

More recently, we have noted a change in the traditional migration patterns, whereby those who are financially able to afford it leave directly from Turkey on tourist boats piloted by the traffickers and headed mainly for the coasts of the Salento or the Calabria regions. These youngsters, who are generally crammed in together with adults, 40 to 50 at a time, face a four-day, highly risky journey into the unknown. On nearing the coast, they are often dropped off 100 metres from the shore and forced to jump overboard where a number of them end up dying because they have never been taught to swim. For some of these Afghan child migrants (about 10% of them in 2008)<sup>9</sup>, Italy is the final stop of their voyage and where,

once they have been informed of their right to request asylum, the youngsters are sent to special receiving communities. However, most of them are wanting to go on to other European Countries and for them, **the transit point in our country is Rome**, where they often land up living in the streets near the **Ostiese Railway Station**. From here, they head off to **France, Holland and Scandinavia**, where the only risk they face is the possibility of being sent back to Greece or to Italy, in other words, back to the place where they were first registered, in accordance with the EC's Dublin II Regulations<sup>10</sup>. **One of the major stopover points is Calais**, on the French side of the Channel, where many migrants spend a number of months while **attempting to board some means of transport**

### headed for Great Britain.

At the time of departure, and facing this long, 5,000 or 6,000 kilometre voyage to Europe, many of these Afghan child migrants don't even have a definite final destination in mind and their final choice of destination is often based entirely on advice received from relatives, friends and travelling companions. **The overall duration of the trip may vary from as little as a few months to as long as a number of years** (up to three years) depending on how long it takes to make the necessary payments, and this duration increases notably for those who are unable to pay the entire fee for the trip up front. Many of these **young migrants who left Afghanistan when they were still merely children only get to their final destinations as virtual adults**.



The new Afghan child migration routes. Source: UNICEF Children on the move

## 1.4 The regulatory framework governing refugee status

Underage children seeking political asylum are subject to the European Union's General legislation on Political Asylum. This legislation essentially consists of **Regulation 2003/343/EC**, also known as the **Dublin II Regulations**, which defines the principles of co-operation between member states and establishes the criteria and the mechanisms for the applicable member states to use in considering requests for political asylum, as well as a number of Directives containing minimum standards for the granting of political asylum in member states, the granting of refugee status and the procedures to be applied by the member states when granting or revoking refugee status<sup>11</sup>. The Dublin II Regulations are based on the general principle that only one member state can be responsible for any particular application for asylum, and this jurisdiction is defined by a hierarchy of criteria to be established at the time of application<sup>12</sup>. In particular, as regards situations involving underage children, they are to be included in the application of the relative if they are accompanied. If instead they are **unaccompanied** but have a parent or a brother residing legally in one of the other member Countries, then the family reuniting procedure is adopted and the jurisdiction

then passes to the Country where the family member is living, as long as this is in the best interests of the child migrant<sup>13</sup>. **In the absence of any family members**, the regulations instead provide that **the Country responsible for handling the child migrant's asylum application shall be the Country where the child originally lodged the application for asylum**, thereby making it possible to immediately grant the child migrant protection as a child and then allowing him/her to subsequently decide whether to lodge an application for asylum in that Country or to lodge it in one of the other Countries that he/she may go to on their migration travels.

In reality some serious limitations have been identified as regards the application of these Regulations, which grant wide-ranging discretionary powers and operating limits and have resulted in differences in application from Country to Country (and even between different areas within the same Country), often resulting in the application of adult criteria to child migrants. **All of this is extremely confusing for the child migrant and it drives him/her to remain unnoticed until he/she reaches the chosen Country of destination**, thus avoiding any involvement with the recognised national safety and protection services, as has

often been found by the operators of the L'Albero della Vita organisation engaged in the orientation activities with Afghan minors in the city of Rome.

With regard to Italy, the first step towards granting the right to political asylum is the submission of a Request for International Protection, whereby the child migrant can request that he/she be granted refugee status or secondary or humanitarian protection (see Box on page 16). All these types of protection enable the individual to obtain a temporary residence permit and to gain access to asylum seeker support and aid programmes in the manner and within the time periods specified in the table above<sup>14</sup>.

TABLE “Types of protection and rights”

Type of protection	Definition	Right to residence permit
<b>International Protection</b>	A request for international protection is an application aimed at obtaining refugee status or secondary protection status (Leg. Dec. No. 25/2008).	The residence permit for the purposes of requesting international protection is only valid for a temporary period and can be extended for the entire duration of the process but can never be converted.
<b>Refugee Status</b>	A refugee is a person who has been granted refugee status in terms of the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951.	The residence permit is valid for a period of 5 years and can be renewed indefinitely.
<b>Secondary Protection</b>	This type of protection is granted to individuals who are not citizens of the European Union, or displaced persons that do not meet the necessary criteria for the granting of refugee status, but who have genuine grounds for believing that, should they return to their country of origin, or to the country of permanent residence, they would run a very serious risk of serious harm and who, as a result of said risk, cannot or will not avail themselves of the protection offered by said country (leg. dec. no. 251/2007).	The residence permit for the purposes of requesting secondary protection is valid for period of three years. When the time comes to renew the permit, it can be converted to work permit on condition that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The conversion application is lodged prior to the date of expiry of the previous residence permit;</li> <li>• The individual is in possession of a valid identity document, passport or travel document;</li> <li>• The individual has a valid employment contract or is running his/her own business.</li> </ul>
<b>Humanitarian Protection</b>	The Police Stations may issue a residence permit for humanitarian reasons whenever the Area Commissioners decide that, although the asylum seeker may not necessarily meet the criteria to qualify for International Protection, there are nevertheless “sufficient humanitarian grounds” for the State to grant a residence permit.	The residence permit granted for humanitarian reasons is valid for one year and can be converted to a work permit subject to the same conditions as those applicable to International Protection. Anyone who was in possession of a residence permit granted on humanitarian grounds prior to the promulgation of Legislative Decree No. 251/2007 (19 January 2008), will have the residence permit converted into a secondary protection residence permit when the former falls due for renewal.

## Notes to Chapter 1

- 1 Afghanistan Rights Monitor, Children Suffered the brunt of war casualties in 2009, February 2010
- 2 UNICEF, Levels and Trends Child Mortality-Report 2010, 2010
- 3 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Setting the Right Priorities: Protecting Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Afghanistan, Report 2009
- 4 UNHCR, Trees only move in the wind: A study of unaccompanied Afghan children in Europe, 2010
- 5 Data supplied to the UNHCR by the National Authorities and contained in the quoted UNICEF document entitled Trees only move in the wind cit.
- 6 Ibidem
- 7 Central Statistical Office of Afghanistan
- 8 UNICEF, Children on the Move: Report on children of Afghan Origin moving to Western Countries, 2010
- 9 ANCI, Minori stranieri non Accompagnati: Terzo rapporto 2009, Roma, 2010
- 10 For more information on the European legislation, kindly see EU Council Regulation No. 343/2003, dated 18 February 2003, which establishes the determination criteria and mechanisms for member States to use in assessing an asylum request lodged in one of the member States by a citizen of another Country, Official Gazette No. L 050, dated 25/02/2003, pg. 0001 – 0010 (EC Regulation No. 343/2003)
- 11 Directive 2003/9/EC, dated 27 January 2003, containing minimum requirements for the acceptance of asylum seekers in member states; Directive 2004/83/EC, dated 29 April 2004, containing minimum standards for granting refugee status or international protection status to citizens of third-world Countries or displaced persons, as well as minimum standards for the type of protection to be granted; EU Council Directive 2005/85/EC, dated 1 December 2005, containing minimum standards pertaining to procedures applied in member States and relating to the granting or revocation of refugee status.
- 12 See Art. 5 of Regulation 2003/343/EC
- 13 It should be noted that family reunification is only possible in the case of parents and siblings and not in the case of other close relatives.
- 14 ANCI-Fondazione Cittalia, Annual report on the System for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees, 2008/2009, December 2009





David Stewart-Smith/Getty Image News

## Chapter 2

### Risks and effects of migration on the child

#### 2.1 The tortuous path of denied rights

In the vast majority of cases, around two-thirds in fact, it is the family members (father, mother or paternal uncle) who urge the youngsters to leave, although increasingly often the young migrants are now actively participating in the family's decision-making process and in as many as one third of all cases the initial propo-

sal comes directly from the youngsters themselves. The main reason underlying such an often heartrending but mutual decision is **the need to distance oneself or one's children from a high risk and highly unpleasant situation where the basic rights of children are being systematically violated**, from education through to he-

althcare and even the right to life itself. According to a report drafted by the Afghanistan Rights Monitor, **2,080 serious violations of children's rights were reported in Afghanistan in 2009 alone**<sup>15</sup>. But even the stresses of the long voyage and of living in Europe pose a whole series of other risks that may cause serious psychological harm



Uriel Sinai/Getty Image News

to the child. As previously stated, the child migrants often leave their families at a very young age. It is precisely this early separation that lies at the root of serious trauma, which is then aggravated by the difficulty experienced in maintaining contact with parents and relatives after leaving the Country of birth. **The greatest risk, however, manifests itself during the voyage, when these youngsters, left at the mercy of the traffickers, are subjected to inhumane conditions** that range from having to spend long periods of time in false-bottom compartments of trucks through to being obliged to undertake long marches in mountainous territory, where the weakest individuals may

even be left to die along the route so as not to delay the march. Having arrived in Europe, the child migrants often find themselves in an unknown situation with no certainty as to what their rights are and without any idea of how to go about requesting political asylum in their chosen Country of destination, where – and here is another limitation – there is often a lack of information in the migrant's home language. It is therefore key that, in the reception phase, particular attention be paid to the individual's right to be properly informed. But that is not all. Once these migrants are picked up by the forces of law and order, **the youngsters may not even be granted their right to be recognised as children**, in violation of the Con-

**During the course of this hazardous voyage, the traffickers show no concern whatsoever for these children's lives.**

vention of Children's Rights, which establishes that in the event of any reasonable doubt regarding the child's age, the child should always be given the benefit of the doubt and be considered as minor. Then there is also the ever-present risk of being sent back to their Country of origin, as demonstrated by the recent decisions taken by the Governments of Great Britain and Norway to repatriate more than 2,000 child refugees.

## 2.2 Human trafficking

The child migrants and their families are generally unaware of the real dangers of the voyage, not least of which is the risk of exploitation by the members of the human trafficking network.

Although there is a lack of official figures and data, in Afghanistan **there has been a sharp increase in the trafficking of children for the purposes of child labour, forced begging and prostitution** in Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia<sup>16</sup>. **The network of traffickers that are active in Afghanistan are also involved in the transportation of Afghan children to Europe.** Above all, these traffickers control the stretch that cuts across Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, as well as the routes from Eastern Europe to Scandinavia, where the youngsters **often fall prey to illegal trafficking** (prostitution, street begging, trafficking of body parts) and simply disappear into thin air. Then there are also certain risks for the child migrants' families, who are subjected to threats and intimidation if they are unable to pay their debt to the criminal organisations.

During the voyage, the youngsters are subjected to **extreme psychological pressure and physical violence, which the traffickers use in order**

**to maintain absolute control over the group** by instilling fear and anxiety. The child migrants originating from the same village or town are systematically separated in order to increase their sense of isolation and their dependence on the traffickers, who even go as far as feeding these youngsters **false information** so as to create confusion and to convince the group to carry on moving.

**The traffickers use extreme psychological pressure and even physical violence on a daily basis in order to maintain absolute control over the youngsters.**



Tariq Mahmood/Getty Image News



## 2.3 The trauma of separation: the search for a place of safety

**Drafted under the auspices of**

Dr. Antonella Selvaggio, Psychologist-Psychotherapist  
(Patrizio Paoletti Foundation, Education Partner)

*In order to better understand how to deal with such difficult stories that involve escape, insecurity and violence, the psychological and educational team of the “Fondazione Paoletti” has made available its specialists and all of its extensive educational know-how gained during the course of ten years of activity in the research, education and teaching fields. What follows is a contribution by Dr. Antonella Selvaggio, Scientific Director for the Patrizio Paoletti Foundation’s education and training programmes.*

Imagine a kind of separation with no definite end in sight, a long voyage to an unknown destination, living in a no-man’s land where the only certainty is the separation from your loved ones, from the only family you have ever known, from your homeland and from the few certainties built up as a child: this, the beginning of a long walk towards a brighter future, is more of a promise than a certainty. This is the kind of prolonged stress that certainly results in a highly complex psychological and emotional life and very often turns into a full-blown psychological trauma that is untreatable in certain cases. In

the more fortunate cases, the problem can still be remedied, although it takes a protective and nurturing environment where the individual is looked after without asking for anything in return and must continue for a sufficiently long period to heal the wound.

More often, however, **this long voyage of hope results in Separation Anxiety Syndrome**, with the typical symptoms shown by all children who are forced by necessity – and these really are extreme circumstances – to become separated from the loving figures to which they are most emotionally attached.

**In most cases, this syndrome leads to social withdrawal, apathy, sadness, difficulty in concentrating and disturbed sleep patterns.** Different fears come to light depending on the patient’s age when the separation occurs, from a fear of animals to a more general fear of “monsters” that appear unexpectedly from the darkness, fear of being kidnapped, fear of motorcar accidents, fear of travelling and fear of a myriad of other situations that the patient may perceive as being dangerous and a threat to personal safety.

A common feature of separation anxiety is an exaggerated fear of dying and **diffi-**

**culty in establishing new emotional bonds with an adult or someone of the same age and, consequently, difficulty in loving someone else and allowing oneself to be loved by someone else,** which can also reach the opposite extreme, namely a morbid attachment to someone who is perceived to be caring and from whom it is impossible to imagine being separated from for even a few moments.

Separation Anxiety Syndrome may cause youngsters to experience extreme anger, which can sometimes appear unexpectedly as a result of some apparently “innocuous” stimulus: this could explain the many episodes of violence that break out on a daily basis in the refugee camps.

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that different cultures display very different levels of tolerance to separation. Indeed, certain cultures – and the Afghan culture is one of these – place great importance on individual independence and the ability to “look after yourself” right from very early childhood. In such cases, therefore, by the time the symptoms appear the syndrome has already turned into full-blown Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In order to properly under-

stand the type of trauma that the Afghan youngsters experience along the “routes of hope”, we have to take a closer look at the issue of trauma, which can be defined as a single experience or an ongoing situation whose overall associated subjective implications, ideas, emotions and physical conditions go above and beyond that which the individual is generally able to process or deal with by integrating them into his/her psychological experience. In other words, events that, due to their extent and duration, cannot easily be integrated into the individual's existing psychological experience base.

Amongst these kinds of trauma, the literature includes bereavement, illness, accidents, physical violence or threats of violence, violation or loss of personal safety and when any of the above happen to others. Furthermore, in order for this to turn into a full-blown “structured psychological trauma” (PTSD), there must also be the involvement of certain personal and experiential factors in the individual's previous history.

That said – and having read through the previous pages of this dossier, which clearly reveal the plight of these youngsters that leave their Country of birth and overcome the inevitable extreme fears and feeling of separation – **this can certainly be classified as a very real**

**risk, indeed almost a certainty that these youngsters will land up suffering from post traumatic stress (PTSD).** Therefore, one of the first requirements in terms of interacting with them and helping them is to **address the trauma in an attempt to re-define their experience of “psychological abuse”.** This is necessary in order to remedy the feeling of bereavement brought on by the separation and to present the possibility of a normal life for the youngster who, unless he receives some assistance, could go on to become a violent man at some stage in the future.

**The first thing that these young men who have already witnessed the**

**It is safe to say that there is a very strong likelihood, if not indeed an absolute certainty that these youngsters will land up suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).**

**worst side of life need is to enable them to once again find a safe and welcoming place, as well as a system that provides them with the kind of caring and support that will help them to overcome the trauma and re-define their experiences, thus giving them back the human dignity that they feel has been lost forever.**



Marco Baroncini/Photographer

Notes to Chapter 2

- 15 Afghanistan Rights Monitor, Children Suffered the brunt of war casualties in 2009, February 2010
- 16 UNICEF, Preventing child trafficking in the Gulf countries, Yemen and Afghanistan: policy options, 2007. It would appear that 700 Afghan minors were deported from Saudi Arabia alone between 2003 and 2004



# Chapter 3

## Afghan children in Italy

### 3.1 The national statistics relating to this phenomenon

In the past two years, **Italy**, like most of the other European Countries, has seen a major increase in the number of unaccom-

panied Afghan children requesting asylum. According to the latest available data, **429 unaccompanied Afghan children** requested

asylum **in this Country in 2008**, which is equivalent to **50% of the total number of children requesting asylum** in Italy. Over the previous two years, the number of Afghan children requesting asylum increased by more than **155% when compared to 2006**. The majority of the unaccompanied young Afghans in Italy are males aged

Afghan children requesting asylum in 2008	429
% of all children requesting asylum in Italy in 2008 were from Afghanistan	50
% increase in the number of Afghan children requesting asylum in the past two years	155
Afghan children taken into the Country's shelters in 2008	1152

Afghan children in Italy

between 15 and 17 years and the main towns of origin are Ghazni, Jaghori and Kabul. Of all the child asylum seekers in Italy, the Afghan children are in the majority in all areas of the Country, prevalently in Central Italy and the Marche Region in particular, where approximately 83% of all child asylum seekers are of Afghan origin, followed by the Lazio Region where the figure is around 82%. In third place is the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region with 70%, followed

by the Emilia-Romagna and Puglia Regions, where the Afghan children congregate almost exclusively in the urban centres. In particular, a strong presence of Afghan children has been recorded in Ancona, Rome, Turin, Venice and Bari. These “official” figures, particularly those pertaining to the big cities, increase significantly if we then add all of the **unregistered unaccompanied Afghan children** that are living there temporarily before moving elsewhere. **These**

**In the past two years alone, the number of Afghan children seeking asylum in Italy has increased by more than 155% compared to 2006 figure.**

**are the so-called “invisible” ones.** Their precise numbers are unknown, but it is safe to say that there are **several hundred of these transient children passing through each year.**

## 3.2 The reception facilities available in Italy

### **Italy still remains a transit Country for the majority of unaccompanied Afghan child migrants**

who, after arriving in Greece hidden in the back of trucks or containers, finally get off in the ports of Bari, Ancona and Venice, from where they then attempt to get to Rome where they join up with more of their countrymen and gather information regarding the next stage of their trip. It is at these arrival hubs that the Italian reception facilities come into play. For the unaccompanied child migrant, these facilities provide the following:

- The designation of a tutor within 48 hours;
- The commencement of the asylum request procedure;
- The introduction into the specific SPRAR<sup>17</sup> reception

centre for asylum seekers;

- The right to family reunion

Once positively identified as being underage, the police then accompany the unaccompanied child asylum seeker to a **primary reception centre for unaccompanied children** where he can stay for a maximum period of 90 days and receive initial care and assistance, as well as all the necessary information regarding his right to request asylum. Thereafter, the child must be transferred to one of the **secondary reception facilities** that are in a position to plan and implement an appropriate ad-hoc settling-in process.

In particular, once the child migrant has been granted asylum seeker status, they must be put into the SPRAR circuit, where they will be provided with all the support

and assistance they require as refugees. However, the reality is often very different indeed. The space available within the SPRAR circuit is insufficient to meet the current demand and so the child migrants often remain in the secondary reception facilities, which are unable to provide the necessary services in every specific case.

The youngsters often complain about a lack of information, which is due to the lack of specific knowledge amongst the service providers and the limited availability of personnel able to understand and interpret to and from the Afghan language and thereby act as mediators.

Furthermore, there is also a lack of suitable facilities to help the child with matters such as getting an education and finding work. These are the reasons that cause

a high percentage (40%) of the children to run away from these secondary facilities and, specifically in the case of the Afghans, to leave Italy and head for Nor-

thern Europe. In 2008, the Italian reception facilities – in other words the social services – hosted some 1,152 Afghan youngsters, which is equivalent to 16%

of all the foreign children in this Country<sup>18</sup>.

### 3.3 Don't just look the other way: it's a communal responsibility

In 2009, some 6,000 children **requested asylum in various European Countries, a figure that should make us think about the large numbers of "invisible" children that pass through our Country and make us wonder what can be done in order to ensure that they are properly protected and assisted.**

Currently in Italy we are even struggling to provide support and assistance to those children who do turn to the institutions, whereas we should be drawing up long-term plans, involving all of the Organisations and members of the Public, so as to enable child migrants to follow a legal path to a brighter future rather than falling victim to the human traffickers.

This is a responsibility that should be acknowledged by all levels of society, from the private sector through to the local, national and European Institutions. The phenomenon of unaccompanied Afghan child migrants needs to be analysed from a global perspective, starting from the problems of identification in Afghanistan and all the way through to the reception limitations and the European legislation.

So it is becoming increasingly important to rapidly establish and implement a communal European asylum system, especially in view of the fact that in June 2008 the EU Commission already published a document entitled Strategic Plan for Political Asylum: An integrated ap-

**An entire population of children on the move is asking us to take care of them and to grant them their inalienable right to a better life.**

proach to the issue of protection within the European Union<sup>19</sup>.

Each year thousands of Afghan youngsters arrive in Europe: **an entire population of children in transit who must not be denied their inalienable right to a better life.**

#### Notes to Chapter 3

17 Sistema Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati" (the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Protection Agency)

18 ANCI, Minori stranieri non Accompagnati, cit.

19 Document from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the EU Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Regional Committee, dated 17 June 2008 – Strategic Plan for Political Asylum: An integrated approach to the issue of protection within the EU - COM(2008) 360 def. – Not published in the Official Gazette.





## Chapter 4

### Stories of lives in hiding

#### 4.1 The case of Rome's Ostiense quarter

##### **Ostiense Quarter, Rome.**

Here, amongst the platforms and the porticoes of this railway station just a few steps from the city centre, is the **end of the line for the majority of Afghan children that disembarked in Italy after their long voyage** across Asia and Europe. As the years passed, many have found some sort of shelter,

initially on one of the station platforms, then under the porticoes and subsequently in the basement on some or other temporary unused building site before finally putting up tents alongside an unused road. Now, following the evacuation of those improvised squatter camps, the arriving children land up living in small groups spread out along the

railway lines or in the public gardens surrounding the Ostiense Railway Station. For the past ten years, the Afghans have been a permanent feature of the Ostiense Quarter. However, whereas before there were very few of them, and none of them were underage children, in recent years their numbers have swelled to hundreds: the Afghans of-

ficially registered in Rome number more than 270, plus another hundred or so individuals that were squatting in the camp in the Ostiense Quarter of Rome, where the presence of underage children was an unacknowledged fact.

Until quite recently, the camp was situated in a small road running parallel to Via Capitan Bavastro. With their tents pitched on the pavements and without any toilet facilities or drinking water available, the Afghan refugees were living in constant need and serious degradation.

In recent months the camp housed some 120 people, of whom at least 25% were underage children and the remaining 75% were adults who were, on average, 27 years of age.

Many of them arrive, stay for a few days to get some rest and to scratch together the money they need before leaving for Northern Europe, where they are hoping to find work more easily. In Rome, the majority of them try to remain unobserved in order to be able to then continue on their journey without being reported to the police and thus running the risk of being registered as adults or in fear or ignorance of what could happen to them should they be reported.

Over a period of four months in the Roma Ostiense squatter camp, the mem-

bers of the “L’Albero della Vita” organisation attempted to assess the situation and to identify the problems faced by these Afghan migrants, while providing an **information and orientation service to help and to get the underage children into the legal process in protected facilities.**

The following are some of the life stories, expectations and fears that these youngsters revealed to members of the “L’Albero della Vita” organisation working in the camp during those four months.

**The migratory route of the Afghan children in Italy passes through Rome’s Ostiense quarter.**



## 4.2 What the child migrants say

### Rahman

(14 years of age • Kabul)

*"My name is Rahman, I'm 14 years old and I come from Kabul".* His eyes wary, his voice firm, the only emotion that Rahman shows is when he talks about his father who was killed in a bomb blast. He came to the kiosk set up by the "L'Albero della Vita" organisation to get some information about England.

*"I still have my mother and four brothers living in Afghanistan: they were the ones that saved me by urging me to leave. In Kabul, I went to school for three years. Our classroom was a tent because most of the buildings in the town had been destroyed. At a certain point I decided that it was time for me to make a move because I didn't want to continue to studying in a tent and face an uncertain future.*

*So I travelled for three months before reaching Italy via Iran, Turkey and Greece. To get from Turkey to Patrasso in Greece, the traffickers made us walk along paths through the woods. Once in Patrasso, I spent twenty days waiting to board a ship bound for Italy. I would hide under trucks or in containers that were about to leave, but each time the Greek police*



Uriel Sinai/Getty Image News

*would arrive, drag me out. This went on until, one day, I found a large car (a camper van) and I climbed in under it. No one realised I was there and so I managed to board the vessel. After spending 36 hours squeezed in-between steel plates I arrived at the port. I'm not quite sure in which city the ferry finally moored, but I continued to cling to the underside of the camper and, when it finally stopped at a filling station, I climbed out, looked for the nearest railway station and bought a ticket for Rome. Four hours later I was here.*

*Now I'm living here in Rome Ostiense and I'm*

*waiting to get some money so that I can leave here. I don't want to stay here. I want to continue on to England, where my parents told me I would be able to continue my studies. That is where I will be able to make some sort of future for myself".*

### Ali

(13 years of age • Jalalabad)  
Ali is a skinny youngster with bright eyes who looks like he could break if you merely look at him.

*"My name is Ali, I'm 13 years old and I come from Jalalabad in Afghanistan. I have three brothers, two of them are in Afghanistan*



*and one is in Denmark. I decided to come to Europe to meet up with him. I only left two months ago because I wanted to wait for the end of the school year. An acquaintance hosted me in Greece and from there I made my own way to Italy, on the back of a truck. When I got off the truck, I walked to the nearest town and I kept to the side of the road, but the police saw me and took me to the police station and then to some family's house. Everyone was very good to me but I couldn't communicate with them. At the official meetings there was always a *tajman* present, or a "translator", who helped me to tell*

*them the most important things. I kept on thinking about my three brothers so, one night, while everyone was asleep, I ran away. I bought a train ticket and left for Rome. I am very sorry for leaving those good people without saying a word, but I don't want to go back there. I'm just waiting to get a bit of money so that I can continue on my voyage. I don't want to stop anywhere".*

#### **Ismaeli**

(17 years of age • Ghazni)  
Ismaeli is 17 years old, but as far as anyone in Italy is concerned, he is almost twenty: three years that make all the difference

because this has enabled him to find work without too many problems. He arrived in Italy from Ghazni district, spurred on by the words of his father, an attorney who died under the bombs together with Ismaeli's mother and sister. His father always told him "Never give up when times get hard". And so Ismaeli decided to leave, he was only nine years old at the time. *"I spent many birthdays on that voyage"* he says. *"Always working to earn a living for myself and to be able to carry on. I picked oranges in Greece and they paid me off the books, but every night they let me sleep in a shed with the other pickers"*. From there, on to England: *"I was only thirteen years old when I got there, but I told everyone that I was 16 years old. I wanted to learn as quickly as possible and also to be independent. I was working, I learned to speak English and my life was quite good, until five months ago that is, when I was informed that they were going to repatriate me to Afghanistan. According to them, I was already an adult and I could therefore just as well start a new life in Ghazni"*. Ismaeli's entire world collapsed before his very eyes. *"I didn't want to go back, back to that life in fear of falling bombs and of getting killed"*. So once again he ran away and headed for France: *"I went to the police station*



Uriel Sinai/Getty Image News

**My father was killed in a bomb explosion. My mother and my four brothers are still living in Afghanistan and they are the ones that wanted to save me from the terrible future that awaited me there.**

*to provide them with my fingerprints and to ask for asylum, but they found that they already had my fingerprints in England, so they told me: "Either go back to England or to Afghanistan". I chose Afghanistan. There were sixty of us youngsters on that plane, all between 17 and 20 years of age, all being deported back to our homeland. When I arrived in Afghanistan it felt like I had never left the place. I simply couldn't face living there again, what with the ongoing war and no real future. So I decided to escape once again. This time around, however, I already knew the way and I could also speak very good English (which helped a lot). I arrived in Rome after travelling for almost two months: I have asked for political asylum and I will soon be starting with Italian lessons. If I can manage it, I would like to rent a house together with a friend so that I won't have to sleep in these tents any longer.*

*I have been all over the world and never got sick, but here I now have this skin ailment. I'm hoping that things will now go my way and that I will be able to stay here in Italy» says Ismaeli. «And perhaps manage to build a future for myself in an honest manner".*

### **Suiman**

(15 years of age • Kandahar)

Suiman comes across almost as a somewhat ostentatious man, like an adult, but he is still only a youngster with a story about a faraway place and a dusty town on the border with Pakistan. He arrived in the Ostiense Quarter of Rome from Kandahar, "a ten-hour trip from Kabul. It's not that far, but the roads are not like those here in Italy and so it takes a long time to get there".

His story is very similar to that of so many other Afghan child migrants fleeing the war back home:

*"I studied until I was 13 years old and then I couldn't continue. While were busy with our lessons, we could hear the Taleban's bombs exploding nearby. It's difficult to live in those conditions so I ran away from Afghanistan to Iran, together with my family, my father, my mother and my sister who is not yet eight years old. In Iran, however, you*

*cannot study if you are an immigrant. The only thing they give you is a work permit, a red card that gives you the right to work. For two years I worked with my father as a mechanic while my mother, a housewife, went to school (she was allowed to do so) to learn to read and write in the dari language<sup>20</sup> She loves to learn, but in Afghanistan, under the Taliban, women were not allowed to attend school.*

*I was not happy in Iran because I was hoping for a brighter future. I dreamt of becoming an aerospace engineer and I would dearly love to finish my studies and then find a suitable job in my own Country. So, from Tehran, I left for Italy. It took me a month to complete the trip. I crossed Turkey by car and then travelled through Greece, where I waited for two weeks to get to Italy in the back of a truck transporting oranges, together with numerous other people, even a woman with her child. It was a terribly long trip and we all remained very quiet so that we wouldn't be discovered. If it wasn't for the oranges on board that truck, we would all have died of starvation. When we arrived and I finally got off that truck, my eyes hurt because they were no longer used to the light.*

*I don't know the name of the town where we stopped, perhaps it was Veni-*

ce. There were four of us: myself, a friend and the woman with her child. We walked around the town not knowing what to do next and looking for the railway station until we were stopped by the police and asked to produce some sort of identity document. We didn't have any documents on us so they took us to an initial reception facility. However, after 48 hours in this community, my friend and I both decided to run away, so we went out for a walk and simply never went back. We caught a train bound for Rome, where we made contact with the Afghan community in Ostiense. All I know now is that I don't want to stay in Italy, I don't like it here. I want to go somewhere where I can get a job and I don't have to sleep on the streets. I don't know much about the other European Countries but I would like to explore them so that I can find a place where I can have a better life and get my family to join me".

### **Abdullatif**

(16 years of age • Kabul)

*"I thought I would be welcome here in Italy, but instead they just slammed the door in my face":*

Abdullatif came to this Country from Patrasso, hidden in the back of a truck. His story is a sad one of betrayed hope and unfulfilled expectations and of a policy

that tends to dismiss rather than welcome.

*"I arrived from Patrasso on a truck. The trip lasted thirty hours. I'm not entirely sure where we arrived, but after the border post the truck never stopped but just went on going. Because we were curious, we pulled off the piece of Scotch Tape that was holding together the two halves of the tarpaulin under which we were hiding, at which point the tarpaulin came loose completely and flew off into the road. The drivers of the other vehicles on the road phoned the police and the truck was stopped. When the police arrived we were brought to a hospital where they measured our blood pressure and took our fingerprints. I was taken to a community and my friend to some other centre for adults. They had decided that we were adults, although I didn't know this at the time. In that community, there were a number of young men of various nationalities who frequently got into fights. I felt like I was going mad in that place and I also began to become aggressive, which I didn't like, so I ran*

*away. I escaped and walked until I found a railway station, from where I then caught a train bound for Rome, then a bus bound for Ostiense. I didn't want to stay in Italy but I didn't have very much money, so I decided to go to the police so that I could get into another reception facility. Members of some or other association accompanied me to the police station, but things didn't appear to be going very well at all. When the people that accompanied me left, the policemen took me to a hospital to be examined (which never happened) and then they took me to the Rebibbia prison where I spent one night. I didn't understand why this was happening, all I know is that my documents now state that I am an adult and I must therefore go to the police station to request asylum. I was expecting to be welcomed, but all I got was a door slammed in my face".*

Notes to Chapter 4

- 20 The most common language spoken in Afghanistan; it is a local dialect of the Iranian Farsi language. In Afghanistan, Dari is used as a common language between various different linguistic groups because of the fact that it is spoken by 80% of the population.





[www.alberodellavita.org](http://www.alberodellavita.org)

L'Albero della Vita Foundation is one of the largest Italian organisations that are working to safeguard and promote the rights of children both in Italy and worldwide. Since its establishment in 1997, the Foundation has intervened actively by means of projects and activities aimed at improving the living conditions and the development of children, the main objective being to safeguard their interests in terms of their environment, their family, their relationships and their psychological wellbeing.

The Foundation is currently active in 14 Italian regions and in 5 Countries around the world on 3 different continents. All of the Organisation's projects and activities are based on providing educational assistance in order to ensure better orientation and a general improvement in the child's personal, family and social life.

The teaching method utilised is PTM method, Pedagogia per il Terzo Millennio (Pedagogy for the Third Millennium) developed by our education partner, the Patrizio Paoletti Foundation.



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The vision that has always underpinned the Foundation's operations is the awareness that the only way to significantly improve someone's quality of life is a global and sustainable approach to life, as well as paying careful attention to all of its different aspects. Through its research, educational and social development projects, as well as its training programmes and sensitisation and institutional information campaigns, the Patrizio Paoletti Foundation's operations are constantly aimed at providing ideas and tools capable of kick-starting the education process and encouraging improvement both in modern man and in the society in which he lives.



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