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### **Our Response to the Nationality and Borders Bill and the current situation in Afghanistan**

We have many concerns about the new Nationality and Borders Bill and the impact on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. The government's distinction between 'good' refugees and 'bad' refugees fails to uphold the commitment that claiming asylum is a human right regardless of whether someone fleeing persecution enters via 'planned' or 'irregular' routes to the UK.

We at the Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile are deeply concerned about the consequences of the current political situation in Afghanistan and the widespread human rights violations escalating daily. The current situation is such that there will be many people needing and wanting to leave and very few of those will enter the UK by regular routes. The majority will not.

At the Baobab Centre the largest group of children and young people we support are from Afghanistan. All have experienced violence in Afghanistan and or in neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan, where their families were in exile. Many of them have experienced murder of one parent by the Taliban and many have had attempts by the Taliban to forcibly recruit them. Those in Iran and Pakistan have experienced violent xenophobia. All left their families and their home countries for fear they would be killed.

And it isn't just Afghanistan, of course. As a young Baobab survivor from Ethiopia writes, "whether it is the authoritarian government fighting its own people or power hungry rebels fighting the government and the people, war has never been absent for the ordinary Ethiopians. Tigray has now become an all-out war, with militia groups accused of forcing children to join the military and threatening to kill their parents if they refuse to join."

We know from our extensive experience supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, that the majority have travelled to the UK via irregular routes arranged by agents. We are very aware that when parents feel like they cannot protect their children they encourage them to leave the country because they are at risk of forced recruitment or being caught up in violent conflicts and being killed.

Having arrived through dangerous means via irregular routes was the only option available to them. Most fled with no documents and the promise of protection from agents. All left their home countries after direct experience of violence to their bodies and after witnessing extreme violence to the members of their families and communities. We know from current happenings; the Taliban feel entitled to punish and violently abuse those who challenge their ideas and especially those who are fighting for their human rights.

All the children and young people attending Baobab have in recent days used the word 'terrified' to describe what might be happening to their families back home. Some are able to express their understanding of the complicated and corrupt situation in Afghanistan where they believe a variety of different and powerful people want access to resources and to keep Afghanistan trade routes open to the powerful few nations. Loss of hope. Others feel a loss of hope and are too upset and fearful to talk about the events and consequences.

The interwoven impact of traumatic violence and traumatic loss has a profound negative impact on the mental health and progressive developments of children and young people. It is our view that unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors who arrive by irregular routes, need to be given settled status shortly after arriving. The current system whereby they are made to wait and faced with prolonged uncertainty for a very long time, undoubtedly worsens their mental health and impacts negatively on their capacity to engage with rehabilitation and move forward in their lives towards a hopeful future.

In order to move forward in their development these children and young people need a sense of hope. The current Nationality and Borders bill sets out regulations that feel more like a terrible punishment not a supportive safe and secure pathway for children and young people who are living with the trauma of having experienced war and extreme violence. The alternative that we would wish for would be that they are offered love and protection and the possibility to engage in rehabilitation and achieve settlement.