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A "Snapshot" Assessment
of Afghan Asylum-seekers
in Belgian Collective
Reception Centres

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghans have been among the largest groups of asylum-seekers in both Belgium and the European Union (EU) in recent years. Through a series of consultations with Afghan asylum-seekers and with staff in eight reception centres, this study examines the situation of Afghan asylum-seekers residing in collective reception centres in Belgium. It identifies a number of underlying stresses, tensions and frustrations which have sometimes been expressed in increased violence in the centres, and seeks to understand these issues better.

Following the increased number of asylum-seekers coming to Belgium in 2011-2012 and consequent overcrowding of the existing centres, Fedasil, the federal agency coordinating the reception of asylum-seekers in Belgium, approached UNHCR to discuss the possibility to jointly identify ways to prevent violence in reception centres from reoccurring and to respond to it appropriately. Based on such discussions, it was agreed that UNHCR would carry out participatory assessments focused on the situation of Afghan asylum-seekers in Belgian reception centres to deepen the understanding of the views of the people concerned and develop recommendations on possible solutions.

In cooperation with Fedasil, UNHCR organized a series of visits to nine reception centres in late 2013 and early 2014 and conducted group discussions and bilateral interviews with 76 Afghan asylum-seekers living there, of whom 29 were unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). Most participants were boys and young men between the ages of 15 and 35; others were women, girls, older men and families, as well as 24 staff working in the centres.

The resulting “snapshot” helps give a voice to Afghan asylum-seekers and to the staff in reception centres who participated. Its strength lies in the opportunity it gave to asylum-seekers to freely express their views on their situation and treatment, to identify the problems they say they have been encountering, their suggestions for solutions, and their aspirations for the future. Their statements are therefore widely reflected throughout the report.

The report identifies various factors contributing to stress and potentially also to violence. The consultations showed that Afghan asylum-seekers living in Belgium suffer from high levels of stress. This is a result, on the one hand, of their experiences in Afghanistan and the harshness of their journey to Europe and, on the other, of the uncertainty of their situation in Belgium, their lack of understanding of the asylum procedure, and unfulfilled expectations. The emotional burden is multi-layered and worsened by the lack of communication with family and friends back home. Past trauma and current frustrations have sometimes led to individual or collective acts of destruction or physical violence in the centres.

For the younger Afghans and unaccompanied children, the consultations showed that having access to education in Belgium leads to ambiguous results. Several youngsters said that because of their psychological conditions they struggled to focus, that they had no parental figure to help them with their work, while those over 18 who were sometimes refused school access, were very disappointed and angered.

Particular issues were raised by the UASC, who had often gained maturity and autonomy during the journey to Belgium and wished to be able to live more independently. This group in particular tended to be more prone to violent behaviour, as well as to depression, self-mutilation and/or suicidal thoughts.

Other concerns raised included aspects of the living conditions in some centres and their limited access to modern means of communication, such as internet and phones. They also felt that various actors at the centre provided them with different and sometimes contradictory information on a variety of topics. This caused confusion and unhappiness and the potential for distrust of the Belgian authorities and the different stakeholders involved.

The situation of the Afghan women and girls in the centres raised distinct issues. Some had travelled alone or been separated from their family and so were without the protection of male family members, which had exposed them to violence during the journey. Once in Europe, they found that they continued to be harassed by other Afghans in the reception centres if they did not wear the veil or did not otherwise conform to cultural and religious expectations.

More generally, while the project did not set out to focus on the Belgian asylum procedure, it became clear that the asylum procedure was a cause of anxiety. The Afghans appeared not to understand the purpose and content of the procedure very well. Most believed they had a right to stay in Belgium and did not expect the asylum procedure to lead to rejection. Sometimes their lack of understanding of the procedure even led to the rejection of their claim, if for instance they told the stories they had been fed by smugglers and only realized after their claim was rejected that it would have been better to tell their true story. Such appraisal confirms the need for continued counselling of asylum-seekers throughout the procedure.

The women and girls had particular concerns about the procedure as they had not necessarily been told that their experience of gender-related forms of persecution could mean that they also had their own grounds for asylum independently of male family members.

Several of the Afghans interviewed thought that the credibility assessment was unfair. Others expressed concern about the quality and reliability of the work of the lawyers and interpreters. Some interviewees were under the impression that the interpreter and/or the lawyer were not relaying their real situation to the authorities during the asylum procedure, which they felt hampered their chances of a successful outcome.

Coping mechanisms in response to these stresses were sometimes positive and sometimes negative. While many were able to go to school or work, play sports, read or pray, all interviewees spoke about the difficulty of dealing with their stress and trauma once these activities were over. The Afghans spoke of difficulties getting to sleep, the temptation to get drunk, the desire to self-mutilate, and to divert physical pain or anger towards others, including their family or friends.

The consultations showed that verbal abuse was relatively common among residents, but there were also incidents of aggressive behaviour. Minor matters could lead to outbursts of violence, because the emotions linked with their frustrations and unfulfilled expectations had often been suppressed for too long.

Residents were less critical of the youngsters' violent behaviour, as they perceived this to be a result of general disorientation, a lack of direction and of adult guidance. Violence by adults was, however, judged severely by other adults. Staff tended to be anxious about the risk of further bouts of violence and did not feel sufficiently equipped to prevent and respond to them. They said that they wanted to receive more thorough training, and that they valued the visits to reception centres by staff from Fedasil's headquarters. Some of the staff interviewed appeared to be working in stressful conditions and wished to receive more support in this regard.

The system of transfers among reception centres was shown to be one response to violent incidents, whether of perpetrators as a disciplinary measure or of victims to protect them. This system was often felt by some asylum-seekers to be unjust, ineffective and as not addressing the issue.

Although the number of asylum-seekers coming to Belgium has progressively decreased since 2012, it is hoped that the overall findings can still be considered valuable in the current context and with regard to other population groups.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this participatory assessment, and taking into account that significant improvements have since been made in the reception of all asylum-seekers in Belgium, UNHCR is making 12 recommendations for further improvements. Such steps to decrease the risk of acts of violence would be particularly relevant should another increase take place in the numbers of asylum-seekers arriving, whatever the nationality, keeping in mind the importance of understanding well their socio-cultural background.

1. VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT:

- vulnerability screening should be improved and undertaken by qualified staff in all reception centres, both upon arrival and periodically thereafter;
- asylum-seekers who may have been tortured, who may be traumatized, psychologically vulnerable, or have specific medical needs and/or disabilities should be systematically identified so that the appropriate response can be ascertained and implemented;
- adequate psychosocial support and medical care should be offered as long as needed;
- psycho-educational programmes on active coping skills should be considered so as to empower asylum-seekers to manage trauma and stress, and reduce the need for mental health care. Similar programmes could be made available to staff to empower them to manage stress and avoid burnout.

2. INFORMATION:

- essential information on rights, obligations and life in Belgium should be clearly communicated to asylum-seekers on a regular basis, including in small groups, in a language and format that is readily comprehensible to them, so as to manage their expectations more effectively;
- coordination among Fedasil, the Aliens Office, the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless persons (CGRS), lawyers, guardians, and other actors providing information to residents could be improved;
- joint efforts should be made to harmonize information provided about the asylum procedure and ensure that messages about the procedure are clearly conveyed in a manner which is adapted to the asylum-seekers' age, gender, language skills and level of education.

3. EDUCATION:

- dedicated staff/volunteers should be in place in all centres hosting children, especially those who are unaccompanied, to help them adapt to the Belgian educational system and liaise with the schools;
- presentations on asylum-seekers' countries of origin could be given to staff in reception centres by UNHCR and other actors;
- for youngsters who turn 18 and are no longer entitled to go to school in Belgium, the possibility should be investigated of continuing language classes or other training for them;
- voluntary work in local businesses or vocational training could be facilitated to give youngsters who turn 18 skills that can be useful both in the context of integration, if granted protection, or upon return.

4. SIZE OF THE CENTRES, PLACEMENT OF GROUPS AND INCREASED AUTONOMY:

- smaller reception centres (e.g. for 50 or fewer residents) appear to be a better option as management can be more flexible, and more personal and tailored attention can be provided to asylum-seekers;
- when allocating new arrivals to a reception centre, placing large groups of the same nationality in one centre should be avoided, so that no one group is dominant in a centre;
- as far as possible a balanced proportion of age and gender groups in each centre should be pursued;
- measures to increase asylum-seekers' autonomy should be enhanced, e.g. by expanding existing practices such as ensuring access to independent cooking facilities, providing vouchers to travel outside the centres and giving residents the possibility to benefit from semi-autonomous accommodation near the reception centre.

5. CULTURAL MEDIATORS:

- reception centres should use the services of cultural mediators speaking the main languages of asylum-seekers, who may include refugees who are now integrated into Belgian life.

6. PROTECTION OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN (UASC):

- specific reception centres for UASC could be considered as a continuation of the initial accompaniment provided in the observation and orientation centres (OOC);
- adequate surveillance mechanisms should be in place in all centres, particularly at night, to ensure the safety and protection of UASC.

7. PREVENTION AND RESPONSE TO SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:

- standard operating procedures (SOPs) to prevent, identify and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) should be in place and implemented in all reception centres;
- information and training should be regularly organized for staff and both male and female residents in the centres, on how gender affects inter-personal relations in the centre, how flight can change gender roles and increase the risk of domestic violence, and how to prevent, identify and respond to cases of harassment and SGBV;
- effective mechanisms should be in place to transfer if necessary SGBV victims to places where their safety can be ensured;
- dormitories should foresee separate corridors and/or blocks only accessible to women and girls at night.

8. PREPARATION FOR THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE:

- the preparation of asylum-seekers for their interview by social workers, legal advisers, and where applicable guardians should be improved, also in cooperation with NGOs;
- asylum-seekers should be made aware of the importance of the interview, what to expect, what their rights and obligations are, what kinds of questions they should expect, and the importance of explaining their real situation as clearly as possible;
- women and girls seeking asylum should be made aware that their experiences may mean they also have their own grounds for asylum independently of male family members.

9. INTERPRETERS:

- quality standards for interpreters, both working for CGRS and for reception centres, should be pursued by offering adequate training to ensure that they are aware of the requirements of neutrality, impartiality and confidentiality, and to enhance intercultural communication;
- interpreters should fulfil the necessary requirements in terms of language proficiency and awareness of age- and gender-related issues;
- quality control mechanisms regularly evaluating the effectiveness of the work of interpreters should be established.

10. LEGAL ASSISTANCE:

- the system of legal assistance provided to asylum-seekers in Belgium should be evaluated to identify obstacles to the delivery of quality legal aid, and to inform the planned reform of legal aid;
- improvements should be made to enhance the synergy between different actors (lawyers, Fedasil, NGOs, social workers, etc.).

11. TRAINING FOR STAFF WORKING IN THE CENTRES:

- existing training should be strengthened in particular in the areas of SGBV, interpretation and cultural mediation;
- training plans could be developed in synergy with all actors and in collaboration with UNHCR.

12. SANCTIONS AND TRANSFERS:

- responses for different types of disruptive behaviour should be reviewed and harmonized and uniformity of practice in different centres should be ensured;
- a gradual and incremental use of sanctions, in which transfers are only used as a last resort, should be pursued;
- asylum-seekers who have been the target/victims of violence should receive specific counselling to help them deal with the incident;
- asylum-seekers who have been the target/victims of violence should also benefit from safer conditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Afghans have been among the largest groups of asylum-seekers in both Belgium and the European Union (EU) in recent years.¹ As a result, they have often been the largest nationality group present in many Belgian collective reception centres. At the same time, and for many years, these centres had to respond to increasing numbers of asylum seekers, which placed significant strains on the reception system.

In 2011, 2012 and 2013, some Afghan asylum-seekers were involved in a number of violent incidents in collective reception centres. In meetings between UNHCR and Fedasil (the federal agency responsible for coordinating the reception of asylum-seekers in Belgium) this increase in violence was discussed, in a context where a high concentration of single young males aged between 15 and 35 years were living in the centres. In 2012, for instance, up to 70 per cent of the residents in some centres were single men, of whom one third were of Afghan origin. This high concentration of young male Afghans who often stayed for prolonged periods was thought to have resulted in increased tension and outbursts of violence, which the staff did not always feel sufficiently equipped to deal with.

In cooperation with Fedasil, UNHCR organized a series of visits to eight reception centres in late 2013 and early 2014 and consulted with Afghan asylum-seekers living there in a series of discussions and interviews. Most participants were boys and young men aged between 15 and 35; others interviewed included women, girls, older men and families, as well as staff working in the centres. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the underlying stresses, tensions and frustrations which were expressed in increased violence in the centres and, in collaboration with Fedasil, to be able to identify ways to prevent violence and respond to it appropriately should it occur. Participants also made numerous suggestions to help improve the situation, many of which are reflected in the report.

It is hoped that the report can help strengthen the approaches adopted by all actors involved in providing reception to asylum-seekers in Belgium and to the Afghans in particular. While it focuses on Belgium, the findings could also contribute to reflection at the European level.

¹ Afghans ranked first among the countries of origin of asylum-seekers in both Belgium and the European Union (EU) in 2011 and 2012, although they fell to fourth place in the EU in 2013. See UNHCR, *Asylum Trends 2012, Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries*, 2013, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/5149b81e9.html>, Table 5; UNHCR, *Asylum Trends 2013, Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries*, 2014, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/5329b15a9.html>, Table 5. In Belgium they remained in first place in 2013. See Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), *Statistiques d'asile, Bilan 2013*, 6 Jan. 2014, available at: <http://goo.gl/iZGsqU>, with data for 2010-2013 at p. 5. Afghans also remained the largest country of origin in the first half of 2014. See CGRS, *Statistiques d'asile, rapport mensuel*, juin 2014, available at: <http://goo.gl/4DuFle>, p. 5.



2. METHODOLOGY

This assessment mainly used a qualitative research methodology. The information was gained through “participatory assessments”² conducted by a consultant and a UNHCR staff member with the help of an interpreter.

Between December 2013 and January 2014, UNHCR, in collaboration with Fedasil, identified some ten collective reception centres managed by Fedasil, the Flemish Red Cross or the Francophone Croix-Rouge hosting the highest percentage of Afghan asylum-seekers in 2012. The following centres were visited: Florennes, Poelkapelle, Arendonk (twice), Kapellen, Charleroi, Sint-Truiden, Ans, Bierset, and Sint-Niklaas.

In the centres semi-structured group discussions were held followed by individual interviews. In total, 76 Afghan asylum-seekers were interviewed and 24 staff members. Of the 76 Afghans, 60 were male and 16 female. The youngest person was 15 years old. Of the participants, 29 were unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), one of whom was a girl (despite all efforts to reach out to young girls, most of the Afghan youngsters available for interviews were boys). Most of the children could only be interviewed on Wednesday afternoons or after school hours in the evening.

Most of the participants, in particular UASC, had travelled over a long period of time from Afghanistan through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Italy and France before arriving in Belgium. Others travelled via Russia or via Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. The women interviewed had taken a plane to reach Europe, while most of the boys and men had come overland. The majority had not chosen Belgium as a final destination.

² See generally UNHCR, *UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations*, May 2006, First edition, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/462df4232.html>.

Those who had known about Belgium beforehand had learnt about the country through family, friends or through Belgians they had met.

Most of the participants said that their main reason for leaving Afghanistan was the violence there and their hopes for a better future in Europe. Several had lived in Iran and Pakistan before moving onwards and had faced difficulties in those countries.

While the findings cannot be considered statistically significant, the value of the study lies in the fact that it gives a voice to the Afghans living in the reception centres. Interviews took place on a voluntary basis. The sample is too small to be scientific but it does provide an insight and a better understanding of some of the broader issues they face.

Each visit to a reception centre followed the following schedule: group discussions were held in the mornings, while the afternoons were mainly devoted to individual interviews. Lunches and breaks were taken together with the participants. In two centres, lunch was taken with the staff only.

In each case, the group discussions and interviews started with an introduction to the work of UNHCR, the purpose of the assessment, a reminder of the rule of confidentiality, and a thorough explanation that the interviews would not have any impact on their individual case. The voluntary nature of the process was also stressed.

The questions asked were translated in Dari and Pashto. The semi-structured and non-structured discussion gave the participants the opportunity to share their views on a wide range of issues. Role play was also important, as it gave them a chance to reflect on improvements and suggest potential solutions to their situation.

Several participants expressed their satisfaction at the end of the process stressing how grateful they were to have had the opportunity to express themselves freely, as the consultations gave them time and space with appropriate interpretation to do so, while the individual interviews provided a confidential and safe environment in which to speak. Some interviews lasted a short time; others for hours. Participants also had the opportunity to ask questions. Most of them were curious to know about the purpose of the study and whether they would have access to the final report. Other questions concerned the Belgian asylum procedure and the concept of international protection. Each person was able to continue with or stop the interview as they wished, although none wished to stop the interview. On the contrary, most used the opportunity to share their experiences and views without constraints.

The participants appreciated the possibility to express themselves in their native language (whether Dari or Pashto). Some reported that they felt encouraged to contribute by the fact that the interviewers were not Afghan. Women were more comfortable sharing their stories as the interviewer was female.

One constraint of the assessment is that it happened in a relatively short period of time. Apart from Arendonck, all centres were only visited once and not all Afghan residents were available at the time of the visits. It should be noted that the number of people seeking asylum in Belgium fell from 18,524 in 2012 to 12,503 in 2013 and the number of Afghans seeking asylum in Belgium also decreased significantly, falling from 2,349 in 2012 to 892 in 2013.³

Staff working in the reception centres were also interviewed. Conclusions and recommendations were discussed with Fedasil before the publication of the report.

³ See UNHCR, Asylum Trends, Asylum Claims in Industrialized Countries, Latest Monthly Data, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c4d6.html>.



3. MAIN CONTRIBUTORS TO STRESS AND FRUSTRATION POTENTIALLY LEADING TO VIOLENCE

The participants had ample space to talk about their stresses and frustrations in their past and current experience. Many factors could thus be identified as potential sources of violence.

These begin with the trauma and stress linked to the reasons for leaving Afghanistan, followed by the sometimes traumatic and stressful experiences of their journey to Europe and Belgium. Participants often arrived with high expectations, which are not fulfilled and resulted in disillusionment and a crumbling of their vision for their future, including regarding a possible positive outcome to their asylum procedure and a right to stay in Belgium. They were stressed by life in Belgium, separated from their families and living in a different culture and society. Many had expectations of an education or vocational training that could give them a better future and found that these hopes were not fulfilled, especially once they turned 18 and were no longer entitled to go to school. They were then left inactive and waiting.

Life in the collective reception centres sometimes posed challenges, resulting in stress, tensions and even violence. Although participants were generally satisfied with the living conditions in the centres, they also expressed concerns about issues such as food, loss of independence, life in a community with fixed times for activities and rules, and with other asylum-seekers of other nationalities. For the UASC, they sometimes found it difficult to adapt to living in a reception centre, especially since they had gained independence and maturity during their flight and journey to Belgium. They wanted to live independently by themselves or with friends. In addition, the women and girls found that they were harassed and taunted by the male Afghan asylum-seekers in the centres, especially if they decided to stop wearing the veil and wear Western clothes.

While the report did not set out to focus on the operation of the asylum procedure, it became clear from the discussions and interviews that there was a lack of clarity about the process, which resulted in a feeling that it was unfair. Those consulted felt that there was a lack of clear information about the asylum procedure and there appeared to be misunderstandings about the role of the CGRS and the function of the asylum interview in the procedure. Participants said that they did not think that the assessment of the credibility of their claim was fair, especially when they saw people posing as Afghans being recognized while they were not believed as being from Afghanistan. Some later realized that they should not have followed the advice of smugglers, but rather that they should have told the truth in their first interview. Participants also raised concerns about the quality of interpretation/translation and about their relationship with the lawyers advising them.

Women and girls had particular concerns in the centres because they found that they continued to be dominated by Afghan males and were harassed by them if they did not conform to expected behaviour or dress. Sometimes there was insufficient awareness that forced marriage or domestic violence can be relevant to their asylum claim. Also, it was not always possible for them to raise their own protection concerns independently of their husbands.

These stress factors are outlined in more detail below. Recommendations are also made at the end of each subsection to help tackle the concerns raised.

3.1 TRAUMA AND STRESS IN AFGHANISTAN AND DURING FLIGHT

The Afghans interviewed often had psychological difficulties resulting from the many stresses they faced. These included trauma experienced in their country of origin and/or on their way to Europe; the fact that they were in a strange country far from their family; and the uncertainty surrounding the asylum procedure which was sometimes long. As a result, they reported problems such as headaches, sleeping difficulties and problems concentrating. Some spoke of depression; others expressed a general feeling of unease.

The participants explained that they had been under constant stress not only in their home country but also since leaving and that each step of the way added a new stress. They spoke about different forms of anxiety linked to the conflict and human rights violations in Afghanistan; their departure; the journey to Europe; humiliations experienced; the death of others travelling with them; separation from loved ones; deprivation of food; fear of police violence; and news of the death of loved ones back home.

“ *The most stressful moment, the worst moment, was when I crossed the border. Leaving Afghanistan Nothing in a man's life compares to that stress.*”

Afghan man

Participants who travelled through Turkey reported many problems while crossing mountains or rivers. The fact that families were separated during flight meant that some teenagers had to travel onwards without their parents and so arrived on their own in Belgium. A few said they were physically injured in the mountains and needed surgery once they arrived in Belgium. Some recalled seeing people walking in front of them and slipping on the ice or falling to their deaths.

“ *I lost my parents and my sisters in the crossing of the river in Turkey. I reached the other side and I couldn't find them. I reached Italy with a group of young guys. We hid under the truck for hours and hours, four of us. When we arrived in Italy, you should have seen the driver's face! He said 'But where are you coming from, you lot?' That was so funny Could my family still be in Turkey? Where are they? I cannot sleep. But I was told to keep going, so I kept going.*”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ There was this guy, right in front of us. He slipped, and that was it. He was gone. We stopped walking and we looked: he had fallen off the mountain.”

Young Afghan man

The journey through Greece was also often recalled as one of their worst memories. Participants spoke about racism and police controls, about different racist groups roaming the streets attacking asylum-seekers and bringing them to the police. Others said that Greece was also a place where asylum-seekers, including Afghans, had access to food via churches, although few of the participants were aware of this.

“ I saw things in Greece that I never will forget. I weighed 80 kilos when I left and was only 35 kilos when I arrived here. Why do we have to go through this?”

Young Afghan man

For those who travelled that route, the journey by boat from Greece to Italy is one event that had a major impact on the participants, especially the unaccompanied children. The boats were reported as being overcrowded and no food or drink was provided.

“ I thought we were going to die on that sea. I had brought water and food, but not enough. I gave the dates, biscuits and the water to two younger kids. I was left eating paper When there was no more paper, I ate my shoelaces [he showed a video with a boat full of boys]. I recorded this so that if I died on the sea, my parents would know where and when I died. I wanted them to see how far I had gone and where I died.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ I went on a small boat to Italy – a Zodiac. The boat was broken and we jumped into the water. I was swimming for half an hour but some people died. Many people died, especially those who could not swim. I think we were with 70 people in the boat, but I do not know how many people arrived. I just heard people crying and shouting for help around me when I was swimming.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

Participants explained the circumstances of the journey on foot, by train, car and/or boat. They showed signs of trauma while recounting their experiences. Some insisted that, if returned to Afghanistan, they would come back but stressed how frightening it would be to them to take the same road and encounter the same dangers again. Three of the participants had already been deported and had come back. Some of the participants explained how the journey had changed them, affecting them but also revealing a new personality.

When asked what could be done to help them, some of the participants said nothing could be done to alleviate the pain and harshness of the journey. They wished the hardship encountered would be acknowledged by the Belgian authorities. Indeed, several participants did not understand why CGRS did not consider the obstacles they encountered on the road. When asked if they would have reconsidered their decision to come to Europe had they received accurate information about the dangers of the journey, some interviewees said they would have come anyway.

“ It is like a trap: we go from country to country. We move forward because in each country, we face problems. So we keep moving.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

It thus seems that part of the violence, whether among residents or self-inflicted, stems from the trauma experienced while still living in Afghanistan and the journey. While some internalize frustration, others express it through individual or collective acts of destruction. The identification of special reception needs

resulting from experiences before arrival in Belgium can thus be a key element in identifying appropriately adapted solutions to tensions that may arise.

In this context, Fedasil's 2013 management plan identifies various elements to its vision for 2012–18. These include an accompaniment that is adapted to the specific characteristics of the individual, his or her needs, experiences and asylum procedure, and the optimization of the accompaniment provided according to their specific characteristics, taking into account in particular the situation of UASC, vulnerable groups, and victims of violence.⁴

TO HELP ADDRESS THE SITUATION OF TRAUMATIZED ASYLUM-SEEKERS IN RECEPTION CENTRES, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- The process for vulnerability screening can be further improved and should be undertaken by qualified staff in all reception centres, both upon arrival and periodically thereafter;
- Reception centre staff should ensure asylum-seekers thus identified receive appropriately adapted reception facilities, specifically regular and qualified psychosocial support, and the medical treatment needed, so that their special needs are addressed as long as needed.

3.2 STRESS LINKED TO LIFE IN BELGIUM

Participants reported that the stress they lived under in Belgium was different: they feared deportation and rejection of their asylum application and this was difficult to bear. Most participants said how stressful it was for them to have to wait for a reply and not to be able to work or study to avoid thinking of the answer from CGRS.

“ I feel the stress in my teeth, in my forehead. I have nightmares. It is just so long to wait, and wait and wait for an answer.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ I am stressed for my family: I dragged my children into this. I don't worry about myself. I am worried for them.”

Afghan man

Others expressed the stress of being alone and separated from their family and relatives:

“ When I was with my family, everything went fine. Being alone is so difficult. There are so many countries between them and me. I am worried for my mother: who is taking care of her? What about my nephews? Are they still alive? Will I live to see them again?”

Young Afghan man

⁴ Fedasil, *Contributions à une politique globale en matière de migration : Plan de management 2012–18*, Jean-Pierre Luxen, Directeur général, 15 March 2013, pp. 10–11.

Some reported how uncomfortable it was for them to be in another culture, in another society where they did not understand and know the rules of behaviour:

“ I don't like the way people look at me. The families in the street, my friends in the centre, people outside It unnerves me and it upsets me to have people looking at me and judging me.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ How can someone who has grown up for 17 years in one culture adapt to a new one and integrate into the new society in one year? How can I understand everything at once?”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ We do not want help from imams but from Belgians. We would like to receive a cultural briefing on Belgium.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ Each country was a new obstacle. Every single step of the journey from Afghanistan to Belgium was hard. I was not ready for that. I was not ready for all those new cultures. I was all right up until Turkey but then ... I was not ready for the European cultures. I was not ready for all this stress. There is a new stress all the time ... deportation or fear of having to do all this journey again. But it was worth it. Here, life is better.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

It was noted that some had physical symptoms such as headaches, paralysis, physical pains or trembling. Others suffered from depression, anxiety and sleeplessness. Two participants said they had attempted suicide.

Asylum-seekers benefit from regular access not only to social workers but also to psychologists in all centres. The consultations nevertheless showed that the Afghans generally welcomed the possibility of talking further about their experiences and concerns, whether in groups or individually.

TO HELP RESIDENTS COPE WITH THE STRESS OF ADAPTING TO LIFE IN BELGIUM UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- The delivery of psychological support should be further strengthened, for instance, by providing more direct and regular access to a psychologist. This would help address problems such as depression, self-mutilation, and thoughts of suicide more efficiently, at the same time as relieving doctors and nurses from having to deal with heavy trauma;
- Reception centres should consider holding regular group discussions, perhaps on a fortnightly or monthly basis, to allow residents to talk more freely about their feelings and share experiences in a structured environment. This would help ensure a permanent communication channel with the staff;
- Reception centres should consider setting up a similar group exclusively for women and girls, whether of one or mixed nationalities, to allow them to share their concerns in a safe environment, moderated by female staff members and with female interpreters as needed;
- Reception centres should consider establishing suggestion boxes and/or complaints mechanisms, if these are not already in place, to provide an avenue for suggestions and complaints to be considered and taken into account.

3.3 UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS AFTER ARRIVAL

Participants had high expectations once they arrived in Europe – in their eyes the continent of the origin of human rights. They saw arriving in Europe as the final stage of their journey. In their eyes, they now had a right to stay and dreamt of rebuilding their lives, reuniting with their families, finding work, continuing their education and/or restarting a normal life and leaving difficult periods behind them.

These expectations and views are in clear contrast to those of the Belgian authorities, administration and staff. They view the asylum-seekers' arrival as the beginning of a process: the beginning of the asylum procedure and of the process of identifying potential international protection needs. Until a final decision is made on these issues, life will to a certain extent be put on hold.

As the asylum-seekers' expectations and the reality of their situation are totally different, this leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings. It was sometimes difficult for the Afghans to comprehend, let alone accept, that they are at the beginning of a new process and that their arrival in Europe is not the end, that the uncertainty about their future will continue, and that all their demands which are often based on unrealistic expectations or misleading information will not be fulfilled. As one participant said: *“We need one stream of communication, instead of promises from everywhere.”*

For the staff, it was sometimes difficult to comprehend the attitude of some asylum-seekers. They felt they were not respected when they were confronted with what in their view appeared to be arrogance based on unrealistic expectations. Sometimes, they put this down to cultural differences.

TO HELP RESIDENTS MANAGE THEIR EXPECTATIONS, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- The structural provision of information on the asylum procedure to asylum-seekers should continue to be closely monitored by Fedasil, in cooperation with the Aliens Office and CGRS, to ensure that information conveyed is standardized and coordinated as much as possible;
- Special attention should be paid by the relevant staff, whether social workers, legal advisers, CGRS protection officers, interpreters, nurses and doctors, guardians and other actors, to ensure that general messages regarding life in Belgium and in particular the asylum procedure are harmonized and that they are adapted to the asylum-seeker's age, gender and level of education. Such information could be communicated on several occasions, perhaps in small groups, in a language and format that is readily comprehensible to them, so as to manage their expectations more effectively.

3.4 UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS IN RELATION TO EDUCATION

To be able to receive an education was often cited as one of the reasons for leaving Afghanistan and searching for a better future. Many of the participants mentioned that they were eager to pursue an education or vocational training and that they wanted to catch up on lost opportunities in Afghanistan and to be prepared to become contributing members of society.

These expectations were particularly strong among the girls and young women interviewed, who expressed anxiety that this might be their only chance to receive an education. As one young woman said: *“I am desperate to learn. Back home, I was not allowed to go to class.”*

At the same time, the possibility of studying and receiving vocational training was a source of tension between those under 18 for whom school is obligatory and those over 18, who often do not have the same opportunities. Some of the participants who were over 18 realized that they had no access to education in Belgium and were thus worried by the fact that they might never have further opportunities for education.



It should be noted in this respect, that Article 14(1) of the recast Reception Conditions Directive states that “... Member States shall not withdraw secondary education for the sole reason that the minor has reached the age of majority”, while Article 16 permits Member States to “allow applicants access to vocational training irrespective of whether they have access to the labour market”.⁵ In this context, Article 74/14 §1 Aliens Act and Article 7§2, 1° of the Belgian Law on the reception of asylum-seekers allows asylum-seekers who have received a negative decision on the asylum claim to request to be allowed to remain on the territory and benefit from reception so that they can finish their school year.⁶

Some of the participants explained that, while they wanted to obtain an education, the current system presents a huge challenge for them and a clear source of stress and frustration. Many of the 15–18 year olds said they had never been to school and did not know how to read and write. This led to shame at school. Some of them did not want to admit this and so pretended.

“ I don’t understand what is going on in the classroom. I don’t understand what the teacher wants. I never went to school back home. I don’t understand what is going on The teacher writes something on the board, I try to copy it down but then it is erased before I have the time to write.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

⁵ European Union: Council of the European Union, *Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)* (“Recast Reception Conditions Directive”), 29 June 2013, OJL 180/96-105/32, 2013/33/EU, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51d29db54.html>.

⁶ Loi sur l’accès au territoire, le séjour, l’établissement et l’éloignement des étrangers, 15 décembre 1980, available at: <http://goo.gl/XuqUUM>; Loi sur l’accueil des demandeurs d’asile et de certaines autres catégories d’étrangers, 12 janvier 2007, available at: <http://goo.gl/Ts8CuK>.

“ At school, everything is in Dutch. I don't understand. I don't even speak English, so it is very hard for me to understand. I can't speak to the others because they are not from my ethnic group. I feel very lonely. I hear all these languages and I cannot talk to any of them. I feel ignorant. I never went to school back home.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

Other teenagers felt so humiliated by their lack of knowledge that they said they would rather not go to school, which created tension as school attendance is obligatory in Belgium and not going to school for those below 18 years of age leads to sanctions (including loss of pocket money). These factors were stressful for the teenagers. For instance, it emerged during the discussions that several participants felt belittled in class, which in turn led to them becoming disruptive.

“ I do not have a mother to help me. Who is going to help me? I didn't go to school. Who is going to help me? Here, they don't even understand why we didn't go to school in Afghanistan.”

Unaccompanied Afghan girl

In addition to the linguistic challenges, some of the teenagers said they found it difficult to sit in a classroom all day. They struggled to focus, as they were not used to sitting for hours at a time. Some said this caused them to have flashbacks and think about their lives, which made them anxious. As a result, some participants had misbehaved and been sent away from school. They explained that they did not understand the decision and felt they were being excluded rather than punished for bad behaviour.

“ At home, we were outside, running around all the time. There was no classroom where I lived. Now they want me to sit in a classroom! It is so stressful: I sit there and I don't understand what is happening. So I start to think. I start to remember what I have been through.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

As one staff member working in a centre stated:

“ At the moment we face a real difficulty with education of the youngsters. They cannot sit still for hours. They cannot be in a classroom for prolonged periods of time. They often show no respect for the teachers and other pupils in the school. They leave class whenever they feel like it. We asked for help from the Youth Service but they do not feel responsible for these youngsters. Of the four unaccompanied children who are now residing in the centre, three are not attending school. Some tell us that they cannot sit in the class because they start to think of the trauma. They cannot concentrate. They cannot tolerate being in a class. They have no life plan, thus also often no motivation. They do not know why they ended up in Belgium. It was not their choice. They do not know what to do with their lives. And they definitely do not have a plan for possible integration in Belgium.”

Staff member

While efforts have been made with special classes (called “OKAN” classes/*classes passerelles*) to integrate newcomers generally into the Belgian educational system, not all teachers are trained or willing to deal with the stress and anxiety of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who are often traumatized.

“ Teachers are not trained to react to cultural issues and communication across cultures. They don't know about post-traumatic stress disorder. They think for example that the unaccompanied Afghan children are always fighting amongst each other when actually they are talking animatedly. They have little patience. Those teachers need to be more careful with children whose lives have been destroyed and who never went to school.”

Staff member working in a centre

In some centres, staff are assigned to help the youngsters catch up on classes and do their homework. In others, the youngsters had access to the Internet to support their learning.

TO HELP ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN TO ADAPT TO BELGIAN SCHOOLS AND ASSIST SCHOOLS IN RECEIVING THEM, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- In all centres hosting children, especially those who are unaccompanied, there are staff members who are specifically dedicated to helping them adapt to the Belgian educational system and liaise with staff in the schools; this may include volunteers and/or associations living near reception centres to help support children with homework and provide tools for homework, e.g. flexible access to the Internet;
- Reception centre staff (whether social workers or educators) should continue to engage with teachers in schools and work on the particular needs of some of the children, who may not have been able to go to school at all, especially if they are Afghan girls;
- The good practice found in some reception centres to give cultural briefings to teachers in nearby schools when significant numbers of asylum-seeking children of a particular nationality are present could be replicated so as to inform them about the children's experiences, the culture they come from, their lives and situation;
- Schools hosting asylum seekers could explore the possibility of involving trauma experts and cultural mediators to help them deal with their specific needs;
- For children who turn 18 and are no longer entitled to go to school in Belgium, the possibility should be investigated of continuing language classes or other training, and of facilitating their undertaking voluntary work in local businesses or vocational training.

3.5 LIFE IN THE COLLECTIVE RECEPTION CENTRES

During the examination of the asylum application, asylum-seekers are entitled to material assistance in a reception centre assigned to them by Fedasil. In principle, asylum-seekers only stay in a collective reception centre for the first four months of the examination of their claim. After four months asylum-seekers can apply for individual accommodation in a local reception initiative (LOI) which is organized either by one of the municipalities throughout Belgium or by another partner of Fedasil (e.g. Service social de solidarité socialiste (Seso), Caritas, Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (CAW) etc.).

Overall the asylum-seekers expressed satisfaction at their living conditions in the reception centres, although they mentioned that life in the centres varies from one centre to another. For instance, while some were very generous with food and served warm food, others tended to serve cold food and in limited quantities, with some asylum-seekers reporting that food was insufficient. The results of recent budget cuts have affected centres differently, with different priorities being set. As a consequence, some centres had a poor reputation and asylum-seekers requested transfers to allegedly more accommodating centres.

As for the staff, they frequently said that small centres were easier to manage than large ones. Sometimes the latter had to receive larger numbers of asylum-seekers of the same nationality at once, which could lead to tensions.

The asylum-seekers mostly complained about their loss of independence. Many said they wanted to be able to buy things themselves rather than being given them. For the men it was often a matter of pride. Women living in centres without cooking facilities for residents asked to be able to cook for their family.

“ I would like to decide and not be compelled.”

Afghan man

“ I want to be able to go to the market and buy a shirt myself.”

Afghan man

Some found life in a community with the rules needed to manage the centres very difficult.

“ We are used to living together and spending time together as a group. One of our problems is that we are asked to go to bed at 22.30. That is very early for Afghans and it prevents us from spending time together. We want to be together to talk and play. And there are no spaces where we can do this other than the bedrooms and the corridors.”

Young Afghan man

“ I have been here for seven months now. I received a positive decision after two months. Nothing is good for me in this centre. I am frustrated about the rules in this centre. I often want to help one of the other asylum-seekers and want to translate for them. Therefore I need to accompany him but I do not get any transportation tickets for this. Sometimes we get sarcastic reactions from our social workers. When I had problems finding a lawyer, my social worker said, “If you can come from Afghanistan to Belgium, why can't you find a lawyer.”

Young Afghan man

Participants also asked for a clearer stream of communication. The same was requested by some staff members who felt residents were saturated with conflicting and sometimes erroneous information and guidance from a wide range of different actors (lawyers, social workers, guardians, doctors ...).

“ The staff and the director should talk more with people to understand them, to be able to empathize with them, and to know what is going on. But sometimes they do not want to be disturbed. Once a week, there should be some kind of morning briefing. More time must be taken to explain things to people. More explanations are needed.”

Young Afghan man

While most centres had a common social space where asylum-seekers could meet and talk, some had to merge the common room with the reception area due to a lack space. This meant that visitors to the centre had to cross the room and interrupt interaction.

Internet, Wi-Fi and computers were available in some centres, but not in others. While some staff stressed that social media could be used to do harm (such as gathering friends to fight), access to the internet is important for asylum-seekers to be able to watch or read news about their home country, to get and remain in contact with friends and family, search for an apartment, and, for children, to have access to computers and the internet to do their homework.

Participants often raised the issue of language. Although language courses are available, they were often keen to learn more, as it is key to understanding the procedure better, to access educational opportunities, as well as to eventual integration once recognized.

Transportation outside the centre is vital for asylum-seekers who may need to visit their lawyer, wish to seek to rent a flat, or visit friends. The current system of providing vouchers for bus/train tickets was also affected by the budget cuts.

In this context, Fedasil's commitment in its 2013 management plan to ensuring that residents receive an appropriate accompaniment throughout their stay may help guarantee a more rational and coherent accompaniment. As the plan indicates, it is hoped that this can thereby contribute to residents' greater

confidence in the reception offered and in the trust in their designated social worker/*accompagnateur*.⁷ In order to secure a more serene atmosphere in each centre, the plan also commits to taking the necessary initiatives to harmonize the regulation of the centres; to elaborating the necessary plans of action to guarantee order in the centres, including through proactive measures and sanctions in case of infractions; and to explaining to each asylum-seeker his or her rights and obligations.⁸

TO HELP ASYLUM-SEEKERS ADAPT TO LIFE IN RECEPTION CENTRES, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- Fedasil should receive adequate support in the process of reducing the size of centres, so that they are more manageable, while still retaining flexibility to respond to fluctuations in numbers arriving;
- Reception centres could consider introducing a weekly meeting or briefing, which residents can attend, where staff can share information and respond to queries; it is also important to continue to involve residents in the centre in different aspects of the running of the centre; residents' committees including female and male asylum-seekers could be formed to facilitate dialogue with the centres' management;
- Reception centres should strive to use the services of cultural mediators who speak the main languages used by asylum-seekers, including refugees who have integrated into Belgian life or Belgians themselves, to enhance communication with the residents, help reduce misunderstandings and tensions, explain Belgian customs and why rules and regulations are needed in the centres; staff at reception centres should be given training in intercultural communication and mediation to help them respond more effectively to residents' concerns;
- Reception centres should continue to strengthen access to recreational activities and ensure that places are available to residents to socialize, including opening common rooms for longer hours, bearing in mind different cultural practices around when socializing takes place;
- Fedasil should enhance measures to increase autonomy such as the Federal Reception Initiatives (FOI), which are currently being introduced in some centres, so that residents can benefit from semi-autonomous FOI accommodation near the reception centre, while still benefiting from the centre's facilities.
- Further Fedasil measures to reinforce autonomy/independence, could include: further expanding its programme to ensure access to independent cooking facilities in all reception centres; enhancing the provision of vouchers to travel outside the centres and allow residents greater independence to buy their own food and other goods.

3.6 PARTICULAR ISSUES RAISED BY UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR LIFE IN RECEPTION CENTRES

Unaccompanied children are initially received in orientation and observation centres (OOC) such as in Steenokkerzeel and Neder-over-Hembeek, where their age and medical psychological and social profile are assessed. After two to four weeks, the children are transferred to a collective reception centre where they are accommodated in separate living units with other UASC and their own team of supervisors and educators. The children also attend school, which is obligatory until the age of 18. Newly arrived children are usually

⁷ Fedasil, *Contributions à une politique globale en matière de migration*, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

sent to a separate class in local schools to prepare them for school generally and receive intensive language classes. Later they are referred to an ordinary local class on the basis of their educational level.⁹

Most centres had a dedicated room for children and some were decorated in creative ways. It also seems that there is a discrepancy amongst the centres in terms of staff, with some staff members in some centres being particularly committed to supporting the UASC to integrate, attend school, and improve their mastery of the language.

Several of the UASC expressed the wish to live by themselves or with friends. They explained that they were independent back home and had gained maturity on their journey to Belgium. They resented being told what to do or when to do it, and wanted to take control of their lives.

“ I am very grateful but I do not want solidarity anymore. I do not want to have to go towards others. I am a man and I want to stand on my two feet.”

Unaccompanied Afghan youth

“ Stop treating us like babies. Let us go out and buy stuff. Let us try things out by ourselves.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ If I were the director of the centre, I would talk more with the people in the centre. I would want to understand what their problems are and how people feel. I would organize a refugee committee. Here staff have no time to talk.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

While most of the staff agreed that adults and families needed their autonomy, they were understandably more reluctant to encourage UASC to live independently on their own.

TO IMPROVE THE RECEPTION OF UASC, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- In view of the good practice of observation and orientation centres (OOC) in Neder-over-Hembeek, Steenokkerzeel and Sugny, to which all UASC are initially referred, Fedasil could consider the possibility of establishing specific reception centres for UASC, so that they continue to receive expert attention and support after the OOC;
- Adequate surveillance mechanisms should be in place, particularly at night, to ensure the safety and protection of UASC;
- For a review of the relevant practices in applying the best interest principle to UASC, see also Safe and Sound, what States can do to ensure respect for the best interests of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe, UNHCR-UNICEF, October 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5423da264.html>.

⁹ For further information see generally <http://fedasil.be/fr/content/trajet-des-mena>. On the subject, see also European Migration Network, *Unaccompanied minors in Belgium. Reception, Return and Integration Arrangements*, 2009, <http://goo.gl/dQ9CuS>.

3.7 PARTICULAR ISSUES RAISED BY BY WOMEN AND GIRLS IN RECEPTION CENTRES

The three Afghan girls (one of whom was unaccompanied) and 13 women interviewed expected to be treated fully equally in Europe, but they found that they continued to be harassed by other Afghan asylum-seekers in the reception centres if they did not wear the veil or did not conform to cultural and religious expectations. A few younger girls were under the impression that they had to comply to be safe. Many women/girls therefore purposely limit their interactions with Afghan males.

“ *I don't understand: when the Afghan boys see a Belgian girl, they find her pretty. But if I wear the same clothes as a Belgian girl, they start harassing me. So I stay with the other women.*”

Young Afghan woman

For others, the reason for their departure was religious persecution. Yet, they found that some of the religious attitudes they had run away from were present in the centres. Some of the participants, in particular the women, explained that they found it stressful to live with these religious people who told them to wear a headscarf and pray.

“ *Why are they here, those Taliban? We ran away from them and now I must live in Belgium with them?*”

Unaccompanied Afghan girl

“ *I do not feel well in this centre. I do not want to wear a headscarf. I wear trousers and because of this, Afghan boys threaten me. One boy hit me. He was arrested but after a while, he came back to this centre. I was hit one single time, but they now say horrible things to me. They tell me that they will kill me once I am outside the centre. I have a lot of stress. It is difficult to be in a centre with so many Afghan men.*”

Teenage Afghan girl

The girls and women interviewed had different concerns from their male counterparts. Some were specifically linked to the reasons for their flight from Afghanistan, which they said included fleeing from forced marriage, domestic violence, slavery, a lack of education and therefore a lack of independence and professional prospects. The fact that they continued to be dominated by Afghan males in the centres was a huge cause of stress and trauma.

“ *The Afghans here wonder: 'How come a woman is here alone?' Then they immediately think of sex. They think we are here to prostitute ourselves.*”

Afghan woman

“ *They followed me everywhere. I started to pluck my hair as a result. They insulted me, would push me, and invite me in their bedrooms. I talked to my social worker but nothing was done. I will harm myself. Then they will listen.*”

Teenage Afghan girl

TO ADDRESS STRESSES FACED BY WOMEN AND GIRLS IN RECEPTION CENTRES¹⁰ AND PREVENT/RESPOND TO SEXUAL AND GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV), UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- Standard operating procedures (SOPs) to prevent, identify and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) should be in place and implemented in all reception centres;¹¹ The European Frame of Reference for Prevention of SGBV, including its SOPs and Code of Conduct for the Prevention of SGBV in the European reception and asylum section, developed by the University of Ghent,¹² could be useful in this regard.
- Information and training should be regularly organized for staff and both male and female residents in the centres, on how gender affects inter-personal relations in the centre, how flight can change gender roles and increase the risk of domestic violence, and how to prevent, identify and respond to cases of harassment and SGBV, as part of ensuring that staff receive appropriate training concerning the needs of victims/survivors of SGBV (as required by Article 25(2) of the recast Reception Conditions Directive);
- Fedasil and reception centres should ensure that victims of torture and violence receive the necessary treatment and access to appropriate medical and psychological treatment or care”, in line with Article 25(1) of the recast Reception Conditions Directive; that effective mechanisms are in place to transfer if necessary SGBV victims to places where their safety can be ensured; and that dormitories foresee separate corridors and/or blocks only accessible to women and girls at night.

3.8 UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS IN RELATION TO THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE AND THE RIGHT TO STAY

While the report did not set out to focus on the Belgian asylum procedure, it became clear from discussions with the participants that asylum-seekers face difficulties in understanding the asylum procedure. For the majority of the asylum-seekers interviewed, the procedure is complex and misunderstood. Many thought that they had a right to asylum on the basis of their nationality and that being an Afghan was in itself sufficient. They did not understand that they had to undergo “an individual bureaucratic procedure”, while the results of that procedure were often difficult to accept. This led to further confusion, misunderstanding and frustration, when they were confronted with reality. It also became clear that the participants expected a tailor-made solution for the whole group of Afghans and that they did not understand why their applications were treated on a case-by-case basis. They thought that the situation in Afghanistan and the obstacles and dangers encountered on the way to Belgium would qualify them for protection as a group.

The subsections that follow set out participants’ feelings and perceptions around different aspects of the asylum procedure.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive report on women in Belgian asylum reception centres, including recommendations on a more gender sensitive approach see: Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad, *Women in Asylum Reception Centres: Towards a Gender Sensitive Approach*, June 2010, available at: <http://goo.gl/6hc2kc>.

¹¹ See also, UNHCR, *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Guidelines for Prevention and Response*, May 2003, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3edcd0661.html>.

¹² ICRH (Ghent University), *European Frame of Reference for Prevention of Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the European Asylum and Reception Sector*, 10 December 2010, available at: <http://goo.gl/YV5feU>.

3.8.1 LACK OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

From the interviews, it became clear that many Afghan asylum-seekers did not understand what their individual asylum procedure involved, its purpose, the proceedings and why an asylum procedure takes time. All this leads to tension, frustration and misunderstandings.

“ *With everything we have been through, why do we have to go through this now?*”

Young Afghan man

“ *After 30 long years of war, why isn't Belgium more welcoming?*”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

While they worried about the outcome of the procedure, they did not fully understand the process and often left this in the hands of the social workers and/or their lawyer.

“ *In general I feel a lot of arbitrariness about the asylum procedure. We have little understanding of what is going on. I did not see the DVD at the in-take interview. Nobody explained the procedure to me. I did not get an explanation about the CGRS interview. All I got was a ticket to Brussels. I had no appointment with my lawyer for three months. And I once paid 100 euros for translation. I only saw my lawyer at the CGRS. People have no information. We are also frustrated about the length of the procedure. I wanted to go to another country but I had no choice. Even now that I have a positive decision I am depressed. On top of it all, my family does not understand me. They say, 'How can you have problems in Europe?'*”

Young Afghan man

Only a few had seen the Fedasil/CGRS information DVD, or seem to remember having seen it, and the information leaflet on the asylum procedure appeared not always to have been distributed. Pashto speakers stressed that the leaflet was of little use to them since Pashto is a spoken language. Some said they could not read, while others struggled because of the language (whether Dutch or French) in which the information was given.

“ *All the documents I receive are in Dutch. I don't speak Dutch. No one in the centre would translate for me, so I didn't know what was going on. The result was that I missed the date of my interview three times.*”

Young Afghan man

Some participants said they did not understand the legal aspects of the procedure. Others did not retain the information, given the mixed messages they had received during their journey to Europe.

“ *Why do they welcome us in those centres and have a procedure if they are not going to keep us? I would prefer if they said it, that they don't want us. Why do they treat us – a family – like this? Reject me from the start! It prevents me from going to other countries: I would have gone to another country if I knew Belgium didn't want us.*”

Afghan man

As was clear from the discussions, many Afghan asylum-seekers do not understand the purpose of the asylum procedure. It is important that asylum-seekers are provided with adequate information at the beginning of the procedure as this may help reduce subsequent disappointment and frustration and help contribute to good decision-making.

As Fedasil's 2013 management plan notes, the provision of objective and pertinent information is an important way of offering the individual concerned a realistic vision of his or her future. Such an accompaniment needs to be adapted to the specific characteristics and needs of the person concerned, including their individual experiences. It also requires appropriate attention from the start of the process until the moment they leave the centre for independent accommodation or return to their country of origin.¹³

Among the plan's objectives are clear and comprehensible communication with residents, notably about the operation of the procedure and their future possibilities which includes voluntary return; continuous dialogue with the local population to improve the integration of reception structures in the local community; and regular internal communication with collaborators to improve understanding of Fedasil's objectives and priorities and involve them in the development of a new organizational culture.¹⁴

TO IMPROVE THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- All actors involved, including Fedasil, the Aliens Office, CGRS, lawyers, guardians, should seek to harmonize information provided about the asylum procedure and ensure that clear and harmonized messages are conveyed in a manner which is adapted to individuals' age, gender and level of education;
- The Fedasil/CGRS video/DVD about the asylum procedure should be shown in small groups, possibly at regular intervals so that residents can view it more than once, with a social worker or a cultural mediator available immediately afterwards to respond to any specific questions; similarly, it is important that the information leaflet about the procedure produced by CGRS is systematically distributed and explained in the relevant languages to all newly arriving residents;
- In this context, Fedasil could consider further collaboration with NGOs to hold regular information sessions for recently arrived asylum-seekers to provide information about the procedure and answer questions.

3.8.2 MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT THE ROLE OF CGRS AND THE FUNCTION OF THE ASYLUM INTERVIEW IN THE PROCEDURE

The interview at CGRS was itself a cause of tension for the participants: it is conducted in a language they do not understand, sometimes with an interpreter they do not trust, and/or a lawyer they have not had the chance to speak to beforehand. The participants expressed their concerns about the constant pressure of avoiding mistakes during the asylum interview. Most did not understand why an interview could last several hours or why there were several interviews.

“ It is very hard to sit in front of them, all alone, unprepared. If I make a single mistake, it will be ‘negative’.”

Afghan man

“ I was scared for my interview. I had no preparation, my lawyer never called me. I am alone. The moment we leave home, we are alone. I cannot register everything that happens around me, just by myself. That interview was just too much!”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

¹³ Fedasil, *Contributions à une politique globale en matière de migration*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 23.

Some participants had a negative experience at interview and said they thought they had not been taken seriously or that they felt humiliated.

“ It does not hurt them to reject me. They probably laugh about it, when I receive my negative. They always say ‘OK, tell us your story’, as if they were not taking us seriously.”

Young Afghan man

“ I don’t understand: on the forms, we are all born in 01/01 in a year. I know Afghans don’t have a date and month of birth, but couldn’t they try to find us different dates? My mother, my brother and I have the same dates. I don’t like that.”

Young Afghan woman

Several participants did not understand the nature of the questions they were being asked:

“ They ask questions such as: ‘What time? Where? Which season? Who is this? How are these people or events linked to you? Why did you do this or that?’ I do not understand those questions. Why do they care about the day and the hour I left Afghanistan? I do not count hours or days. The interviewers do not listen to us: they are lost in those details and don’t listen to my story They think they know about Afghanistan better than us. They only know what they have heard on the news. They use that news and test us on it to then tell us that we are liars if we don’t know which news they are talking about. So I end up being interviewed on events I have never heard of. They don’t seem to understand that Afghanistan is at war. Every single corner of it is at war. They even use Google earth! They used it to check if we are from where we say we are. But Google earth is wrong and got the names of the villages and cities wrong. And you know what? I don’t know all the names of the streets in my town. I don’t have a map in my head Then, I got my negative decisions. Based on Google earth?! Is that the law? How can the law do that to people?”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ They were asking such strange questions and my lawyer had not prepared me at all. They kept asking me for dates. They wanted to know when I had left Afghanistan, when I had arrived in Turkey. But we don’t keep dates. We don’t write a ... diary! We don’t keep dates! They asked me something very strange: I am from a region where a drone killed several members of a wedding party. They asked me if I was related to those people and if I had been at the party. I said no, I didn’t even know about the drone. Then, the interviewers asked me why I didn’t know about the wedding party and the drone. I told them I didn’t know, that’s all. Then, they told me I was a liar. Do they think we all know each other? I live in a huge region!”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ They asked normal questions, like ‘Why are you here?’ or ‘What happened in Afghanistan?’, but then they asked very strange questions about the streets in my town. Like I know all the street names in my town! They also asked me about incidents against the French army in Kapisa, which I had never heard of. I think that’s why I got a negative reply. I saw some Pakistanis who pretended to be Afghan and they do research on the Internet before the interview. Maybe I needed to do it as well? But it is my home country so why would I do research about it!”

Young Afghan man

“ There is often a lack of trust between Afghan asylum-seekers and social workers. They take us for state agents. They confuse us with protection officers of the CGRS. And they have bad feelings towards the CGRS. They feel that the system is being abused.”

Staff member

In this context, as UNHCR has stated in its recent report *Beyond Proof*,¹⁵ the process of taking into account the applicant's individual and contextual circumstances includes taking account of a range of factors including his or her age, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, education, urban or rural background, profession, socio-economic status, religion, the impact of trauma on memory and behaviour, and of fear and lack of trust.

TO HELP PREPARE ASYLUM-SEEKERS FOR THE ASYLUM INTERVIEW WITH CGRS AND IMPROVE THE WAY IT IS HANDLED, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- Social workers should verify that a lawyer is assisting the asylum-seeker and should be encouraged to call lawyers to ensure they prepare the asylum-seeker for interview; and
- Lawyers, and where applicable guardians, should seek to prepare asylum-seekers for their interview, also in cooperation with NGOs, so that they are aware beforehand of the importance of the interview, what to expect, what their rights and obligations are, what kinds of questions they should expect, and what it is important to say.

3.8.3 PERCEIVED UNFAIRNESS OF THE CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT

Some of the participants had the feeling that their credibility was questioned by the lawyer, the CGRS interviewers and/or their social workers. They reported being told that they needed to tell the truth, which frustrated them as some said they kept telling the truth but were rejected all the same. This frustration often went hand in hand with a lack of understanding of the procedure. Some individuals thought that if they said the truth, this would automatically give them a right to international protection.

Some of them had the feeling that, as Afghans, they were not considered as having any priority in the procedure and were frustrated to see people of other nationalities being treated differently. The case of the Syrians was mentioned, including in comparison with the fact that the conflict in Afghanistan has been going on for over 30 years. There were also tensions because some participants said that some Pakistanis or Iranians pretended to be Afghans. As one young Afghan man explained:

“ Listen, I knew you [the consultant] were Iranian the moment you said hello. It is because of your accent. How do you know we are Afghans? Because we speak Dari, right? Look, this is a glass. You use one word to say “glass”. I use another one. This is how we make the difference between you and me. So why don't the interviewers check the accent, the language spoken, the culture and our names. Interpreters could help. Right now, they don't.”

Young Afghan man

“ A lot of Pakistanis pretend to be Afghans, we know it. They come from Pakistan, through Afghanistan and buy identity papers there. The worst thing is that they get a positive answer here in Belgium, while we don't. They lie during the interview.”

Afghan man

Many Afghans who leave Afghanistan are fed contradictory information and some no longer trust any official instances and prefer instead to rely on informal sources. A handful of participants admitted to using a story that had been given to them by smugglers. The latter told them that they should never tell the truth and should instead give a story created by the smuggler. After the first CGRS interview, the Afghans often realized it had been a mistake. They would then tell the real story during the second interview, which caused

¹⁵ See UNHCR, *Beyond Proof, Credibility Assessment in EU Asylum Systems: Full Report*, May 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/519b1fb54.html>, The Summary Report is available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51a704244.html>.

confusion during the asylum procedure and led some participants to think that this was why they had received a negative reply.

“ I didn’t say that I had converted to Christianity. The man who took me here said I should never say my secrets during the interview. Now, I regret not telling them during the interview. When I received my first negative answer, I realized I should have said. I told them during the second interview but they didn’t believe me.”

Young Afghan man

“ I told them I didn’t have electricity at home. No computer, no TV. The interviewer did not believe me. They said I was a liar.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ Those who lie, yell, fight, manipulate, all those who don’t like Belgium, seem more likely to get more out of the system and to do so more quickly.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

TO HELP ADDRESS THE PERCEIVED UNFAIRNESS OF THE CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

➤ Those assisting asylum-seekers, and notably lawyers, should stress that smugglers may well have given asylum-seekers inaccurate information about what to say in interview and that, even though they may feel intimidated by people in authority, it is better to explain their situation as clearly as possible during the interview with CGRS; and also that disclosing information later on can sometimes be considered as lacking in credibility.

➤ Furthermore, lawyers should explain what may constitute persecution and that even private matters, such as conversion to another religion, forced marriage or domestic violence, can be grounds for recognition of refugee status.

3.8.4 WOMEN’S AND GIRLS’ CONCERNS ABOUT THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

The women and girls interviewed had sometimes been given conflicting advice about what to speak about in their asylum interview. It sometimes seemed to them that concerns specific to their situation (as opposed to that of their husband) were not properly raised or considered.

“ They told me that no one would believe me if I spoke about forced marriage, marital rape and slavery. So I didn’t say the truth and I received a negative response. Now, I am telling them the truth, but it might be too late. I told them everything, even the truths I shouldn’t have told them. I had to tell them my story through the interpreter, who was a man. I wanted to disappear under the ground. I was so ashamed.”

Afghan woman

“ My husband and I did the interview at the Commissariat together. We both got negative decisions but I could not say anything about my private life and the interviewer did not ask me anything.”

Afghan woman

In this context, as UNHCR has noted, it is important to ensure, when assessing asylum claims made by a couple, that appropriate attention is given to the situation of the wife, who may have her own grounds

for asylum and may even be the principal applicant. The interview with the wife of a couple should not concentrate primarily on verifying the account of her husband, but rather accord sufficient attention to possible international protection needs linked to her own situation. It should also take account of the situation of women in the country of origin.¹⁶

TO ENSURE A MORE GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH TO THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- Women and girls seeking asylum should be made aware, individually, that their experiences may mean they also have their own grounds for asylum independently of male family members;
- Lawyers and social workers should advise female asylum-seekers that they may seek a female interviewer and interpreter and that they can ask for a female interviewer/interpreter if they are concerned about this; and
- More female interpreters should be made available for interviews at CGRS, especially in languages such as Pashto and Dari where there are significant numbers of asylum-seekers using these languages, and appropriate cultural awareness and Code of Conduct training for interpreters should be provided.

3.8.5 CONCERNS ABOUT THE QUALITY OF INTERPRETATION

Many participants reported problems with the interpretation during the asylum procedure. Some mentioned that the interpretation of what they said was less than accurate, leading to confusion and perhaps rejection. Some Dari speakers reported having had a Pashto speaker as an interpreter and vice versa. Yet, they said that the interviews had still taken place and the interpreters never notified the interviewer about any problem. For their part, the participants were too overawed and afraid to report any concerns to CGRS.

“ *My interpreter did not interpret well. I know, I was there. Everything happened in front of me but I couldn't say a thing. It all looked like a movie.*”

Young Afghan man

“ *During the interview, it was obvious that I didn't answer to some of the questions and the interpreter replied for me. The interpreter also talked too much to interpret answers given. But the interviewers did not seem to see it; they just did not seem to see it.*”

Afghan woman

“ *My interpreter even got the road I took wrong. During the second interview, I was asked questions about countries I have never been to. It is like being stabbed in the back!*”

Young Afghan man

“ *I think those interpreters don't understand how the country has changed. They sometimes left 10 years ago and the country has changed since then.*”

Young Afghan man

¹⁶ For further information see UNHCR, *Note du Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés relative à l'évaluation des demandes d'asile introduites par des femmes*, 14 December 2012, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/50dc23802.html>; The recast Asylum Procedures directive requires “each dependent adult [to] be given the opportunity of a personal interview.” See European Union: Council of the European Union, *Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast)*, 29 June 2013, L 180/60-180/95, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51d29b224.html>, Article 14(1).

According to the participants, this could lead to errors in the reporting of the interview. They said that the interpreters seemed to change names of people, dates of birth or place of residence. Some participants attributed this to a lack of understanding by the interpreters of the language in which they are expected to be fluent. Others said that when they contested the facts in the report of the first interview, they were told they were contradicting themselves. Several participants believed they had received a negative response as a result.

“ I even showed the interviewers, my lawyer and the social worker where the mistakes were: the name of my brother-in-law, how many brothers I have, the name of my home town ... everything was wrong. So I stand there, telling them about my life and they have in front of them a document that says things different from what I am saying. Then they told me I was lying! It wasn't me; it was my interpreter who got it wrong! They said: “Why didn't you tell us this before?” but I did! I did! The interpreter didn't do his work.

Young Afghan man

A handful of participants also reported being intimidated by interpreters at the beginning of the interview. Some asserted that the interpreter was telling them before the interview started that they were liars. Others said the interpreters were not paying full attention during the interview and were instead playing with their mobiles.

“ Some of us understood that they criticize us for leaving, but we are really in danger! So we are afraid of the interpreters.”

Afghan man

“ The worst are those with thick accents who are from an ethnic group but pretend to speak Dari. We don't understand them!”

Afghan man

TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF INTERPRETATION PROVIDED DURING THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE AND IN RECEPTION CENTRES, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- Training for interpreters working for CGRS and in reception centre should be reinforced to ensure that they are aware of the requirements of neutrality, impartiality and confidentiality, and that they are trained in intercultural and gender-sensitive communication;
- All interpreters used by reception centres, lawyers or CGRS should respect the deontological code committing them to strict neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality, and respectful behaviour, such as that contained in UNHCR's Code of Conduct for interpreters;¹⁷
- Social workers and CGRS should ensure that interpreters used have full command of the language needed for the interview. Using certified or professional interpreters is recommended and should be considered before resorting to informal interpreters;
- Social workers and lawyers should alert CGRS to reported cases of intimidation by interpreters and of inaccurate interpretation, so that CGRS can follow up on this; a complaint box, or other mechanism to complain, should be available for asylum-seekers to report interpretation problems; and
- Social workers, lawyers and CGRS should take asylum-seekers' preference as regards the gender of interpreters into account, in particular so that Afghan women can more openly tell their stories without fear of judgment.

3.8.6 CONCERNS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP WITH LAWYERS

Some participants stated that they had faced problems with their lawyers. There was a perception that some lawyers did not commit to the case and others were absent, including during the interviews with CGRS.

Other participants, however, had a positive experience of their lawyers. Some of the quotes below demonstrate a clear lack of understanding of the Belgian system of legal aid and the role of lawyers.¹⁸

“ I am not sure about my lawyer ... I am not sure what to think. When I received my negative reply, he didn't even know about it. He didn't even know I had been interviewed. I think that because he works for free, he doesn't do the job.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ I was hoping the lawyer would help me, but he only cares about the procedure. He even told me that once the negative decision would come and I would be in the streets, he would have nothing to do with me anymore.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ My lawyer represented two of us the same day! I stayed with her intern for the interview and she went from one room to the other, between the two of us!”

Young Afghan man

TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDED TO ASYLUM-SEEKERS, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- The system of legal aid provided to asylum-seekers in Belgium should be evaluated to identify obstacles to the delivery of quality legal aid to persons in need of international protection, so that improvements can be made to enhance the synergy between different actors (lawyers, Fedasil, NGOs, social workers, etc.) and can feed into the planned reform of legal aid;¹⁸
- Sufficient time should be devoted to explaining the asylum system in Belgium, including the system of legal aid, so that frustrations linked to misunderstandings can be reduced;
- Fedasil could consider expanding the practice adopted in one reception centre of having two social workers dedicated only to providing advice on the asylum procedure to residents and ensure such social workers receive appropriate training to do so; and
- Training for law students and lawyers in aliens' law should be strengthened, possibly in collaboration with NGOs specialized in asylum matters, to improve the quality of legal aid provided.
- Social workers should encourage and assist asylum-seekers to report incidents of misconduct by lawyers they hear about to the relevant bar association.

¹⁷ UNHCR, *Self-Study Module 3: Interpreting in a Refugee Context*, 1 January 2009, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/49b6314d2.html>, Appendix I. Article 18(7) of the Recast Reception Conditions Directive also provides that “Persons working in accommodation centres shall be adequately trained and shall be bound by the confidentiality rules provided for in national law in relation to any information they obtain in the course of their work.” See also information on the project implemented by UNHCR Austria “Qualitätsvolles Dolmetschen im Asylverfahren” - QUADA, co-financed by the European Refugee Fund and the Austrian Ministry of Interior, at <http://goo.gl/Jxs1UR>.

¹⁸ See also, UNHCR, *Mémorandum en Matière de Protection des Réfugiés, des Bénéficiaires de la Protection subsidiaire et des Apatrides en Belgique*, 30 July 2014, p. 27, available at: <http://goo.gl/p3Be5X>.

3.9 THE SITUATION OF CENTRES WHERE REJECTED ASYLUM-SEEKERS ARE ALSO ACCOMMODATED

Some of the centres visited have dedicated “return places”, where a number of rejected asylum-seekers have been accommodated since 2013. The aim is to convince and help rejected asylum-seekers to return voluntarily to their country of origin. This can lead, however, to misunderstanding and tension with the other asylum-seekers whose claims are ongoing and who are living alongside them in the centres. Often the differences in treatment are misunderstood, which can create a difficult atmosphere and further undermine trust.

This was especially evident for those whose claims had been rejected:

“ They stopped treating me like a human being the moment I received my first negative reply. Do we stop being human beings then? Why can't I still be respected?”

Afghan woman

“ The whole day we are sitting in our room and trying to sleep. Especially since I got a negative decision, I can no longer follow language classes or any other courses. I feel I am treated differently from before I received a negative decision. Staff no longer care about me; they say that they cannot do anything for me anymore.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ The day I received my negative reply, I lost it. I went out, in the cold, without my coat. I got lost in the streets. I was like a mad man. I am stuck now. It is like a trap.”

Young Afghan man

IN RELATION TO THE SITUATION WHERE REJECTED ASYLUM-SEEKERS ARE ACCOMMODATED ALONGSIDE ASYLUM-SEEKERS STILL IN THE PROCEDURE, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- All asylum-seekers should be provided with information about voluntary return throughout the asylum procedure;
- Rejected asylum-seekers should be given individually tailored and adequate advice and psychosocial support to deal with their situation and plan their future;
- Efforts should continue to be made so that social workers are supported and given specific training on the provision of advice to rejected asylum-seekers and on how to counsel them to adjust mentally to the decision, so that they can assist in the process of ensuring return in safety and dignity.

4. COPING MECHANISMS AND SELF-MUTILATION

Participants found different ways of coping with these stresses, some positive and others not. Positive mechanisms included doing sport, reading books, going for walks, praying, and talking with friends. Less positive ones included yelling at friends and family, violent outbursts such as breaking furniture and self-harm practices. Eating was another way of expressing and dealing with their stress: a few participants explained they were eating too much, others said they struggled to eat.

“ *When I am stressed, I yell at my mum. I know it is wrong. I try to control myself, but then I must eat, and eat, and eat. My heart beats so fast; it will come out of my body.*”

Young Afghan woman

For some participants, religion was a way of coping with some of the stress. A majority reported praying when under pressure. They also explained that praying offered them a daily schedule and routine they could stick to in a world without references.

“ *We try to use religion to build a link with the youngsters because some of them go to Koranic schools.*”

Staff member

Two of the participants who had converted to Christianity felt isolated and feared the reaction of their compatriots, so they hid their conversion.

“ *My conversion to Christianity has isolated me: I cannot tell the others I have changed my religion. I must stick with them, go out with them and even pray with them. So I pray on Friday in the mosque and escape to pray in church on Sunday. Sometimes I suffocate.*”

Young Afghan man

The discussions and interviews also revealed negative coping mechanisms, including self-mutilation. They showed that the 16 to 25-year-old boys and men tended to mutilate themselves by cutting their arms. Mutilation was not noted with the girls or women. Some of the participants showed their scars and stressed they were aware that self-mutilation was not a normal way of coping; they explained it helped them release some of the stress under which they were living. Some staff were aware of the self-mutilation issues and seemed to view it as a form of internalized violence. As for the participants, they spoke of it as a way of releasing their anguish. As mentioned above, two participants had attempted suicide.

“ *Now we see less violence towards us and towards things, but more self-mutilation. Scarring might be seen as a sign of masculinity. They say to us that it is a kind of rite – to show their manhood – that it is cultural. But I have difficulties believing this. This is really something that has been increasing in recent months. It is as if the external violence has been internalized. Sometimes they admit that they do it to forget their problems. As social workers we lack tools to deal with this. We lack the skills.*”

Staff member

“ *My family, the journey, the humiliation, the interview, the answers ... I go crazy. The moment I cut myself, I am in pain. The pain takes the thoughts away.*”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ One day, the police came and took my father away. I fought them, and they arrested me. Once in prison, I begged them to see my dad and speak to him. They refused. There was a bit of broken glass on the floor, so I tried to cut myself to force them to allow me to see my father. Since then, I have done it. I hit walls; I hurt myself when I feel I am going crazy. It helps the pain go away.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ The brain does not rest. All we think about is death, pain and lost ones. We cannot sleep. I forget things. People think I do it on purpose, but I don't. I do forget things. I know it isn't normal to harm myself. I know it. It is not part of my culture, the Afghan culture. I know it is crazy. But when I do it, the pain goes away.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ Look at my knuckles. Look at how red they are. I hit the walls. One day, a girl said something mean to me, so I was mad, and I started hitting walls. It helped. The pain helped me to forget the rest. It is my brain, you know: it is so busy with everything. I have no mother. I have no father. I am running away from the Taliban. So whenever I have emotions, they turn into anger and I get mad. So I hit walls.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ Nothing helps to alleviate our suffering and stress. When I was in jail I cut glass and because of the stress I started to cut myself. Here I also cut myself because of my depression, because of the stress.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

It became evident that staff did not know how to respond to and cope with self-mutilation and major trauma. Training is necessary to equip the teams. Most of the asylum-seekers consulted wished that communication with staff could be improved so that they could speak more freely about their stress and said there was a need for an ongoing dialogue. They welcomed the UNHCR interview and said they needed to talk.

TO REDUCE THE RISK AND INCIDENCE OF SELF-MUTILATION, UNHCR RECOMMENDS:

- Group discussions and the possibility of individual counselling should be provided, as highlighted in the previous sections;
- Periodic screening for psychological and behavioural concerns among asylum-seekers be put in place, to prevent any further self-harm and identify what preventive treatment and care may be able to help;
- Professional psychological help should be available on call to Fedasil staff whenever there is a problem of self-harm, as this is a very serious indicator of psychological stress;
- Providing psycho-educational programmes on active coping skills, which can empower asylum-seekers to manage trauma and stress and to reduce the need for mental health care.

5. VIOLENCE AMONG RESIDENTS IN RECEPTION CENTRES

The different stresses and frustrations identified in the participatory assessments are among the factors that can be seen as contributing to the incidents of violence that took place in reception centres in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The sections which follow set out the attitudes of the residents to the violence and the reactions of staff towards it and the tools they were given to deal with it. Finally attitudes towards the policy of transferring asylum-seekers from one centre to another are explained.

5.1 RESIDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE IN THE CENTRES

Adults explained that the acts of violence were mainly carried out by 15 to 25-year-old youths. They believed minor acts of violence by them might be caused by general disorientation and lack of direction. Their bouts of violence (involving breaking windows, breaking toilets, disabling heaters, etc.) were generally perceived by the adults as a way of expressing anxiety for someone without parental guidance.

“ *Imagine a child crossing the world by himself, facing dangers. He comes here and sees freedom and safety. He does not understand that he might be mistaken in his understanding of freedom: it is not freedom to fight, to insult or to break. But who will tell him since he is alone? It is hard for me to cope with stress and a new world. It is harder for the youngest ones, who are without their family and who suddenly face a new culture.*”

Young Afghan man

“ *We should not forget that some of these kids are coming from a country at war and often from a broken family. They often don't know what love is.*”

Staff member

By contrast, acts of violence by adults were judged severely by other adults.

While the participants generally said they would rather avoid fighting as they had grown up in a country at war, they reckoned they would fight if they had to:

“ *If they want a fight, they will get a fight. We can give it to them, if that's what they want. As a group, all together, we can fight I once saw two Africans fighting and I tried to stop them. They kept fighting so I left. [He stopped talking.] I don't want to fight. I have seen enough fighting.*”

Young Afghan man

“ *We don't want to fight. But if someone starts a fight, and tries to attack one of us, we have to go and fight. It is compulsory to defend anyone who is attacked. It is not a choice.*”

Young Afghan man

“ *Sometimes when you have the feeling that the staff are not listening to you, you want to punch them.*”

Young Afghan man

As for the reasons for fighting, it appeared that this is often related to small matters such as insults, disagreements over cooking space, looking at a girl, or mobile phone thefts.

“ The fighting happens because people are frustrated. They have been waiting for a long time for an answer and that is why they fight. The procedure takes a long time. The decisions are negative most of the time and they cannot understand this. If there is a majority of one community in one place, problems start. When there is a big group, they need to show off. The Albanians have got knives. The Afghans don't like it when somebody shows a knife or a gun. Then they react strongly.”

Young Afghan man

5.2 STAFF REACTIONS TO VIOLENCE IN THE CENTRES

Some of the staff interviewed appeared to be working in stressful conditions. Some said they would like to receive more support both in terms of budget and training. They said they were stressed by acts of violence and the daily lack of discipline. Most explained that there were few problems with the Afghan families. Rather, concerns came from the UASC who lacked discipline and from young single male adults aged 18 to 30 years, who could be violent and who sometimes influenced the UASC.

“ We think that the main fights are caused by stupidities. But the youngsters have grown up in a power vacuum. There is no longer anyone in authority who can give them values. There is no family, no village elders ... no one with authority.”

Staff member

“ There are clearly two groups within the Afghan population [in the centres], the Dari speakers and the Pashto speakers. The Pashtos are perceived by the Daris as richer and more connected. They have lived in Pakistan for a long time and have earned more money. It is easier for them to falsify their documents. The Daris feel excluded from these networks. These groups fight among themselves but if one of them has a conflict with other nationalities, then they will all fight the other group and support each other”

Staff member

Some staff members wondered whether the intensity of the violence expressed by the Afghans might be linked to cultural factors. While these might be relevant, it is important to avoid stereotyping on the basis of culture or nationality. As staff members working in the centres said:

“ Some Afghans like to fight, and hurt each other. They challenge each other and test their resilience to pain. Their games are brutal, it is cultural. But they are games We should also avoid pointing at Afghans in general: they are all different and come from different backgrounds.”

Two staff members

“ We had all kinds of violence in the centres during the crisis but it was our fault: we did not welcome them well. There were far too many people coming at once, with a large number of Afghans. We weren't ready and we couldn't provide them with good support.”

Staff member

Many staff members working with the UASC put a lot of energy and passion into their work. It also emerged that having staff members who were themselves immigrants, had travelled a lot, and/or spoke foreign languages was helpful.

“ Our Persian-speaking staff member is amazing with the children. They call her auntie.”

Staff member

“ Our Persian-speaking staff member was under so much pressure when all the Afghans arrived.”

Staff member

“ In relation to the sanctions, it would be good to share best practices – also with other countries. It is also positive to receive training – not only for social workers and educators but all staff (kitchen staff, guards etc.). Everyone should get training on conflict prevention, conflict management and intercultural relations.”

Staff member

“ In the past, we had small conflicts between a few individuals. Those were resolved by the residents themselves. There was no issue of “communitarism” [i.e. that the whole community takes up the fight rather than individuals]. But then we had large groups; Chechens, Guineans, Afghans ... so many all at once. It was difficult to get to know them at a personal level. Then, there were big fights, linked to ethnic background.”

Staff member

Staff explained that since the numbers of Afghans had reduced and the Afghan community had been distributed more evenly amongst centres,¹⁹ there had not been any major acts of violence. Rather the level of violence has decreased to periodic tensions and small-scale fighting between two individuals. It seems that there is nevertheless a legacy of violence: some staff members expressed weariness at the violence and the fact that there is a repeated pattern to it. Some participants said they felt discriminated as Afghans due to the past violence.

In general, the staff interviewed said they remained anxious because of the violence in the past and the fear of potential future fighting. Most staff and participants believed that the violence was caused by what they called a “group effect”, given that the Afghans are the largest community in the centres, which they thought could be a trigger. The staff also said that they had seen acts of violence in the past with other communities that were, at that time, the largest group in the centres. Group pressure and peer pressure may play an important role.

“ Now the centres are calmer because they are less populated and there is a better mix of the different nationalities. The group effect is gone. Before, there were times where we had more than 50 per cent Afghans. We had to split up some of the activity rooms into one for the Afghans and one for the other nationalities. Tension was also decreased by relocating the youngsters and bringing them to the ground floor. That way there could be more social control and they were less isolated. Sometimes changing their location has a tremendous effect. Besides, spreading nationalities over the whole of the Fedasil network has had a positive impact. When there is a large group of the same nationality arrogance increases.”

Staff member

In general, staff nevertheless reported that they felt unprepared to deal with violence and the aftermath violence. In view of the difficulties of their work, it is crucial that staff members working in the centres have the opportunity to raise with the Fedasil management issues of concern to them in their work. They stated that Fedasil had taken some steps to improve the system (by devising sanctions systems and providing training) but felt that more could be done to react to such incidents and put in place a strategy to deal with the triggers of such behaviours.

This is indeed one of the objectives of Fedasil’s 2013 management plan, which refers to the need to implement training including specifically training on the management of aggression in response to violence in the centres.²⁰ The plan also commits to developing an action plan to combat violence within the network of reception centres to prevent all forms of aggression or incidents and, if necessary, to sanction such acts. It commits to the subsequent development of a “stress team” to support staff who have been subject to aggression or caught up in it; to the sharing of knowledge and experience gained in controlling and responding to

¹⁹ See also Fedasil’s 2013 management plan which commits to the elaboration of a structured master plan to ensure an adequate response to medium and longer-term needs, which includes the evolution of a more balanced distribution of collective and individual reception capacities. Fedasil, *Contributions à une politique globale en matière de migration*, p. 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

aggression with similar organizations (such as the Red Cross, penal institutions, social service providers); and to the establishment of a network to share knowledge and practice in responding to incidents of aggression.²¹

TO REDUCE THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AND IMPROVE THE RESPONSE TO INCIDENTS, UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- When allocating new arrivals to a reception centre, the placing of large groups of the same nationality in one centre could be avoided, so that no one group is dominant in a centre and the centres can thereby reduce any “group effect” and the tendency for groups to make decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclination of individual members;
- While discussions with staff showed that some had received training in crowd management, it would be also useful to provide training to all staff including porters, receptionists, cooks, in conflict resolution and mediation skills, so that they are better able to prevent conflicts arising and mediate to diffuse them if necessary;
- The exchange of information and best practices among reception centres staff, including on violence and conflict resolution which could potentially help reduce staff stress levels, should continue to be promoted;
- Fedasil could consider providing psycho-educational programmes on active coping skills for staff to empower them to manage stress and avoid burnout;
- Reception centres could hold regular facilitated group discussions among residents (as also recommended in the section Stress linked to life in Belgium), to allow more dialogue among asylum-seekers, health professionals and staff, to identify sources of frustration, misunderstanding, exhaustion and past and present stress, to help alleviate internal and group tensions, spot potential problems sooner, address them more efficiently and help decrease the incidence of violence.

5.3 THE SYSTEM OF TRANSFERS AMONG RECEPTION CENTRES

The Belgian reception system permits the transfer of individual asylum-seekers from one centre to another for a variety of reasons. They can be transferred for disciplinary reasons or for protective reasons (e.g. because they were the target of fighting), as well as for practical reasons (especially during the reception crisis where there was not enough reception capacity), because a centre was closed, or because the person had moved to a different stage of the asylum procedure.

“ I am tired of all the centres. I am tired of the transfers. Every time you need to adapt. When I get to know the people I have to change centres again. The place might be safe but I don't feel safe. It is not the problem of young Afghans fighting a lot here, but their heads are full of problems and they are hurt. That is why they fight. They never see love in their lives. They are only fighting and are uneducated. They do not learn about respect. Here it is another country with different food, habits, and culture. Also it is dangerous and difficult for them when they get a negative decision. They left everything; they accepted many bad things on the way. And once they get a negative decision, there is no longer a solution. Sometimes they become depressed, sometimes violent. They never saw love, respect, care and safety. From the youngsters only 20 per cent have received any education or love and support. The others did not see this. If you are uneducated – there is no difference between good and bad.”

Afghan woman

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

“ We have changed centres so often. Each time, we had to take all our bags with us. Once, we got lost in the station. Someone started shouting at us that we couldn’t stay where we were. We tried to explain we were lost but only my teenage son speaks a bit of Dutch. The people around us all spoke French. Someone called the police. The children were crying. Another time, my husband and I were arrested by the police. Our children came back from school to the centre to hear that we had been arrested. We spent a night in a cell. The children were terrified, especially since my husband who had already been arrested in Belgrade for three months and had been beaten up. The Belgian police released us in the morning and we were transferred again. I don’t understand why they keep messing up our lives.”

Afghan woman

In addition, when a violent incident occurs a transfer can also take place as a measure of last resort and as a way of controlling and limiting violence. Both the perpetrator and the victim can be transferred in order to avoid further retaliation and escalation of violence. This is often felt as being unjust and participants felt that the system of transfers is not a solution in itself.

“ There was fighting between Albanians and Afghans. For my safety I was transferred here. Not because I was involved. This transfer was not good for me because I had friends in Brussels and I went to school there. I had to accept this transfer even if I did not want it. I had no choice. It was a transfer on the streets. The fighting was stupid. Some Afghans were working in the kitchen. They were giving one ice cream per person. The Albanian girls wanted to have more than one. The Afghans were not allowed to give one extra. The girls then claimed that they did not get anything. The Albanian men fought and all the Afghans fought back.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

“ The guys who were really involved in the fighting should go to jail or something. Now they are just being transferred. This is no punishment. This transfer system creates impunity. I got the same punishment as somebody who was involved. I got transferred for my own safety without doing anything, so as a reaction to this, some people would actually do something rather than standing by.”

Young Afghan man

“ Then, some of us are transferred for our own safety even if we didn’t participate to the fighting!”

Young Afghan man

Some of the UASC had been transferred several times due to minor acts of destruction. They were generally reluctant to explain what kind of violent act they had exactly done. Staff explained that they would know what had happened in the previous centres; some reported they would rather never speak of the past to give the children a chance to redeem themselves. Some of the staff attributed the lack of discipline and minor acts of violence or destruction to the fact that UASC were immature and going through puberty at the same time as adapting to a new country. It appeared they were more concerned about violence by the 18 to 30-year-old group. Transfers are a cause for concern and in the views of some interviewees they do not appear to solve the issue.

“ Transfers do not help because the problem is in our heads and this does not change with a transfer.”

Unaccompanied Afghan boy

It appeared that the transfers are extremely stressful for the UASC: they have often travelled in groups with other youths. They are used to each other’s company and explained it was difficult for them to trust adults. It became clear that they attempted to create communities with group leaders, both in the course of their flight and in the country of asylum. The group could be made up of as few as three individuals up or up



to 15 youngsters. They explained that when one member of the group was removed from the country or transferred to another centre, they experienced this as an emotional loss. The UASC also explained they were tired of constantly moving between centres. Some explained that they would even provoke a violent incident in order to be transferred and to be able to regroup with UASC they had travelled with or had met later in the centres.

Other UASC mentioned that transfers were used to gain influence within a group. Somebody who had been transferred several times acquired greater kudos with other UASC and thus more power in a group.

“ Asylum-seekers know about the fighting in the other centres. They know who was involved. We always call the police as soon as five or six people are involved in a fight. Sometimes, the police have a calming effect; sometimes, it further agitates them and Afghans then start to fight the police. It really depends on the attitude of the police. Only if the situation is really serious do we transfer. We prepare the luggage and the person is transferred when they return from the police station. We do not think that this policy of transfers is positive. It is not perceived as a sanction. Sometimes it is more effective to exclude somebody from the reception network. Or it would be better to create a separate centre for the difficult cases. With a transfer, there is no room for reform. We see time-out in another location as something more positive and constructive, after which the person comes back to the same centre.”

Staff member

Some of the staff seemed to approach transfers as being merely a part of the system; others were critical of them. They had the feeling they were failing the UASC, and that the problem was only removed and sent away without addressing its causes. As a result, a handful of staff members tried to avoid transferring UASC.

“ Transfers should be avoided at all costs. They are in a way a failure for the resident and for us. This is why we have a range of sanctions.”

Staff member

“ The transfer system demonstrates a lack of vision.”

Staff member

“ Sometimes we know we are not the solution for them and we know they will be leaving soon and be transferred again.”

Staff member

In this context, it should be noted that the Recast Reception Conditions Directive provides in Article 18(6) that “Member States shall ensure that transfers of applicants from one housing facility to another take place only when necessary. Member States shall provide for the possibility for applicants to inform their legal advisers or counsellors of the transfer and of their new address.”

TO IMPROVE THE OPERATION OF SANCTIONS IMPOSED FOR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR AND THE SYSTEM OF TRANSFERS BETWEEN CENTRES UNHCR RECOMMENDS THAT:

- The scale of sanctions that are applied for different types of disruptive behaviour could be further reviewed and harmonized to ensure uniformity of practice in different centres and the gradual and incremental use of sanctions, in which transfers are only used as one of the last resorts;
- When considering to transfer residents, reception centres should take into account the fact that transfers significantly disrupt the life of the individual, especially children, including as regards their education and social contacts and do not necessarily contribute to improved behaviour and take up time and resources;
- Reception centres should ensure that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration²² when considering whether or not to transfer disruptive children to another centre, and they should take into account Article 24(2) of the recast Reception Conditions Directive which stipulates that “[c]hanges of residence of unaccompanied minors shall be limited to a minimum”;
- Fedasil should further investigate measures to reward good behaviour rather than sanction bad behaviour; Fedasil could also seek the views of professionals dealing with youth and group/gang phenomena who could also train staff members and assist in developing sequential solutions; and
- Special attention should be paid to asylum-seekers who have been the target/victims of violence, who should receive specific counselling to help them deal with the incident, as it is important they do not feel they are being punished along with the instigators of the violence.

²² See Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 3; Recast Reception Conditions Directive, Article 22(1). See also *Safe and Sound, what States can do to ensure respect for the best interests of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe*, UNHCR-UNICEF, October 2014, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5423da264.html>.



6. CONCLUSIONS

The discussions and interviews carried out in the course of this “snapshot” participatory assessment have helped shed light on the situation of Afghan asylum-seekers living in collective reception centres in Belgium. They have identified a range of stresses and challenges they face that relate both to their sometimes traumatic experiences before arriving in Belgium and after that to the uncertainty of their situation, their limited understanding of the asylum procedure, and their unfulfilled expectations. Many staff and participants believed that the influence of the “group effect” resulting from the accommodation of large numbers of Afghans in the same reception centre had led to group and peer pressure, influencing interaction between groups and contributing to triggering violence.

The consultations indicate that the Afghans’ past experience and trauma, their various current frustrations and the impact of being accommodated in large national groups in the centres have been among the factors contributing to individual or collective acts of destruction or physical violence in the centres. It is hoped that the various different issues identified in this report can increase awareness of these factors and thereby help identify strategies to tackle the challenges posed more effectively.

Through this snapshot, UNHCR wishes to highlight the difficult work of Fedasil staff and hopes that the recommendations made will be helpful to give them the support they deserve.

