

WAITING IS NOT AN OPTION.

A Call for Repatriation of Foreign Citizens in Northeast Syria. Repatriate the Children Sweden calls for immediate action for governments to repatriate all their citizens as one measure to protect children and other citizens — in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere — from being victims of war. Additionally, Repatriate the Children Sweden calls for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to release all detainees requested by governments who guarantee to receive them. *September 2, 2021*

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Abstract

Repatriate the Children Sweden calls for immediate action for governments to repatriate all their citizens as one measure to protect children and other citizens - in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere - from being victims of war. Additionally, *Repatriate the Children Sweden* calls for the *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* to release all detainees requested by governments who guarantee to receive them.

In Northeast Syria (NES), citizens with affiliation to ISIS, from at least 57 countries, are being held in camps, detention centers, and prisons, administered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). A majority of the some 72 000 detainees are children. While the AANES has long appealed for governments worldwide to bring their citizens back, governments are lingering to repatriate, leaving their citizens and the AANES in what is described as an unsustainable situation.

Already there are children who have died in, or been kidnapped from, the camps. For the children remaining, so far, the window for repatriating is still open, but soon it may be too late.

In May 2021, the children's rights organisation *Repatriate the Children Sweden* sent a delegation to NES to better understand the conditions to solve this predicament. The aim of this report is to share findings from the trip in order to contribute to a deeper understanding and to illustrate the urgency of the matter through a children's rights and child protection perspective.

The findings in this report are followed with recommendations where it is suggested that humanitarian principles, due process and a perspective of security must be combined for a holistic solution.

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Introduction

In the beginning of 2019, seven small Swedish children were left orphaned in Syria after their parents joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)¹ and were killed in the end battles of the so-called² caliphate. Their grandfather, Patricio Galvéz, had for years been trying to convince his daughter to return to Sweden with her children without any success. He could no longer help his daughter who was eventually killed in an airstrike in Eastern Syria, but he promised himself he would do anything to rescue his grandchildren.

He turned to all relevant Swedish authorities, ministries and non-governmental organisations for help, but no one could offer the assistance he needed for his mission. With an escalating sense of urgency, Galvéz decided to travel to Northeast Syria (NES) himself to search for these vulnerable children. He found them alive, but badly malnourished and traumatized, and living in the Syrian Democratic Forces³ (SDF) run al-Hol camp. The camp management told Galvéz that the children were at risk of dying if they remained in the camp much longer. The youngest of the seven, little Mohammed, was at that time 1.5 years old but weighed less than three kilos. However, the Kurd-led self-administration could not simply release the children. Rather, they required that the Swedish government formally request the children and guarantee repatriation.

After a massive campaign from the children's grandfather and huge media pressure, in May 2019 the Swedish government chose to give their approval for repatriation of the seven siblings, and Galvéz was able to bring them to safety and a new life in Sweden. At the same time, the Swedish government relinquished their legal and moral responsibility to the other Swedish children in the camp who to this day remain in dire conditions described as the equivalent to torture⁴.

1 Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, is one term to name the terrorist group and refers to a direct translation of one of the names the terrorist group used for themselves: 'al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham.' Other abbreviations that are being used for the terrorist group are ISIL, IS or Daesh (or Da'ish).

2 In June 2014, ISIS' leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria, a self-proclaimed caliphate with no official recognition from any governments.

3 The Syrian Democratic Forces, formed in 2015, is a US-backed, Kurd-led military alliance composed of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian/Syriac, Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen forces. The SDF are combating ISIS in NES, supported by the Global Coalition against Daesh.
www.sdf-press.com/en/

In February 2021, a number of the world's leading independent Human Rights experts who compose the UN Human Rights Council sent a letter⁵ to 57 governments worldwide to express their serious concerns regarding violations of international law by countries who are waiving their responsibility for their citizens held in NES. The Human Rights experts emphasized the urgent need for justice, truth, and reparation for all of the victims of the very serious violations that have occurred in the region and urged all governments to immediately repatriate their citizens.

Government after government have responded to the criticism by denying their ability to have any impact on the situation and showing little interest in dealing with their citizens. While Sweden rejects the assertion that it has jurisdiction over its nationals in NES, Germany is blaming the AANES for not releasing adults, France is responding that they have no presence in the camps, and other nations find similar excuses to delay repatriation.

These are all resourceful countries that could be part of solving the dilemma. They are responsible not only to their own citizens, but also as members of the military Global Coalition against Daesh⁶ who must be committed to global peace and security.

The U.S. Special Envoy for the Global Coalition, John Godfrey, recently expressed that “the victory over the jihadists on the battlefield would be squandered if western nations did not take responsibility for repatriating and, if need be, prosecuting, their citizens who remain in the camps⁷.” It would be a particular tragedy given the majority of the citizens from these 57 nations are children, most of them below the age of 12.

Top U.N. officials including Secretary-General António Guterres, Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, and the UN counterterrorism chief Vladimir Voronkov, “have repeatedly called on member States to expedite repatriating their nationals for rehabilitation, reintegration, and, as warranted, prosecution⁸.”

The aim of this report is to contribute to a deeper understanding and to illustrate the urgency of the matter through a children's rights and child protection perspective. The atrocities carried out by ISIS need to be countered not only by military actions but also by humanitarian interventions. Human rights, peace and security are interlinked. Children's rights apply to all children, regardless of their family setting. Repatriate the Children⁹ (RTC Sweden) calls for immediate action from governments to repatriate their citizens in NES as one measure to protect children and their

4 www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Europes-guantanamo-THE_REPORT.pdf

5 www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26730&LangID=E

See Appendix 1

6 The US-led Global Coalition against Daesh is a military alliance, formed in 2014, composed of 83 members, most of them European Union and UN member states. Together, the Global Coalition is committed to degrading and ultimately defeating Daesh.

www.theglobalcoalition.org/en/mission

7 www.thetimes.co.uk/article/joe-biden-urges-western-allies-to-bring-back-isis-families-held-in-syria-sng77cngg

8 www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/17/foreign-isis-suspects-families-why-single-r-word-matters-un

www.documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/024/00/PDF/N2102400.pdf?OpenElement

www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25986&LangID=E



Children in Roj Camp, NES ©RTC Sweden

families - in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere - from being victims of war.

As RTC Sweden are acting from Sweden and were part of the repatriation process of seven Swedish children, this report has a Swedish perspective and uses Sweden as an example. However, Sweden is only one out of 57 states that is being addressed by the findings and messages of this report.

9 Repatriate the Children Sweden is a children's rights organisation, founded by Patricio Galv  z, Gorki Glaser-M  ller and Beatrice Eriksson in 2020. Together with RTC Denmark and RTC USA, RTC Sweden aims to have a supportive, advisory and informative function for relatives of children, politicians and decision-makers, authorities, non-profit organizations and the media in the issue of children detained in NES. repatriatethechildren.org

ISIS Recruitment of Children from Camps:

Fertile Soil for Radicalization

While ISIS has lost control of all previously held territory in Iraq and Syria, there is reason to believe the group is not yet defeated. From January to August 2021, ISIS has claimed 680 attacks in Iraq and Syria.¹¹

The number of Swedish children in the camps have ranged from an estimated (but unconfirmed) 80 in 2019 to a confirmed 22 in 2021. It begs the question what happened to the children? Since the Swedish government was not part in repatriation, this discrepancy in numbers needs an explanation and all children must be accounted for. We know that during this period there was a window of opportunity for repatriation. What we don't know is if Swedish children have died in the camps, been smuggled out of the camps, are hidden from authorities or been kidnapped during their detention.

These fears are not unfounded. In March 2021, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service, PET, confirmed reported¹² that at least 30 children from the SDF controlled camps in NES have been kidnapped by ISIS militants to be trained to potentially commit terrorist attacks in their home countries. In July 2021, the U.S. Defense Department's Inspector General in a quarterly report prepared with counterparts at the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development on the U.S. and allied operations in Syria and Iraq, cited U.S. military intelligence that **"ISIS has given priority to smuggling boys out of these camps to training locations in the Syrian desert"** and warned that these camps have been a hotbed for ISIS recruitment and radicalization¹³.

The position of the Swedish government is that the children shall be repatriated "when and if possible" but their parents shall not be given any assistance to come back home. Since the seven Swedish siblings were brought home in 2019, at least 28 countries have

¹¹ Statistics according to analyst Aaron Y. Zelin at the Washington Institute.

<https://twitter.com/azelin/status/1433049749855391745?s=20>

¹² www.ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/dansk-politik/danske-boern-i-fare-islamisk-stat-har-udset-sig-350-boern/8505324

¹³ www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2716943/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/

¹⁴ Belgium, France and Sweden are among the European countries with the highest recorded number of men and women joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq. These countries have, together with most of the other 27 European Union member states and countries such as Australia and Canada, been reluctant to take action for repatriation. However, Belgium, along with Finland and Denmark have recently stated that they will repatriate children and women. Finland and Belgium have already begun with these processes on a case to case basis. Countries such as Russia, Uzbekistan and Kosovo have repatriated ↓



Children in Roj Camp, NES ©RTC Sweden

repatriated, or otherwise helped bring home, citizens (however, most countries that have repatriated have only brought a few of their citizens back¹⁴), showing that it is possible and that the window for repatriation has been open for more than two years already. Fionnuala Ni Aolain, the UN *Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism*¹⁵, confirms that all these 57 states, including Sweden, are in a position to return their nationals¹⁶.

Even though governments already have lost their chance to protect a number of their children - the ones who have already died, been kidnapped or disappeared, there are children that governments still can rescue, but they are lingering.

a big number of their children and women. North Macedonia and the USA have also repatriated few of their male citizens. Albania announced in July when they repatriated 14 children and 5 women that they are "working on repatriating all of its citizens."

www.justsecurity.org/76899/foreign-isis-suspects-families-why-a-single-word-matters-at-the-un/

www.npsyria.com/en/62938/

15 Independent UN Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Human Rights Council. They are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent

from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

16 www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/fn-toppens-kritik-sverige-foljer-international-lag

Political Fear of Repatriation

Could Be Unfounded and Deepens the Crisis for Relatives of Children and Citizens in Camps and Prisons.

Together with *RTC Denmark*¹⁷ and *RTC USA*, *RTC Sweden* has initiated an informal international network for repatriation with advocacy groups where there has been representation from around 15 different countries in 5 continents. The different groups, most of them based on family members of detainees, have been trying to understand why citizens are being held in unlawful detention without any action from their governments to protect their rights and save their lives. The members of these groups stand with the same devastation and frustration and many express how they see that neither authorities nor politicians seem to take any responsibility to find a solution for this urgent issue. In this crisis situation, the families affected describe how the lack of transparency and information is causing them harm and frustration.

Clearly the issue has been politicized in the countries that have their citizens detained. As Thomas Renard, a senior research fellow at the *Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations* in Belgium, has concluded that for some European leaders repatriation would be tantamount to “political suicide.”¹⁸ **However, to safeguard the fundamental rights of children, it needs to be contested that politicians are choosing and managing to prioritize strategic calculation over legal frameworks.**

Finland has taken a unique position in the matter which has not caused political fallout, but rather shown that governments can make difficult decisions without losing political prestige.¹⁹ Finland’s Special Envoy, Jussi Tanner, states that Finnish authorities, regardless of a political impact, are obligated to bring Finnish children (which means to also bring their caretakers) home. This obligation, to let the best interest of the child guide all decisions regarding all children is paramount and applies not only to Finland but to all signatories of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Denmark is another example that recently has followed Finland’s policy of announcing

¹⁷ repatriatethechildren.dk

¹⁸ www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130_final.pdf?type=pdf

¹⁹ www.um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/suomi-kotiutti-kaksi-lastaja-aidin-syyriasta

repatriation of citizens. Among the European governments, the Danish one have been one of the most reluctant to repatriate, long claiming that Danish citizens who joined ISIS have turned their backs on Denmark and are no longer welcome to return²⁰. However, in May 2021, the Danish government made a 180 degree turn, and announced they are repatriating women and children of Danish citizenship. Similarly, this announcement has not seemed to cause political setbacks or turmoil for the Danish government.

In these cases, the way these governments communicated to the public (i.e. through the existing legal frameworks) seems to have impacted the way repatriation was perceived. Political repercussions are not a given, fear of repatriation may be unfounded or exaggerated.

The vulnerable and powerless position of the extended families, as well as the fear of political fallout from bringing citizens back to their home countries, is depicted in the documentary *Children of the Enemy*.²¹ Patricio Galvéz, describes his situation after being reached by the news of his daughter being killed and his grandchildren left orphaned:

— I've contacted the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs thousands of times but they tell me they cannot help, that it is complicated. I believe it is because of their internal policy, they don't think it's their responsibility to help people who joined ISIS. But it wasn't the children who joined, it was their parents.

The human rights lawyer, and co-founder of the legal action non-governmental organisation *Reprieve*²², Clive Stafford Smith, is advising Patricio Galvéz on how to rescue his orphaned grandchildren whilst the politicians are passive in the matter:

— Politicians are cowards, and at the moment they just don't want to do anything. What you've got to show is that it is worse for them to do nothing, than it is for them to get the kids out. The only way to do that is to show that these little children are going to die. Whenever your government comes up with a pretext for not doing the right thing, we need to tell them what to do and publicize it so they have to do it. It's a game and you are shifting the pieces around, but you can't just sit and wait for them to act.

Stafford Smith, who has been involved in a number of repatriation efforts, believes that governments sooner or later must take a proactive stance towards the issue and facilitate repatriation. He argues that by leaving these women and children

20 www.politiken.dk/indland/art8122331/Mette-Frederiksen-vil-stadig-ikke-hente-danske-børn-hjem-fra-fangelejr
Translation from Danish by the author of this report.

21 www.cinenicfilm.se/children-of-the-enemy/

The documentary 'Children of the Enemy' (2021) is directed by Gorki-Glaser Müller, one of the co-founders of Repatriate the Children Sweden.

22 www.reprieve.org/uk/

in the camps, the “Europeans are forcing the [AANES] to establish a European Guantánamo in Northeast Syria, which is illegal, as Europeans have long said when the Americans were doing it.”²³ He assures Galvez that “we’re going to win this in the end because the government’s position is so profoundly wrong”²⁴.

Extended family members of children in the camps, from countries all over the world, have reached out to RTC Sweden desperately asking for help and advice, asking “How did Patricio Galvéz manage? What can we do to get our children and grandchildren home?”

Most of the extended family members contacting RTC Sweden describe themselves to be in just as powerless a situation as what Galvéz experienced. One grandmother of children in the camps tells us that the responsible officials have been declining her calls and haven’t returned her emails where she appeals for consular help and information. One day she even traveled to the capital to sit outside of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to wait to meet with just anyone at the ministry, anyone at all, to listen to her.

Another extended family member states:

— Mental illness has increased significantly among us families (...). The information I get [from the camps] crushes me, the only way to try to keep functioning is by suppressing it until something can be done about it. But what can we do? We, as relatives, need support. No one of us has been contacted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or any government agency, health center, etc. No one has reached out. Time has proven there is no help for us.”²⁵

Yet another extended family member describes how he noticed how his children were changing and becoming radicalized (back when they were still Sweden), and that he and the children’s mother felt powerless not to be able to have any impact on the indoctrination that occurred. They contacted the police and the security service to report their own children, appealing for help from the authorities to prevent the children from traveling to Syria, but authorities responded: “There is nothing we can do about it”²⁶. After years of struggle, worries, grief, anger and stigma, this grandfather of children in the camps describes how exhausted he is: **“You can see my body, physically I am still here. But that is all that remains of me, an empty shell.”**

With the absence of political action, time continues to pass and while children and families in the camps, detention centers and prisons, as well as their extended family members in their home countries, are suffering under difficult conditions.

23 Clive Stafford Smith is referring to Guantánamo Bay, which has been described as “a symbol of torture, rendition and indefinite detention without charge or trial”

www.amnesty.org.uk/guantanamo-bay-human-rights

24 www.syriadirect.org/is-the-eu-obligated-to-repatriate-its-children-from-northeast-syria/

25 From a text message conversation with an extended family member. Translated from Swedish by the author of this report.

26 The children had turned 18 years old, and at the time, it was not illegal for a Swedish citizen to travel to Syria or to join ISIS or similar groups.

The Challenge of Procedural Confusion:

“All They Need to Do Is to Request Them”

In May 2021, *RTC Sweden* decided to send a delegation to NES to better understand the conditions to solve this predicament. The delegation were welcomed by high ranking decision-makers within the AANES and in discussions they asserted that the AANES are not posing any obstacles to repatriation.

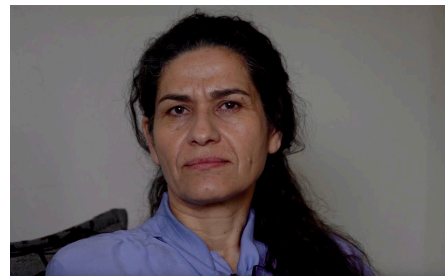
Elham Ahmad, the President of the *Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council* (SDC), the political wing of the SDF, describes how the fight against ISIS was not only on behalf of the Kurdish population but of the entire world and that the current situation is unsustainable. Ahmad states:

— The ISIS fighters came from different countries. As a consequence of this war, we are holding a huge number of women, children and many fighters. It is a heavy burden for us to hold thousands of those people, both in the prisons and the camps. It needs a huge capacity for our security forces to keep these camps and prisons secure and we cannot continue for a long term with this low capacity as time passes.²⁷

In addition to many thousands of Syrian children, there are more than 22,000 foreign children who languish in camps and prisons²⁸. According to Ahmad, there are mothers who are raising their children with radical ideas and mindset in the camps, and the self-administration does not have the capacity to educate them, to separate them, or to feed them. The neglect of the countries that are not taking responsibility for their citizens will result in a new generation of ISIS in these camps, Ahmad says, while explaining the many difficulties the self-administration is facing:

27 All quotes and information from Elham Ahmad presented in this report is from an interview with Elham Ahmad in Qamishlo, NES, 18th of May, 2021. The quotes have been translated from Kurdish by a local translator.

28 www.news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085982



↑ ELHAM AHMAD
President of the Executive
Committee of the Syrian
Democratic Council, NES
©RTC Sweden

– Tens of times we have been appealing to the countries to repatriate their women and children. But still, they won't take responsibility. We have not received any answers for our appeals and this is a huge threat. Attempts to kidnap families and children from the camps are still ongoing.

29 www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx

30 [www.twitter.com/JussiTanner/status/1416072115166617613?s=20](https://twitter.com/JussiTanner/status/1416072115166617613?s=20)

31 www.facebook.com/195621950482248/posts/4607711245939941/?d=n

As a representative for the AANES, Ahmad says they are seeking a solution for this situation with the countries that have citizens in NES. At the same time, she is criticizing foreign governments for only focusing on children, while there needs to be a solution regarding *all* foreign citizens. With reference to the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*²⁹, the self-administration policy is clear to not separate children from their caretakers.

Elham Ahmad asserts that governments that want to repatriate their children and women need only need to request them, and the AANES would unconditionally hand them over. However, it is not clear why repatriation efforts are lingering when they have been announced by foreign governments and if it is as a simple procedure as the AANES representatives are claiming. When Finland, in July 2021, repatriated a woman and her two children, Special Envoy Jussi Tanner, claimed that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland first requested to repatriate the same family already in September 2020³⁰. Denmark announced repatriation in May 2021, and three months later the decision is still not yet operationalized. A Danish Member of the Parliament, Rosa Lund, says the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs are doing “everything they can” to get the Danish citizens home, but implies that the AANES need to be negotiated with³¹.

Despite the AANES claims that repatriation is a simple process, there is a widespread perception that the AANES sets requirements or obstacles for repatriation. Lack of transparency and conflicting reports generates confusion, delay in process for repatriation and mistrust of both foreign governments' and AANES intentions and capacity. Despite their stated righteous intentions, it could be possible that the AANES is playing politics with these detainees by using the process as leverage for establishing international relations and its own legitimacy as a potential future state. However, 28 out of 57 countries have successfully repatriated, or otherwise helped bring home, a few or many of their citizens already, in coordination with the AANES.

False Hopes for Local Trials

The AANES long appealed to foreign governments to repatriate their citizens. In 2020 as the appeal had generated little or no response and the situation was becoming untenable the AANES announced, as an alternative, that they wanted to try foreign detainees in local courts. Also this initiative has been met with little substantive support. As Ahmed explained it to RTC Sweden, the AANES sees no likelihood for these juridical processes to take place in NES:

— The countries need to participate in these courts and adopt the sentences of these courts, but still, [the countries of citizenship of foreigners] have not approved of establishing such courts. Without this approval, it will be difficult to go on with these trials.

Ahmad describes how the AANES not only would need governments to recognize these processes, but also to support the courts by sending experts, judges, and jurists to be involved in these trials as observers and confirm the sentences. To make that happen, it wouldn't be enough for just a few states to approve, but all countries would need to collaborate to give the courts legitimacy and to ensure implementation of the court's decisions. **So far, none of the almost 60 states that have citizens in the SDF detention have approved of such collaboration, hence there are no current plans for foreign detainees to be tried in NES.**

In the light of what Ahmad is describing, the Swedish government's arguments, on why they cannot act for safeguarding the protection of children by bringing them to Sweden, must be questioned. While the Swedish foreign minister, Ann Linde, is claiming that it is of "highest priority" for the Swedish government to solve this issue, she is referring to the ambitions of AANES to prosecute foreign citizens in local

courts (including being affiliated with ISIS) as one reason why it is complicated for the Swedish government to act³². When listening to the high-ranked decision maker, Elham Ahmad, describing that there are no conditions for trials regarding foreign citizens in NES, the argument from the Swedish government seems inaccurate. Ann Linde states in the Swedish parliament in April 2021 that “children shall not have to remain in such camps.” Still, the Swedish government has not declared when they shall bring them home. If the government would have the ambition to do whatever it takes to safeguard the Swedish children’s rights and welfare, one first step could be to publicly declare what efforts are being done to bring them home. That would be one way of building trust and creating conditions for a good reception of the children and their caretakers. The stance of the Swedish government appears to demonstrate a lack of political will, rather than a lack of opportunity to repatriate their citizens. If the Swedish government are not willing to repatriate adults, a risk assessment must be done and publicly shared on the possible consequences of letting citizens remain in unlawful detention under conditions that has been described to equal torture. Non-action from governments side risks to feed the ISIS narrative and benefit ISIS in terms of re-recruitment.

³² www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/de-svenska-barnen-i-nordost-syrien_H810596

The quote has been translated from Swedish by the author of this report.

“Do We Need to Feed our Killers?”

During the *RTC Sweden* visit to NES, representatives became more viscerally aware of the effect of war on the region. With around 11,000 casualties and more than 25,000 injured soldiers of the Kurd-led military SDF, fighting ISIS on the ground, it is difficult to find anyone who has not lost a family member or friend due to this war.

Hozan,³³ a humanitarian worker in Qamishlo³⁴, told *RTC Sweden* that it is unbelievable how the perpetrators of these crimes against his people are being left to remain with their victims and how he cannot understand how the international community are turning their backs on the people who played a huge role in recapturing the lands ISIS called their caliphate. He explained:

– Everything here is destroyed (...) People here blame the countries who don’t care about their detainees; their children, their women (...) Already, we are hardly feeding our kids and our families. So do we need to feed our killers as well?³⁵

Samra, a local journalist in Qamishlo, criticized what she sees as neglect from countries worldwide. She has reported on ISIS atrocities for years and describes how the threat from ISIS still exists. In eastern rural Deir ez-Zor³⁶ and Shaddadi³⁷ suburbs and different towns of NES, there are daily assassinations and terrorist attacks, she says, but there are also ISIS attacks inside the camps. According to a statement issued by the *Asayish*³⁸, ISIS cells in the al-Hol camp killed 47 people during the first quarter of 2021 alone, including children³⁹.

— As we see inside the camps, especially al-Hol camp, there are many murders and stabbing cases (...) ISIS *hisbah*⁴⁰ offices have been established by those radical women who still have the radical ideas of ISIS.⁴¹

33 Not his real name. All names with interviewees in this report, except for the officials, have been exchanged to fictitious names.

34 Since most of the interviews and conversations in this town were carried out with Kurdish speaking interviewees, also the Kurdish spelling for the town is being used in this report. The Syrian town is formally spelled in Arabic as al-Qamishli.

35 Interview with Hozan in Qamishlo, NES, 16th of May, 2021.

36 Also spelled Dayr al-Zawr, Deir Ezzor or Deir Al-Zor.

37 Also spelled Al-Shaddadah, al-Shaddadi or Ash Shaddadi.

38 The Asayish are the Kurdish internal security forces and fulfil various security roles that range from police to counterterrorism.

39 www.syrianobserver.com/news/67524/two-sisters-killed-in-the-al-hol-camp.html

40 ISIS’ moral police who are focusing strictly on enforcing Sharia Law ↓

Samra describes the common perception of being part of a people that has sacrificed everything and are now being left behind.

— In the opinion of residents of Northern Syria about those camps and prisons (...) they are insisting that the international community has not offered support enough in comparison to their sacrifices - that rescued the world from the largest terrorist group that has existed in Syria and Iraq.

Hozan and Samra are not the only ones *RTC Sweden* met during ten days in NES who expressed feelings of betrayal by the international community. Most people described both fear and worries of having thousands of foreign citizens affiliated with ISIS as neighbours.

To protect the area and develop the region after all the atrocities, Elham Ahmad, president of the SDC, says that a shared effort with nations worldwide is necessary:

— The self-administration is still under danger and being threatened. So for this part, a clear position must be taken to conduct pressure against any possible aggression. Because the citizens of those countries pose a huge threat.

and recruiting new ISIS members.

41 Interview with Samra in Qamishlo, NES, 17th of May, 2021. The quotes have been translated from Arabic by a local translator.

Repatriation: A Simple Path Forward

Dr. Abdulkarim Omar, the co-chair of the Foreign Relations Commission in NES, describes that the problem of the ISIS mercenaries and their wives and children, either in the prisons or in camps, is a huge problem for the AANES, both from a humanitarian perspective and from a security perspective. Dr Omar points out:

— We have them, but it is not only our problem. It is a problem related to all the international community. **Children are innocent, they are just victims and their countries must take their responsibility. Their existence here will make another generation of terrorists. This generation will be even more dangerous than their fathers. Because these children are growing up in that mindset of terrorism and the mindset of taking revenge.**⁴²

Unlike Elham Ahmad, Dr. Omar is still hoping to manage a collaboration with countries to try some of the foreign women in local courts in NES. He says the crimes they want to investigate are those committed within the Kurdish controlled area, the ones who fought with ISIS and “killed people from our region”. Dr. Omar stated that most of the women held in the camps have not committed crimes. He says:

— Those women who have committed crimes, I guess they are not a large number. [The women and their children] need to get out of the radical atmosphere. Their existence in those camps is dangerous for them, for us, for their countries and for the whole world.

The Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ann Linde, is claiming that the AANES has the ambition to investigate and prosecute citizens, including being affiliated with ISIS, and uses this as an argument to linger repatriation⁴³ Dr. Omar confirms the

42 All quotes and information from Dr. Abdulkarim Omar presented in this report is from an interview with Dr. Abdulkarim Omar in Qamishlo, NES, 20th of May, 2021. The quotes have been translated from Kurdish by a local translator.



↑ DR. ABULKARIM OMAR
Co-chair of the Foreign
Relations Commission of
the AANES ©RTC Sweden

opposite, that AANES will not investigate and prosecute whether foreign citizens in their detention have been affiliated with ISIS. Dr. Omar also states that possible crimes committed by foreign citizens in other parts of Syria and Iraq will not be investigated by the AANES. Regarding the crimes the AANES would want to investigate (those committed within the Kurdish controlled area, the ones who fought with ISIS and “killed people from our region”), Dr. Omar cannot describe how these local trials with international collaboration could occur, without the support needed, as Elham Ahmad already has pointed out. Hence, there are currently no plans for foreign citizens to be tried in NES.

The AANES wants foreign countries to repatriate their children and mothers⁴⁴ to their home countries as soon as possible and will unconditionally hand them over to officials from governments who are requesting them. Dr. Omar’s opinion is that:

– The only way to overcome this challenge is for the European countries to take responsibility and repatriate the women that have not committed crimes, and the children, and to reintegrate them with their societies and rehabilitate them.

In interviews, both Elham Ahmad and Dr. Abdulkarim Omar convey a clear message that the situation in NES is unsustainable and foreign countries need to immediately repatriate their citizens, as well as contributing to peace and security in the region.

This message is also conveyed with written statements from both the AANES and the SDF.⁴⁵

43 In the interpellation debate in the Swedish parliament in April 2021, Ann Linde is claiming that the ambition from AANES side is to investigate, and if possible convict, the women of crimes in local courts, including the crime of being affiliated with ISIS.
www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/de-svenska-barnen-i-nordost-syrien_H810596

44 In our interviews with Elham Ahmad and Dr. Omar they were only describing the procedures for children and women to be handed over to their home countries as simple, however, in July 2021, the SDF General Commander Mazloun Abdi calls for repatriation of “women, children, and ISIS fighters”, which can be interpreted as a change of policy from the AANES side to appeal for repatriation for all citizens, not only children and women.
www.twitter.com/mazlounabdi/status/1409262423673028609?s=21

45 For example:
www.twitter.com/cmoc_sdf/status/135577723638149121?s=21
www.twitter.com/rojavaic/status/1372518844720353282?s=21
www.kar-derve.com/en/2021/06/08/a-meeting-between-representatives-of-the-autonomous-administration-and-representatives-of-several-european-countries-and-the-us-department-of-the-state/

Inside the Roj Camp

After Ain Issa⁴⁶ camp was dissolved during what has been described as “the Turkish invasion of Northeast Syria,”⁴⁷ in October 2019, two major camps remained holding most of the foreign women and children; al-Hol and Roj. During our visit, the RTC Sweden delegation was not permitted to visit al-Hol camp, with the explanation from the local authorities that all Swedish children and women have been moved to Roj camp. Al-Hol Camp hosts some 59.000⁴⁸ detainees and is being described as a humanitarian catastrophe. Malena Rembe, an independent senior security analyst, who visited the al-Hol camp in October 2020, describes the atmosphere in al-Hol to be hostile and miserable. She states:

— The children point with their hands over their throats that we should be beheaded, aim at us with toy weapons and throw stones at us (...) The tents are slanted and have worn tarpaulins as winter insulation and many women wear broken shoes under their black niqabs.⁴⁹



46 Also spelled Ayn Issa

47 www.reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/displacement-and-despair-turkish-invasion-northeast-syria

48 According to the Rojava Information Center, August, 2021, 59,188 individuals remain in al-Hol, including 8,482 third-country nationals.

www.twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1425805667110162438?s=20

www.um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/suomi-kotiutti-kaksi-lasta-ja-aidin-syyriasta

49 www.ui.se/butiken/varldspolitikens-dagsfragor/2021/is-familjernas-oden-fragan-omvarlden-duckar-for/

The quote has been translated from Swedish by the author of this report.

50 www.thetimes.co.uk/article/jihadi-brides-are-widows-now-and-they-want-to-come-home-prjqbq7fr

← Map showing the location of Roj Camp and al-Hol Camp. NES Source: The Times⁵⁰



Children and women in Roj Camp, NES ©RTC Sweden

In Roj camp, the living conditions are considered better than al-Hol, yet it is a crowded, tented camp with approximately 2,600 detainees⁵¹. **The area is surrounded by barbed wire fencing, and armed soldiers monitor from watchtowers to discourage attempts at escape.** The day in May the *RTC Sweden* delegation visited Roj, it was over 40 Celcius degrees. During the visit, a sudden sandstorm struck, destroying several tents. This instance provided a small understanding of the weather conditions faced by camp residents. The overall situation in the camp appeared chaotic and the delegation was only given a short time to visit the camp. The delegation was not able to meet with any Swedish children, but did meet one of the twelve Swedish women detained there, Amina. Amina was detained by SDF and first brought to the al-Hol camp, but was transferred along with her children to Roj camp during the summer of 2020.

For the children in the camp, the few child friendly spaces have been suspended during periods of Covid lockdowns, and there are not many possibilities to create meaningful activities for the children. There has been some education available, for example language and mathematics classes, but since the pandemic broke out the children have not had access

51 Sky News reported in March, 2021, that there are 2,618 people in Roj Camp, made up of 784 families, 684 of whom are foreign families from 30 different counties.

www.news.sky.com/story/creating-the-next-generation-of-jihadists-the-return-of-is-to-syrian-refugee-camps-12252486

www.um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/suomi-kotiutti-kaksi-lasta-ja-aidin-syyriasta



Amina being interviewed by Beatrice Eriksson from RTC Sweden in the administration office at Roj Camp, NES ©RTC Sweden

to classes. The Swedish children are between the age of 2 to 10 years old. Amina says she is trying to teach her children the Swedish letters and to read and to write, but says it is not enough to meet the needs of the children.

52 www.reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/thousands-foreigners-unlawfully-held-ne-syria

— I am glad I've been able to teach my oldest the multiplication tables (...) But I cannot teach her everything. I myself am not a teacher. I do not have the teaching methodology, I do not have books. I only teach her things that I remember myself.

She said it is important for her that her children shall be educated, since that is the only way to have a future. She is afraid her children will not know anything about the outside world, living an isolated life in the camp. Amina wants her children to be able to live a normal life; having access to health and dental care, to feel safe and to have access to child friendly and pro-social activities. "I wish they could have a life", Amina tells us.

The RTC Sweden delegation also asked to meet with Swedish men in prisons in NES but was not permitted. According to Human Rights Watch, The SDF are also holding about 10,000 men as well as at least 700 boys of all nationalities, in "overcrowded, makeshift prisons for ISIS suspects."⁵²

The Parents of the Children

As the *RTC Sweden* delegation did not get a chance to visit SDF run prisons in NES nor to meet with fathers of children, this chapter is focusing on the women in the camp. A number of reports have been published about children and women's living conditions in detention in NES, but it should be emphasized that it is problematic that there is so little knowledge available about the conditions under which men, many of them fathers of children, live. From a child perspective, it is also an aggravating circumstance for the children's recovery not to have information available regarding their parents.

When it comes to the women in the camps, there has been more information available, for example through media reporting and reports published by civil society organisations. However, there are risks of fixed narratives based on few interviews. As the *RTC Sweden* delegation only got to meet with one woman, Amina, in Roj Camp, the reporting of her stories and views cannot be generalised. *RTC Sweden* rejects lumping the women and their situations together.

Amina's perception is that many of the women in the camp show regret and all of the Swedes that she knows of just want to go home and set up a normal and calm life for their children. She is trying to make sense of why they have not yet been repatriated. Amina explains:

— To me, it feels like the main reason why we have not been allowed to come home is that people may be afraid of us, and the first thing I want to say is that they should not be afraid of us. It is us who should be afraid when we are going home. There are many who try to know who we are, and I will be afraid when I go home. There are also the extremists who are against us.

Aminas comment shows that she doesn't identify herself as an extremist or security threat, but rather feels worried that people who are radicalized could be a threat to her and others in her situation. In media reporting as well as in the political discourse, the women who traveled to Iraq and Syria are often categorized and lumped together to be called "*ISIS women*" or "*ISIS brides*", with generalized presumptions that they are all extremists affiliated with ISIS. **A report from Reprieve from April 2021, reveals that a majority of the adult British women detained in Syria "meet the legal definition of trafficking victims**, as they were all subjected to sexual and other forms of exploitation, and were either transported to Syria as children; coerced into travelling to Syria; or kept and moved within Syria against their will"⁵³. There are reasons to believe this does not only apply to British women.

Amina told us that many Swedish women have escaped the camps, smuggling their way out of NES. She described this as a question of socio-economic status and access to people outside of the camps who can send them the money. "Those who remain are those who could not afford to go home," Amina says.

Some reports contend that there is extensive smuggling of women from these camps, where at least 13 Swedish women and their children have been smuggled out. It is reported that money to pay smugglers is usually sent by relatives and that the smuggler networks takes the women and their children on dangerous routes through Northern Syria go to Turkey to be sent from there back their countries of origin⁵⁴. There are also reports that there are hundreds of women in the camps that have gotten married with men they have met online, and that several hundred have been smuggled out of the camps using cash bribes gifted by their new husbands⁵⁵.

53 www.reprieve.org/uk/2021/04/30/most-british-women-and-children-detained-in-north-east-syria-are-trafficking-victims/

54 Reports show it often costs around \$ 15,000. www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/omfattande-utsmuggling-av-is-kvinnor-i-al-hol-lagret

55 According to testimony from 50 women from al-Hol and Kurdish officials, among others, the camp's inhabitants have been sent wire payments totalling upwards of \$500,000.

www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/02/women-isis-syrian-camps-marrying-way-to-freedom

Best Interest of the Child: A Mandate for All Nations

Even though the AANES has been clear that they are not willingly letting children be separated from their mothers to be sent home, Swedish officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (who visited the detained families for the first time in October 2020) have asked the mothers if they would be interested in consenting to send their children home to Sweden without them. Amina told us that she and the Swedish women she is in contact with in the camp have considered this, but since there is no guarantee that the children will be placed with relatives, the women are worried they might never see their children again. **Amina says she has explained to her two oldest children that there is a possibility for them to get out of the camp but they refuse to be separated from their mother.** She said her children became sad thinking of leaving without her and said they cannot leave their mother and younger siblings; they are already grieving the loss of their father.

— If the Swedish government will make the decision to take all the children, then I will not resist, but then my children will know that it is the government's decision. It is not me who has sent them away against their will. Then they will not hate me in the future. They will know that I had no choice.

Amina is describing a dilemma. She wants the best for her children, and for her that means for them to be brought to Sweden along with her, but as this option has not been viable, she and the other Swedish women find themselves in a situation where they have few options to meet the best interest of their child. When officials of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs offer mothers to consent for their children to be repatriated without them, it is difficult to know how to assess the authenticity of such consent when it comes from mothers who are living under detention and do not have sufficient information to be able to make an informed decision.

56 Amina is aware that the child protection unit at the Social Services in Sweden will investigate the best interest of the child upon arrival to Sweden, and that there are other mothers who have returned, who have lost custody over their children and had their children placed in foster care.



Children in Roj Camp, NES ©RTC Sweden

There are many civil society organisations advocating to the 57 governments with citizens in detention in NES not to lower the bar for children's rights by making exceptions from conventions that have been ratified. In a Human Rights Watch appeal from May 2021, it is stated:

57 www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/26/nordic-countries-repatriate-nationals-northeast-syria

Repatriating children by separating them from their mothers without individual, expert assessments of whether such separation is in the child's best interest flouts the right to family unity, a pillar of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the right to family life under the European Convention on Human Rights.⁵⁷

Although the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not called for women to leave their children, it can be viewed as problematic that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are involving themselves in the issue of separation between children and mothers. For the Swedish children, it would be the Social services of the municipalities that are the ones with the commission to make child protection assessments. These assessments can only be done on Swedish soil, which requires the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to repatriate children along with their mothers for the right profession with the right mandate to be able to begin to investigate the needs of the children. Such an investigation is the only way to decide on where the children should live and who should be the custodians of the children in their best interest.

Stalled Repatriation Counteracts Deradicalization Efforts

While a majority of the children in the AANES detention are below the age of 12 years old, children who are older have experienced atrocities during their upbringing in the so-called caliphate. There are boys who have been abused by ISIS as child soldiers, including having been forced to be part of committing beheadings. Despite the low capacity from the AANES side to meet the needs of the thousands of children detained, efforts are underway to rehabilitate at least some of the most vulnerable children, those that are assessed to be the most at risk.

For boys between 11-18 years old, several have been taken out of the camps and been brought to an AANES-run detention and rehabilitation institution called *Houri Center*. A number of boys who became orphaned during the end battles in Baghouz in the spring of 2019 were also brought to this center. Some 100 boys from more than 35 different countries are staying at the center and sleeping in dormitories. Since the center was set up in 2017, only 3 children (Russian and American) have been repatriated. As time passes and children in the camps are growing older, the situation for the center is unsustainable since there are not enough resources and space to receive more children.

According to the staff, which consists of local psychologists, social workers, and teachers, the children at Hour Center are offered education, activities, and psychological treatment. Dalia of the staff tells us about an exercise she does with the children. She explains:

— I ask them to use their fantasy to imagine they are on a desert island where people are coming to, and the boy in front of me will be the one to decide what five laws should rule the community, rules that cannot be broken. Most of the boys answer things like; diversity of religion, no child marriages, children shall be part of making decisions.



Haidar in the dormitory at Hourri Center, NES ©RTC Sweden

there shall be healthcare available, people shall be able to live freely, not being detained. A few of the boys said that if there would be prisons, they should have high security.

What the boys describe is in contrast to what one can assume they have experienced, and shows that they have the ability to think outside of what they have been indoctrinated with during their time in the so-called caliphate.

The staff claims to see that the boys are developing and being de-radicalized during their stay at Hourri Center. However, when a boy turns 18 years old, they are no longer allowed to stay at the center and are transferred to the prisons where the adult suspected ISIS fighters are. Rony of the staff states:

– We do the whole process of rehabilitation, but then everything is undone when these states do not repatriate their children. We are managing to rehabilitate these boys, but then they are sent to prisons and get radicalized again.

Rony described how the AANES are trying to get these children back to their countries of origin, but the countries refuse to receive them, which leaves the staff at the Hour Center crestfallen to see that their work has been a waste of time. Rony says “the problem is not on our side, but in the countries that are responsible for these children.”

In the Hour Center, there is a 16 year old boy, Haidar, who is registered as a Swedish citizen, with family origins in an Asian country. Rony says that no government official has contacted them regarding Haidar:

— If any government would have asked for him, we would have delivered him immediately. If no one will repatriate him within two years, he will end up in prison and that is no place for him (...) Haidar is a calm and shy boy, one of the best students. He enjoys helping out in the garden, likes sports activities and he never gets in any trouble.

Meeting with Haidar, he tells us he was brought to Hour Center when he was 14 years old after both parents had been killed in the war. Before the parents brought the family to the so-called caliphate, they lived in Sweden. Haidar spoke a bit of Swedish with the delegation, explaining he went to school in Sweden. He said he is dreaming of being reunited with his aunt and younger brothers that he was separated from when he was brought to Hour Center. Haidar told us:

— I want to be with my family, live a good life and play football (...) I want to go back to my country and live peacefully with my brothers.

If Sweden has a policy to repatriate orphans, and if Haidar is a Swedish citizen, it must be questioned why he is still in detention in NES. If he is not repatriated within two years, he will be transferred to a prison with adult men that are suspected of being ISIS fighters. Time is of the essence for all governments of Hour center detainees to repatriate them while they are still children.

Rights of Children as a Pathway to Accountability

Almost all countries that have children remaining in detention in NES have ratified the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. In Article 3, it is stated that “in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”⁵⁸ **Sweden played a leading role in forming the Convention on the Rights of the Child and was one of the first countries to ratify it. In 2020, the convention became Swedish law. However, in this issue it is difficult to see that the law has been implemented in practice.** In addition, it lacks basic clarity regarding mandates and organisational structure. Agencies refer to each other making it near impossible for relatives and NGOs to identify who they should turn to, who will help, who in word or deed will assume responsibility for upholding the law and should be held accountable should the best interest of the child not be respected. To find a solution for the Swedish children to be able to come home, *RTC Sweden* has reached out to the Foreign Ministry⁵⁹ and the Ministry of Justice, other governmental representatives⁶⁰ and members of the parliament as well as local politicians, the Center Against Violent Extremism, the National Board of Health and Welfare, Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, the Ombudsman for Children, the Parliamentary Ombudsman, and the Social Services within municipalities. Repatriate the Children Sweden has talked to researchers, analysts, experts and academics, lawyers, journalists, aid workers, non-governmental organisations, relatives of children held in NES, as well as reached out to the archbishop and the royal family. Neither authorities nor politicians seem to take responsibility to find a solution for the urgent issue, but rather pushes the question away. Repatriate the Children is only one among many civil society organisations and networks worldwide that are working on the same issue. Many of the actors are describing similar procedural confusion in their respective countries.

58 www.barnombudsman.se/om-webb/platsen/english/the-un-convention/

59 See Appendix 3.

60 See Appendix 2.

Conclusion: Human Rights Apply to Everyone

The situation in the camps and detention centers shows that urgent action must be taken and that children must be protected from indoctrination and radicalization to violent extremist movements and environments.

The crisis in the camps in NES continues to escalate and become even more acute. Fires, diseases, accidents, violence and kidnappings are some of the most pressing threats. The situation on the ground is unsustainable, it is becoming increasingly difficult for authorities to maintain security, and humanitarian aid is limited. Already, women with their children have escaped from the camps without being found⁶¹. The geopolitical situation is another factor that complicates the conditions that can be changed from one day to another. **The children have the right to life, survival and development. When governments let the children remain in the camps and prisons, children are exposed to unimaginable danger.** According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶², governments must take all appropriate measures to ensure that children are protected against all forms of violence and discrimination and to ensure that every child has the protection and care needed for the welfare of the children. Children who have been subjected to neglect, abuse or armed conflicts are entitled to rehabilitation. The starting point is that all children are of equal value and have the same rights. Children can never be held responsible for their parents' actions.

The fact that children are being kept in detention camps when they could be brought home by their governments raises important matters of principle. The issue is not only governments abandoning children, but also a shift in society where politicians make distinctions among children. International law principles require convention states to provide interventions against human rights violations if they are able.

61 www.dutchnews.nl/news/2021/07/fears-is-women-could-return-to-nl-after-escaping-kurdish-camps/

62 www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

The international community can contribute to prevent more children becoming victims of armed conflict.

Abandoning the citizens also sends a signal of lawlessness to the victims of ISIS: those who were killed, those who survived and those who were displaced. Still 2,800 Yazidis are missing.

It is improper for the international community to turn its back on the AANES, whose people have suffered extreme crimes.

The issue is also related to due process, citizenship, and the position governments world wide should take in the fight against terrorism. If governments seek to counter violent extremism and contribute to peace and security in Syria and Iraq (as well as globally), they must prevent further radicalization. If governments abandon the children of their nations, they are at risk of growing up to become the next generation of violent jihadists. Furthermore, when governments discriminate against certain children, they arm the extremist narrative that governments are hypocritical. Governments cannot pretend that they are fighting a “war on terror” to protect the rule of law when they disregard legal principles; it will feed into the ISIS narrative to leave citizens in unlawful detention. Based on these different reasons, governments must repatriate all their citizens; children and adults.

This problem – insofar as the issue of respecting human rights can even be called a “problem” – will not solve itself. This issue will continue to grow until decision makers decide to repatriate all their citizens. Humanitarian principles, perspectives of due process and global security must be united in a holistic solution for this dilemma. So far, the window for repatriating the children is open, but soon it may be too late. **Every day counts.**

Recommendations For Governments With Citizens Held in NES

Based on what this report has shown, the following recommendations are proposed for all foreign governments with citizens held in NES:

- The perspective of the best interest of the child is paramount and must guide all decisions regarding children.
- Governments must proactively ensure human rights are not being violated, the only option is to repatriate all their citizens.
- Action must occur with no further delay, time is of the essence.
- Information must be shared with families and relatives affected.
- Children must be considered as victims and there must be an organized reception that takes into account the children's needs and creates the conditions for rehabilitation and integration.
- All adults suspected of crimes must be investigated by states with a mandate to do so. Perpetrators of ISIS that have committed crimes must be prosecuted.
- As long as there are citizens missing, governments must have staff on site in the camps and prisons to contribute to the mapping of citizens to their nations.
- UN member states should consider and actively acquire knowledge from civil society organisations to have a cooperation to find holistic solutions regarding prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.
- Governments who begin to repatriate must appeal to other countries to do the same.

- Resourceful countries that repatriate their citizens must also contribute to finding solutions to families of other citizenships that are being left behind. The end goal must be to empty and close the camps and prisons in a near-by future.
- Governments must contribute to peace and reconciliation and prevent further atrocities in the name of violent extremism. No child should grow up under the influence of ISIS or any other violent extremist movement. Victims must be offered support, protection and redress.
- Governments must ensure the safety and recovery of its citizens returning from the so-called caliphate. This is also central to finally breaking the circle of violence.

Recommendations for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

Based on what this report has shown, the following recommendations are proposed for the AANES, including the SDF and the SDC:

- The perspective of the best interest of the child is paramount and must guide all decisions regarding children.
- The AANES must proactively ensure human rights are not being violated.
- The AANES must remove any potential obstacles they have put in place and/or clearly publish a step-by-step guide on how repatriations can happen. The end goal must be to empty and close the camps and prisons in a near-by future by releasing the detainees to their respective governments under controlled protocols.
- The AANES must share all information regarding children and adults that have died or disappeared while being held in AANES custody.

Epilogue:

The Seven Orphans Incredible Development and Recovery

When we⁶³ first met the seven orphaned grandchildren of Patricio Galvéz in Erbil in May 2019, they were stressed and traumatized. All of them were malnourished and sick. They had just come out of the chaotic al-Hol camp, and before that had lived on the run in a war zone. The oldest of the siblings, 8 year old Ibrahim, had seen his father shot to death just months earlier, and a few months before they had lost their mother. The children didn't have a rhythm of day and night and almost never slept at the same time. The oldest ones seemed to have flashbacks from the war, painted war drawings with black crayons and were talking about the mujahidin. One of the girls was almost apathetic and didn't want to eat, others were crying and screaming for their mother.

While waiting for the Swedish authorities to issue the travel documents for the children after being brought out of NES, they had to stay in Erbil for eight days at a hotel with high security arrangements and were not allowed to go outside this hotel. During this week, the grandfather Galvéz was accompanied by his friend, the film director Gorki Glaser-Müller who was there to document Galvéz struggle to rescue his grandchildren, and Beatrice Eriksson, an on-leave social worker who was in Erbil to conduct interviews with ISIS atrocities survivors for her master's thesis and volunteered to help out. But three adults to handle the situation during those eight days was not enough. Without the help from the good journalists, amazing local volunteers and understanding hotel staff, it would have been impossible to cope. Journalists helped Galvéz to bring the children to the hospital and at the hotel helped with changing diapers and giving the children baths, local volunteers contributing with their time to take care of the children, local aid workers buying clothes and providing toys and teddy bears for the children, hotel staff trying to comfort the crying children, carrying them around in between cleaning our tables after providing us with food.

63 Founders of RTC Sweden; Patricio Galvéz, Gorki Glaser-Müller and Beatrice Eriksson.



Gorki Glaser-Müller, Beatrice Eriksson and Patricio Galvéz along with the orphans at the gate waiting to board the airplane to Sweden ©Rena Effendi

Aside from trying to make the children feel safe and making sure they all got their basic needs met, there was also a massive media pressure (around 20 journalist from all over the world came to the hotel to report on the case), the stress to try to get information from the Swedish authorities, the stress over the escalating aggressions between Iran and USA on Iraqi soil and rumours about a lockdown of the airport, the stress to crowdfund for money to pay for the hotel stay and flight tickets back to Sweden, and a crazy security threat when the children's grandmother, a person who also had joined ISIS along with the children's parents, showed up at the hotel. It is impossible to describe how intense those eight days spent at a hotel in Erbil were.

The lack of information about the process was highly difficult to handle. Every minute we were waiting for the Swedish authorities to let us know the status about when we could travel but during those eight days of crisis and chaos, we almost did not get any information about anything at all.

More than two years have now passed since we landed with the seven children in Sweden and they have recovered in the most incredible way. They are placed in three wonderful foster families, and live relatively close to each other and can meet continuously and talk to each other on the phone. Their grandfather sees them on a regular basis and is teaching them music, taking them to



Patrico Galvéz nurses his grandchild Mohammed to sleep during flight back home to Sweden ©Rena Effendi

nature and all things a grandfather wants for his grandchildren. The children are all in school. Little Mohammed, who was close to perishing in the camp, has now grown strong and is running around, dancing, singing and laughing as any other 3 year old. All children have new names and are living under protected identities. The development of the children since May 2019 is truly miraculous. Thanks to the support, love and care from the people in the children's surroundings, they are doing as well as anyone could have wished for. As Galvéz reflects at the end of the documentary 'Children of the Enemy', depicting his struggle to get his grandchildren home:

64 <https://cinemicfilm.se/children-of-the-enemy/>

— Children are like seeds of love (...) If they do not receive love, the vicious circle of hatred will only continue.⁶⁴

We can conclude that the keys to the children's recovery have been safe environments, loving foster families and extended family members who are part of the children's lives, pro-social activities, education, health care and psycho-social support.

Appendix 1

The UN Human Rights Council letter, addressing the governments who has citizens in NES, 8th of February 2021⁶⁵

Syria: UN experts urge 57 States to repatriate women and children from squalid camps

GENEVA (8 February 2021) – UN human rights experts expressed serious concerns at the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation at the Al Hol and Roj camps in northeast Syria - home to over 64,000 people, mostly women and children - and urged 57 States* whose nationals are held there to repatriate them without delay.

“The number of the countries concerned and the dire humanitarian conditions of the camps highlight the need for collective, sustained and immediate action to prevent irreparable harm to the persons in vulnerable situation held there” the experts said. “Thousands of people held in the camps are exposed to violence, exploitation, abuse and deprivation in conditions and treatment that may well amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment under international law, with no effective remedy at their disposal. An unknown number have already died because of their conditions of detention.”

UN human rights experts have issued official letters to 57 governments who are believed to have nationals in the camps. At the Al-Hol camp – the largest camp for refugees and internally displaced people in Syria - more than 80 percent of those being held are women and children.

Reports of increased violence in the camps since the start of the year compound the experts’ calls for urgent action.

The experts recall the urgent need for justice, truth and reparation for all of the victims of the very serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law that have occurred in the region. In that context, the continued detention, on unclear grounds, of women and children in the camps is a matter of grave concern and undermines the progression of accountability, truth and justice.

65 www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26730&LangID=E

* Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Indonesia, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Maldives, North Macedonia, Malaysia, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, South Africa, Spain, State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Senegal, Somalia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam, and Yemen. The information available to the experts dates from June 2020.

** The experts: Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism; Leigh Toomey (Chair-Rapporteur), Elina

"States have a primary responsibility to act with due diligence and take positive steps and effective measures to protect individuals in vulnerable situations, notably women and children, located outside of their territory where they are at risk of serious human rights violations or abuses, where States' actions or omissions can positively impact on these individuals' human rights," the experts said.

The experts reminded the States concerned that the repatriation process must be done in accordance with international human rights law. They also stressed that States must refrain from any actions that would expose the individuals to further human rights violations on their return to their country of nationality, and that they should actively support their re-integration with adequate social, psychological, and educational support, conscious of gender-specific traumas that could have been experienced by women and girls.

They also expressed concern at a 'data collection' process that took place in the camps last July. "Highly personal and unique data were gathered from women and children in conditions where consent could not be freely given, nor under circumstances in which it was clear whom would have access to those data, and how they might be used," said the experts echoing the call of the High Commissioner for States to assume responsibility for all of their nationals.

"We fear that this exercise was in fact aimed at identifying third country nationals who may pose a security risk, information that could be further communicated and used by States of origin, as a basis for deciding the further course of action for their nationals. This could include trial and repatriation, or children's separation from their families, including that of male children for further detention."

The experts said they were gravely concerned that the exercise, reportedly to evaluate security threats, lacked regard for basic principles of due process and solely targeted families with alleged links to foreign ISIL fighters, including women and children, who already suffer from heightened discrimination, marginalisation and abuse on the basis of their alleged affiliation with the group.

They added that the process had largely excluded humanitarian actors, including medical personnel.

ENDS.

Steinerte(Vice-Chair),
Miriam Estrada-Castillo,
Mumba Malila, Seong-Phil
Hong, Working Group
on Arbitrary Detention;
Nils Melzer, Special
Rapporteur on torture
and other cruel, inhuman
or degrading treatment
or punishment; Agnès
Callamard, Special
Rapporteur on extrajudicial,
summary or arbitrary
executions; Siobhán
Mullally, Special
Rapporteur on trafficking
in persons, especially in
women and children; Pedro
Arrojo-Agudo, Special
Rapporteur on the human
rights to safe drinking
water and sanitation; Felipe
González Morales, Special
Rapporteur on the human
rights of migrants; Mama
Fatima Singhateh, Special
Rapporteur on the sale
and sexual exploitation of
children; Fabian Salvioli,
Special Rapporteur on the
promotion of truth, justice,
reparation and guarantees
of non-recurrence; Working
Group on discrimination
against women and
girls; Elizabeth Broderick
(Chair), Melissa Upreti (Vice
Chair), Dorothy Estrada
Tanck, Ivana Radačić, and
Meskerem Geset Techane;

Joseph Cannataci, Special
Rapporteur on the right to
privacy; Mr. Javaid Rehman,
Special Rapporteur on the
situation of human rights
in the Islamic Republic of
Iran; Fernand de Varennes
RP, Special Rapporteur
on minority issues; and
Michael Fakhri, Special
Rapporteur on the right
to food.

Special Rapporteurs
are part of what is
known as the Special
Procedures of the Human
Rights Council. Special
Procedures, the largest
body of independent
experts in the UN Human
Rights system, is the
general name of the
Council's independent
fact-finding and
monitoring mechanisms
that address either
specific country situations
or thematic issues in all
parts of the world. Special
Procedures' experts
work on a voluntary
basis; they are not UN
staff and do not receive
a salary for their work.
They are independent
from any government or
organization and serve in
their individual capacity.

Appendix 2

Open letter to the Swedish government on the
World Children's day, 20th of November 2020⁶⁶

Öppet brev till Sveriges regering på Barnkonventionens dag

Ett och ett halvt år har gått sedan ni valde att rädda sju svenska syskon ur al-Hols brutala och omänskliga misär.

Då, var de krigstraumatiserade, sjuka och undernärda. Den yngsta pojken var nästintill apatisk och vägde knappt 3 kilo trots att han var 1,5 år. En av flickorna gömde sig i ett hörn, med bortvänd blick och vägrade äta, medan hennes systrar trööstlöst grät. Storebror målade krigsteckningar med svarta kitor.

Sedan de kommit hem, har dessa sju barn återhämtat sig på ett otroligt sätt. Även om deras blickar ibland kan avslöja ängslighet, är de i full fart och springer, hoppar, leker och skrattar. De är nu placerade i trygga miljöer, långt bort från våldsideologier och terrorsektor. Minstingen dansar glatt till Babblarna. Storasysstrarna blåser såpbubblor och busar med familjens hundar. Storebror målar nu teckningar i färg.

De har fått en ny chans i livet.

Under samma tidsperiod har situationen i nordöstra Syrien, där uppskattningsvis 15-20 svenska familjer hålls i förvar, förvärrats dramatiskt. I en strid ström har skrämmande rapporter kommit från lägren, senast Egmont Institutes "From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive" där situationen beskrivs bli allt mer allvarlig. Det är en katastrofal humanitär situation som dessa barn befinner sig i; med våld, sjukdomar, brist på rent vatten och sanitära olägenheter.

När ska dessa svenska barn få sina rättigheter och behov tillgodosedda?

Desperata mammor, som gett upp hoppet om att deras regering ska agera, väljer att försöka hitta egna lösningar genom att fly med sina barn. Den 1/11 rapporterades att fyra svenska kvinnor

66 <https://www.repatrivatechildren.org/open-letter>

med totalt nio barn som flytt från nordöstra Syrien till Turkiet nu var på väg till Sverige. Att smuggla sig ut från läger som al-Hol och Roj hela vägen till Turkiet kan innebära en livsfara, men också att hundratusentals kronor hamnar i organiserad brottslighet. Detta hade kunnat föregås om Sveriges regering hade tagit beslut om att hämta hem familjerna under kontrollerade former. USA har upprepade gånger meddelat att de står redo att facilitera repatrieringar till vilket land som helst som begär det. Att Sverige, ett land med stora möjligheter att agera utifrån Barnkonventionens lag, tillåter barn att sväva i livsfara på detta sätt är orimligt och ovärdigt. Dessa barn har rätt till skydd och liv.

Det är Sveriges ansvar att se till att inga fler svenska barn dör eller radikaliseras. Vi uppmanar också Sveriges regering att bidra till globalt fredsarbete och strategier för att inte fler ska falla offer för islamisters meningslösa våld. Sverige behöver vidta tydligare åtgärder för att förebygga radikalisering och extremism. Ett viktigt steg i det arbetet är att hämta hem de svenska familjerna och låta barnen växa upp med demokratiska värderingar.

Det är positivt att två delegationer från Utrikesdepartementet har besökt nordöstra Syrien under oktober.

Vi finner det dock anmärkningsvärt hur man från UD, vid besök i lägren, har frågat om det finns någon mamma som vill få en kontakt förmedlad till socialtjänsten för att lämna ifrån sig sitt barn. Vi menar att rätt profession måste hantera frågan. I Sverige är socialtjänsten den myndighet som har rätt utbildning och befogenhet att utreda barn som misstänks fara illa; vad gäller vårdnad, boende och umgänge. Vad vi vet kan dock inte detta göras utanför Sveriges gränser. Dessutom har det kurdiska självstyret varit tydliga med att de, utifrån barnets rättigheter, inte separerar barn från sina mammor. Därför måste det första steget vara att Sveriges regering tar beslut om repatriering av de svenska familjerna.

Steg två, väl i Sverige, är att sociala myndigheter måste utreda varje barns situation. Samtidigt måste polisen utreda varje vuxen som misstänks för brott. Mottagandet behöver ske på ett ordnat sätt, som skapar förutsättningar för rehabilitering och integrering där barnens behov beaktas och barnets bästa är i fokus. Redan nu bör konsulära och sociala myndigheter erbjuda anhöriga i Sverige relevant information och stöd för att hantera den situation de befinner sig i och står inför.

I oktober rapporterades det i kurdisk media att Sverige ska leda arbetet med lokala domstolar för utländska kvinnor och att barnen ska sättas i "barncenter" i nordöstra Syrien, uppgifter

som den svenska regeringen valt att inte kommentera. Vad gäller? Vad är slutmålet? Att ta hem barnen "när och om det är möjligt" - är inte tydligt nog. Sveriges regering måste presentera en strategi som är tydlig, förutsägbar och som skapar tillit och möjligheter att involvera fler resurser.

Sedan vi bildade den ideella föreningen Repatriate the Children (RTC Sweden) har vårt koncept spridit sig och numera finns även RTC Denmark och RTC USA. Vi har också identifierat liknande grupper i andra länder och initierat ett nätverk med representanter från 13 olika länder från 4 olika kontinenter. Vi representerar en bredd av kompetenser och står redo att bistå våra respektive regeringar i att skapa en framkomlig väg för repatriering.

Vi är övertygade om att frågan om svenskarna i Syrien är en fråga där humanitära principer, rättssäkerhet och krav på säkerhet kan och måste sammanföras. Vi vill tro att Sverige fortfarande är ett land som står upp för dessa principer. Idag på Barnkonventionens dag vädjar vi till Sverige att implementera Barnkonventionen i ord och handling genom att omedelbart repatriera familjerna till trygghet och säkerhet i Sverige.

BEATRICE ERIKSSON, GORKI GLASER-MÜLLER, PATRICIO GALVEZ

REPATRIATE THE CHILDREN

Appendix 3

An example of questions posed by RTC Sweden addressing the Swedish government, followed with the Swedish governmental response⁶⁷

On Tue, Feb 16, 2021 at 5:01 PM Info Repatriate the Children <info@repatriatethechildren.org> wrote:

Till:

*Enheten för konsulära och civilrättsliga ärenden
Mellanöstern- och Nordafrikaenheten
Enheten för europeisk säkerhetspolitik
Enheten för folkrätt, mänskliga rättigheter och traktaträtt
Enheten för FN-politik, konflikt och humanitära frågor*

Den 8 februari meddelade experter från FN:s råd för mänskliga rättigheter att de stämplar Sverige för bristande hantering av sina medborgare i läger i nordöstra Syrien. Enligt FN följer Sverige inte internationell lag. FN:s uppmaning till Sverige och 56 andra länder är tydlig: *“Ni måste agera för att försäkra er om att era barn och kvinnor inte riskerar livsfara, tortyr och kränkningar av en hel radda mänskliga rättigheter, till exempel utbildning, de här barnen får inte det.”*

Utöver kvinnor och barn återfinns också ett fåtal svenska män i utomrättslig fångenskap i regionen. Ur en rad olika perspektiv, bland annat gällande säkerhet och rättsliga principer, bör Sverige även repatriera dessa likt bland andra USA har gjort.

FN betonar de långsiktiga säkerhetsriskerna med att lämna kvar barn. *“Om man dömer barnen till ett liv utan värdighet, där deras rättigheter fullständigt åsidosätts, skapar man en grogrund för ännu mer våld”* och det är *“moraliskt bankrutt att betrakta barn på det viset. De stater som gör detta kommer att dömas av historien,”* säger FN:s särskilda rapportör Fionnuala Ni Aolain.

Det är Sveriges ansvar att se till att inga fler svenska barn dör eller radikaliserar. Ett första steg är att hämta hem barnen med koppling till Sverige till trygghet och säkerhet.

⁶⁷ Email correspondence between RTC Sweden and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Swedish government, February and March 2021. The name of the official responding to the RTC Sweden email has been removed.

Kabinettsekreterare Robert Rydberg kommenterade FN:s uppmaning att ta hem medborgare från nordöstra Syrien enligt TT: "Vi har inget intresse, inget behov av att aktivt bistå dem från att ta sig hem till Sverige" och syftade på de vuxna svenskar som hålls utomrättsligt fångna i nordöstra Syrien.

Det är inte UD:s, utan barnens intresse och behov som behöver vara vägledande i hanteringen. Om Sverige ska uppfylla Barnkonventionen, svensk lag, behöver Sverige göra vad som krävs för att få hem barnen omgående.

Vi förstår nog alla att om Sverige ska ta hem barnen så innebär det att Sverige behöver repatriera dem tillsammans med sina mammor. Huruvida barnen sedan ska stanna hos sin vårdnadshavare eller placeras i familjehem är en fråga som socialtjänsten måste utreda i varje enskilt fall och utifrån barnens bästa. Detta kan endast utredas på plats i Sverige. Därför är det förvirrande att läsa kabinettsekreterare Rydbergs vidare kommentar i frågan där han förklarar att "Sveriges linje kvarstår, vilket innebär att man arbetar för att få hem de barn som finns i lägren, men inte män och kvinnor."

Vår första fråga till utrikesdepartementet är därför: Vad gör Sveriges regering konkret för att få hem barnen som befinner sig i fånglägren?

Enligt FN har alla stater, inklusive Sverige, möjlighet hämta hem sina medborgare. *"Det går. De nationer som inte gör det, visar bara brist på vilja"*, menar Ni Aolain. Bara de senaste månaderna har bland annat Tyskland, USA och Finland repatrierat medborgare. Finlands särskilda sändebud i frågan, Jussi Tanner, menar att finska myndigheter, oberoende av ett politiskt beslut, förpliktigas att ta hem barn. Tanner sa i december: *"Det finns inget alternativ för myndigheterna"* och informerade samtidigt om att det inte är möjligt att separera barnen från mödrarna, utan att antingen måste alla tas hem tillsammans eller måste alla lämnas kvar.

Svenska utrikesdepartementet har på frågan om när barnen ska tas hem under en längre tid uppehållit sig vid formuleringen *"om och när det är möjligt."*

Vår andra fråga till utrikesdepartementet är därför: Vad är annorlunda mellan Finlands och Sveriges syn på myndigheters förpliktigande i frågan?

I ett skriftligt uttalande i Tidningen Syre 29 januari förklarar UD:

"Icke desto mindre kan det finnas möjligheter [att ta hem barnen], varför UD har frågat de svenska kvinnorna i Roj om de vill komma i kontakt med berörd socialtjänst för att diskutera repatriering av endast barn. Grundläggande är då att socialtjänsten erbjuder en insats om vård efter utredning och vårdnadshavarens samtycke, enligt socialtjänstlagen. Utrikesförvaltningen kan inte fatta den sortens beslut. Vi kan medverka till att etablera kontakt och försöka skapa praktiska förutsättningar i en komplicerad situation."

Vår tredje fråga är: Kan socialtjänsten ge i uppdrag till UD att repatriera barn med sina vårdnadshavare?

Anhöriga här i Sverige som vi är i kontakt med uttrycker bristande kontakt med utrikesdepartementet samt känslor av maktlöshet och behov av stöd. En anhörig sa till oss nyligen:

"Den psykiska ohälsan har ökat rejält bland oss familjer... Informationen jag får [från lägren] krossar en, enda sättet att fungera är genom att förtränga det tills man kan göra något åt det. Men vad kan vi göra? Vi anhöriga behöver någon form av stöd. Ingen har fått kontakt från UD eller någon statlig myndighet, vårdcentral etc ingen har reached out. Det finns ingen hjälp och det har tiden bevisat."

Vår fjärde fråga är: Vad gör utrikesdepartementet för att säkerställa att samtliga berörda familjer får relevant information och stöd utifrån den konsulära aspekten?

Sedan vi kom till Sverige med de sju barnen från al-Hol i maj 2019 har vi haft låg förståelse för varför Sverige inte har repatrierat övriga svenska familjer. Snart har två år gått utan att något mer barn har räddats. Utifrån vår förståelse har det varit möjligt hela tiden. Vi tror att vi med våra erfarenheter skulle kunna vara del i att bidra till en rättssäker och humanitär lösning.

Vår femte fråga är: Vad behöver utrikesdepartementet för att få frågan löst och vad kan vi i RTC och vårt nätverk bistå med?

Föreningen Repatriate the Children,
genom ordförande Beatrice Eriksson

Repatriate the Children syftar till att ha en stödjande, rådgivande och upplysande funktion för anhöriga till barn, politiker och beslutsfattare, myndigheter, ideella organisationer och media i frågan om barnen i nordöstra Syrien.

www.repatriatethechildren.org
twitter.com/RTC_Swe
facebook.com/RTCSwe

The Swedish governmental response to the
questions posed by RTC Sweden

On Thu, Mar 4, 2021 at 6:11 PM
<xxxxxxxx.xxxxxxx@gov.se> wrote:

Hej

Ref till ert e-mail nedan. Ni har även har vänt er till ett antal andra enheter inom UD och till andra departement och utöver våra svar här så kommer vi ha möjlighet att diskutera vidare och utveckla resonemangen vid vårt möte nästa vecka.

Det är fortsatt regeringens målsättning att de barn som finns i lägre nordöstra Syrien ska kunna föras till Sverige om och när det är möjligt. Det lokala självstyret (AANES) motsätter sig familjeseparation och repatriering av endast barn. Undantag kan göras om föräldern samtycker. Ingen av de svenska kvinnorna har hittills visat intresse för detta. Det är inte aktuellt att repatriera kvinnor ur lägren. Vi avvaktar det lokala självstyrets brottsutredningar och eventuell lagföring.

Sverige och UD har en god relation och dialog med det lokala självstyret i nordöstra Syrien (AANES). Dialogen inkluderar kvinnornas och barnens situation i lägren. Vi bevakar frågan om brottsutredningar och eventuell lagföring noga. Under UD:S konsulära besök i nordöstra Syrien i oktober framkom att det finns 11 kvinnor och 20 barn Roj med koppling till Sverige i Roj. Efter besöket har det tillkommit uppgifter om några kvinnor och barn i Roj. När det gäller al-Hol finns vaga obekräftade uppgifter om cirka 10 kvinnor och cirka 10 barn. UD arbetar på att få dessa uppgifter bekräftade i dialog med det lokala självstyret som ansvarar för lägren. Ovissheten beror på att vissa kvinnor kan ha uppgivit en annan identitet, att de håller sig undan i lägret eller att de kan ha avvikit på egen hand. Nästan alla barn är tillsammans med sina mödrar. Vaga uppgifter om ytterligare föräldralösa följs upp noga.

Sverige stödjer ett antal internationella organisationer som arbetar för att förbättra levnadsvillkoren i nordöstra Syrien. Vi gör detta genom humanitära organisationer och via regeringens strategi för Syrienkrisen. Ett antal av de humanitära aktörerna som verkar i lägren för att göra tillvaron drägligare för barnen (FN, ICRC osv.) gör så med stöd från Sverige. Regeringen beslutade också strax innan jul om att förlänga den svenska strategin för Syrienkrisen (2021–2023).

Vi noterar att några finska och tyska kvinnor och barn nyligen repatrierats från nordöstra Syrien. Vi förutsätter att kvinnorna utretts noga för brott. Det kan förstås också ha förekommit särskilt ömmande humanitära skäl. Varje ärende hanteras individuellt av det lokala självstyret.

Vi har naturligtvis stor förståelse för det omfattande behovet av psykosocialt stöd till anhöriga i Sverige. UD:s uppdrag att hantera individkonsulära ärenden med svenskar i utlandet innebär att vi även ibland står i kontakt med de anhöriga i Sverige. Att vi har kontakt med och lämnar information till dessa anhöriga bygger då på att det finns en uttrycklig efterfrågan / medgivande från individen som är föremål för det konsulära stödet, eller motsvarande starka skäl för det. Det är naturligtvis svårt i de ärenden som finns i nordöstra Syrien och vi gör alltid bedömningar från fall till fall. Vi arbetar normalt sett med en (1) kontaktperson i varje ärende, den personen förväntas samordna informationen till fler anhöriga om det är påkallat. På så vis kan vi värna den konsulära sekretessen. Vi försöker naturligtvis i möjligaste mån ge stöd och information till alla anhöriga och alla är självfallet välkomna att höra av sig om de vill prata allmänt om UD:s roll och arbete.

Vi ser fram emot vårt möte den 12 mars.

Vänliga hälsningar,

Published September 2, 2021
by Repatriate the Children Sweden (RTC Sweden)
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Layout: Nina Derkert

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