

Media Update

7 September 2021

UNICEF

Statement by UNICEF Executive Director

Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on unaccompanied and separated children evacuated from Afghanistan

NEW YORK, 7 September 2021 – “Since 14 August, hundreds of children have been separated from their families amidst chaotic conditions, including large-scale evacuations, in and around the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. Some of these children were evacuated on flights to Germany, Qatar and other countries.

“UNICEF and our partners have registered approximately 300 unaccompanied and separated children evacuated from Afghanistan. We expect this number to rise through ongoing identification efforts.

“I can only imagine how frightened these children must have been to suddenly find themselves without their families as the crisis at the airport unfolded or as they were whisked away on an evacuation flight.

“UNICEF is deeply concerned about the welfare of unaccompanied and separated children wherever they may be. They are among the most vulnerable children in the world. It is vital that they are quickly identified and kept safe during family tracing and reunification processes. All parties must prioritize the best interests of the child and protect children from abuse, neglect and violence.

“During tracing and reunification processes, children should be provided with safe, temporary alternative care, preferably with extended family members or in a family-based setting. Placement within institutional care arrangements should be a last resort and only temporary.

“Governments of countries where unaccompanied and separated children

have family members should cooperate and facilitate reunification and safe, legal migration pathways for these children if it is in the child's best interest. The definition of family members should be sufficiently broad to place unaccompanied children safely with relatives who will care for them.

“Likewise, children moving with trusted adults should remain with them if it is in their best interests to do so. Separating children from adults whom they know and from whom they receive care could cause further harm.

“All children have the right to be with their families. Parties involved in evacuating and hosting people fleeing Afghanistan should make every effort to prevent the separation of families from occurring in the first place. This means ensuring proper coordination among civil and military actors, establishing basic registration of children and families, and verifying flight manifests.

“UNICEF is providing technical support to governments who have evacuated children and those who are hosting them. Right now, our teams are on the ground at the Doha air base in Qatar and the Ramstein air base in Germany, working with authorities and our partners to register unaccompanied children, provide them with appropriate care and protection, and support tracing to bring them back together with their families.

“In Afghanistan, more than 550,000 people have been displaced by conflict, the majority in recent weeks, and 10 million children are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. We are very worried about the safety and wellbeing of unaccompanied and separated children inside the country. UNICEF and our partners need unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of Afghanistan to gather an accurate picture of their number and whereabouts. This will be vital to reaching them with protection and services.

“Now and in the days to come, it is imperative that all parties and the international community join us in prioritizing the wellbeing of children inside Afghanistan as well as those who have been evacuated.”

