

## Home Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: [Channel crossings, migration and asylum-seeking routes through the EU, HC 705](#)

Wednesday 7 October 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 December 2020.

Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; Dehenna Davison; Ruth Edwards; Andrew Gwynne; Adam Holloway; Dame Diana Johnson; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald.

Questions 278-389

#### Witnesses

[I](#): A, Mohammad, N, Sam Rahimi, Antonia Cohen, Volunteer Adviser, Refugee Council, Seb Klier, Parliamentary Manager, Refugee Council, and Anne Stoltenberg, Project Development Worker, Migrant Voice.

Note on evidence: This evidence was taken in private on 7 October 2020. Further detail has been added to the evidence via footnotes during the process of making corrections to the transcript. Some of the corrections were provided by witnesses with facilitation by Refugee Council and Migrant Voice. These footnotes are therefore not marked as direct quotations.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: A, Mohammad, N, Sam Rahimi, Antonia Cohen, Seb Klier and Anne Stoltenberg.

**Chair:** Can I welcome all of you to this meeting? We really appreciate it. I am Yvette, the Chair of the Committee. We are taking evidence on the channel crossings, what has been happening with the boats, what has been happening for people arriving and some of the difficulties that everybody faces, so we were very keen to hear from you about your experiences. I appreciate that many of the experiences you have faced may have been very difficult, so we really do not want to ask you anything that is difficult for you to talk about. We very much appreciate anything that you are able to tell us.

I thought we would start with the members of the Committee introducing ourselves. I am Yvette Cooper, the Chair of the Committee. I am the Labour MP for Castleford in Yorkshire, which is about 20 minutes outside Leeds, and I have been an MP for about 20 years. Andrew, can I go to you next?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Hello all, and thanks for this today. I am Andrew Gwynne. I am the Labour MP for a seat called Denton and Reddish, which is 6 miles outside of Manchester. I have been a Member of Parliament for 15 years.

**Ms Abbott:** My name is Diane Abbott. I am a Labour Member of Parliament. My constituency is in Hackney in east London, and we have always had a great many refugees and asylum seekers living there. I have been a Member of Parliament for 33 years.

**Dehenna Davison:** Hello all. Thank you for being with us. My name is Dehenna, and I am the Conservative Member of Parliament for a place called Bishop Auckland, which is a long way north just outside Newcastle. I have only been an MP since December, so I still have an awful lot to learn, but I am getting there.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Good morning everybody. My name is Stuart McDonald, an MP with the Scottish National party, which is usually called the SNP for short. I represent people in a constituency called Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East—it is a bit of a mouthful—which is quite near Glasgow up in Scotland. I have been an MP now for five years.

**Ruth Edwards:** Morning everyone. Thank you for joining us today. I am Ruth Edwards. I am the Conservative Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe, which is in Nottinghamshire in the east midlands. Like Dehenna, I was also newly elected in December.

**Adam Holloway:** As-salamu alaykum. I am Adam. I am an MP in Kent. I have never been to Yemen, but I spent quite a lot of time in Afghanistan



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with Pir Gailani when they were fighting the Russians, and I have probably been to Afghanistan about 25 times.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My name is Diana Johnson. Hello. I am the Member of Parliament for Hull North, which is up in Yorkshire, so it is up in the north and on the coast. I have been an MP for 15 years.

**Elizabeth Hunt:** Good morning. My name is Elizabeth, and I am the Clerk of the Committee, which means that I run the staff team and work with Dominic, who you have already met.

Q278 **Chair:** I think we have Antonia, Seb, Anne and Judith from the Refugee Council and Migrant Voice on the call as well. Is that right?

**Anne Stoltenberg:** I am Anne from Migrant Voice. Judith is not joining us. I am based in London, but I am originally from Denmark.

**Antonia Cohen:** My name is Antonia. I am volunteer adviser at the Refugee Council and have been for the past 12 or more years. I also run something called the Refugee Cricket Project, which involves both cricket and advice. I am based in London.

**Seb Klier:** I am Seb Klier. I am the parliamentary manager at the Refugee Council based in London.

Q279 **Chair:** We have A, N and Sam with us. Thank you very much for joining us. Can I just ask each of you in turn about your decision to leave Yemen or Afghanistan? What factors influenced your decisions to leave?

**N:** Hi everyone. My name is N, and I am from Afghanistan. It is nice to meet everyone.

**Chair:** Good to see you.

**N:** Thank you. Your question is about why I left Afghanistan.

**Chair:** Yes.

**N:** I am from Uruzgan, which is not far from Kandahar, if you've heard of it. Adam said that he had been to Afghanistan 25 times, so he probably knows it. My village was under the control of the Taliban, and they wanted to recruit people to be part of their team. They asked my dad, but he didn't want to join and refused, so they took him by force. After they took him, we never saw him again. After that, they came to my house—I do not want to go into too much detail—and they tried to take me and train me to become part of their team. They were basically trying to brainwash me to train me to become a suicide bomber.<sup>1</sup>

My mum was worried for my life and my future, so she handed me to a smuggler who brought me to Kabul, which is the capital and a long way

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<sup>1</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The Taliban wanted to train N as a suicide bomber, which N and his family did not want. So N left Afghanistan before they could take him and start this training.



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from my area of Uruzgan. I stayed there for some time at the smuggler's house, and then he passed me to another man who brought me to Iran. That is how my journey started. My life was in danger, and my mum was scared for me. That is why she had me taken out of Afghanistan.

**Q280 Chair:** Thank you. Did she have to pay at the beginning for you to be able to leave?

**N:** I don't know anything about that, but of course you have to pay to do that sort of journey, because people obviously want money in order to take you from one place to another. I think that was all done by my mum, and I didn't know anything at the time. I was 13 and a half, and my mum said, "Go with this man," and I was like, "Why?" and she said, "Just go with him," and then he brought me to Kabul. I don't know anything about it, but my mum definitely paid. I was very young at the time. I spoke to her when I was in Kabul, in the smuggler's house, but I lost contact with her when I started my journey and went to Iran. I haven't spoken to her since. She did everything, and I really appreciate it that she had me taken from that place.

**Q281 Chair:** That is incredibly hard. Did you know where you were going?

**N:** No, I didn't. When I was living with the guy in Kabul, which is the capital of Afghanistan, he wouldn't say anything or talk that much. He had kids, and I used to play with them in their house. After about three months, he handed me to another man who brought me to Iran. My journey started in Iran, and then I was just passed from one person to another to another. They wouldn't talk to me as they put me in the cars. For example, I was put in the space underneath a small van, with my head where the smoke comes out of the car. I was there for about two hours, and it was a terrible journey. It was 11 years ago—a long time—but it was very dangerous. I am thankful that I am still alive.

**Q282 Chair:** How long did the whole journey take?

**N:** The journey took about seven months.

**Q283 Chair:** So it was to Iran first and then to where from Iran? What were the different steps of the journey?

**N:** When we went to Iran, I stayed there, but I couldn't do anything because I was in their hands, along with other young boys, and they were making the decisions. They took me to the border with Turkey and handed me, along with other people, to a Turkish man. We were there for some time, and from there they took us across to Greece and to Italy, and then from Italy to France. I was staying in Dunkirk, which I think is by Calais, and then from there to England.

It was a big organisation with very bad people, to be honest. They were criminals, and you had to listen to whatever they say. I remember in France there was a refrigerated lorry, and I didn't want to go in when I saw it, but a man hit me over the head and just grabbed me, because I was so small, and put me in the lorry with another two men, and he closed the door. I thought, "I'm not going to get out of this," but we were lucky



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that they didn't turn down the refrigerator at the back, which can be very cold. When we got to Northampton, the two men got up and just started hitting the door. The driver then called the police, who came and took us.

**Q284 Chair:** At each stage along the journey, did they tell you where you were going? Did you know at each stage where you were and what was happening next?

**N:** You mean the smugglers? They were just saying things like, "We are going from one place to another. You have to do this, and don't say anything while you are in the car. Don't make noise." But they wouldn't say a final destination or anything else; they would just, like I said, say, "We're going from here to there, and it will be this long." It wasn't like that just with me, but with the other people as well.

**Q285 Chair:** Did you know all the way along the way that the UK was the final place you would be heading to?

**N:** No. I didn't even know the name "UK". I hadn't heard of it before, because I was very young at the time. When I got to France, I had my birthday there but, no, I didn't know where I was going.

**Q286 Chair:** Thank you, N, for describing that. You must have been incredibly strong to get through that, especially when so young. There are some other questions we want to ask you about other bits of what happened and so on, but can I first turn to A? Are you able to talk to us about what your experiences were?

**A:** Can you give me the question?

**Chair:** What were the reasons why you left Yemen? What happened, and what were the circumstances?

**A:** I left Yemen, personally, because of race, because I grew up in a neighbour country.<sup>2</sup> You all know that over the last few years my country has been destroyed. There is no healthcare. There is no Government. There is no safety. There is even no water sometimes.

**Q287 Chair:** And what happened? What were the factors that affected your decision to leave? What happened when you left?

**A:** I left in 2014, when I was studying at my university to be a doctor. The Houthi rebels were investigating people in the street. When they found me, they did not find my internal ID because I owned only a passport. We have some family, and they decided to lock me in a room.<sup>3</sup> We negotiated that I would leave my dad's house for them unless I was recruited,<sup>4</sup> because, as I told you, I grew up in a neighbour country, so

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<sup>2</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The neighbouring country was Saudi Arabia. A lived there from age 3 and came back to Yemen to live and study at age 18. Because A grew up in Saudi Arabia, he had an accent that was seen as foreign and this made life difficult in Yemen, as Saudi Arabia is involved in the current conflict.

<sup>3</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The Houthi rebels locked A in a room in his dad's house in Yemen.



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they wanted me to be recruited because I know a lot of information about this country. So I left my dad's house. I ran away back to the neighbour country, then I left from the neighbour country to Mauritania.<sup>5</sup> From Mauritania I went by car and sometimes by walking to different places: from Mauritania to Mali, from Mali to Algeria, from Algeria to Morocco, and then to Spain, then France and, as you all know, to the United Kingdom. Several countries; several stories. I was exposed to traffickers in Mali. They locked me in a room and were asking for money;<sup>6</sup> otherwise, I would be a slave to work with them. In Morocco I was beaten by the police when I was trying to go through Melilla—and even in France. To be honest, I was careless until I arrived in this country,<sup>7</sup> to come and speak eye to eye to people who can understand my feelings and understand my voice. These are all the circumstances. I can say my story, if you want to hear it, from when I went from my country to arrive in this country.

**Q288 Chair:** Yes, tell us more about it. When you left, did you know where you were going to? Did you have a place in mind?

**A:** No. I just had some pictures that I will go through Mauritania to Mali and then Algeria, then Morocco and then Spain. In Mali, I was exposed to someone who beat me and put a knife in my chest. He was asking for money, because he knew that the people coming through this country were just passing, so he wanted to take advantage. I paid a lot to him until he left me. I went through Algeria and the police caught me and sent me back through the border into Niger in the desert alone, fighting my faith and my destiny. In Morocco, I was trying to go to Spain. The police beat me—they slapped me, actually—so I tried to go through the sea. I'm that person who is always putting himself on the line.<sup>8</sup> I was always on the sea, from Morocco to Spain. When I arrived in Spain, I claimed asylum. I claimed asylum because of Dublin III, and everyone knows that I am running just for peace and for safety.<sup>9</sup> In Spain, I stayed there for less than one month. I didn't find anything, actually; I found myself in the street. I was trying to take my right as a refugee, as someone who is known in this country. My country has been destroyed, so I just wanted a

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<sup>4</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The rebels said they would only let A out if he agreed to be recruited by them.

<sup>5</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I couldn't stay in Saudi Arabia, because I had no rights as a foreigner. I also couldn't stay in Yemen, because I did not want to be recruited by the rebels."

<sup>6</sup> Additional note from witness following session: They asked A for \$500, which he paid.

<sup>7</sup> Additional note from witness following session: By "careless", A means that he felt left out, uncared for, without a place in any society.

<sup>8</sup> Additional note from witness following session: By this, A means: "I'm a person who is always having to take big risks to get to safety."

<sup>9</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A knew that it says in Dublin III that the first safe country in Europe that is reached by an asylum seeker is the one responsible for assessing his/her claim.



stable life. I know a little bit of Spanish, so it was a good thing to start my life in Spain. The Spanish are nice, but the processes there are not very good. I can show you my papers. Actually, I arrived in March, but they do not provide a home.<sup>10</sup> They gave me an appointment in February.<sup>11</sup> I don't know if I have it here for you or not. Hang on a second. Yes, this was the 11th, 2019. During that time I found myself on the street in Barcelona.

Q289 **Chair:** So you arrived in Spain in which month?

**A:** I arrived in 11, 2019.

Q290 **Chair:** You arrived in November 2019 and your appointment wasn't until February.

**A:** Yes, so I found myself on the street. Then I found myself in Paris, then from Paris to Calais. I stayed there because I wanted my own tent. This was my dream: to have my own food alone and to stay in peace. This was my purpose in Calais, but I met a lot of people that wanted to go to the United Kingdom, so I understand a little bit about this country and the processes there. Until February I didn't enter this country, so I said, "Well done."<sup>12</sup> I tried to go to this country, but the time is passed, so I went back to Spain to take my rights, and that was the end because I did not want to risk dying again.<sup>13</sup> On the 1st January of this year I was stuck in the sea alone. I was in fear of my life because I was trying to go to the United Kingdom as a chance, but it was a really horrible and miserable time for me until this moment. I will never forget that time that I nearly died alone in the sea. I went back in February<sup>14</sup>—

Q291 **Chair:** You tried to get across the sea in a boat on your own?

**A:** Yes, by the beach.<sup>15</sup> I was alone, so I was screaming alone, "Someone help me," but I was in the water for one hour. In the winter your body will stop. You can cry out a lot, but no one will help you. You say that you are coming from your country.<sup>16</sup> It was better to die nearer to your family. It was hard for me. So, in February, I give up. I said, "I can't." It was more

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<sup>10</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A meant to say November, not March.

<sup>11</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This appointment was at the Red Cross, to get accommodation.

<sup>12</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A had tried to get to the UK but by February had not managed to, so decided to go back to Spain for the Red Cross appointment.

<sup>13</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I had already risked my life trying to get to the UK and didn't want to face this again."

<sup>14</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A went back to Barcelona.

<sup>15</sup> Clarification: A was trying to swim from the beach into the port, where he wanted to try to get on a boat.

<sup>16</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I've left my country, travelled all this way, just to die here."



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than I could do. In Spain they do not provide anything for me, and I cannot go to any country. It is not by my own choice. I am here regarding to a law. I went back to Spain in February to take my rights, and when I met them there they gave me a further appointment. I can show you. Here is the paper that gave me a further date. I want you to read it for me, please, ma'am.

Q292 **Chair:** 27 October.

**A:** October 2020. Until this moment, if I was in France, I would be on the street. On the street there are a lot of junkies, drug dealers. I do not want to speak about the street, but I am careless<sup>17</sup> until this moment because I have lived in the UK for seven months and nothing has happened regarding me. Nothing. I am just in the hotels, in several hotels, from country to country, from Wales to England. I was detained twice.<sup>18</sup> Regarding the law—you know the law—it is justice, but sometimes the law has no eyes and no ears to understand what is going on. I have been detained twice, facing going back to Spain, and in Spain they do not provide anything. They do not provide enough. This is why I am here.

Q293 **Chair:** When you went from Spain to France, what was the reason for travelling to France?

**A:** It was to search for another country.

Q294 **Chair:** So you went to Calais because there were other people there that you knew, or was it for a different reason?

**A:** In Paris I met some groups—bad groups, actually. By mistake I met someone from Eritrea. He said that he would go to Belgium and then he would try to go to United Kingdom, but I told him, "What's the reason?" He told me he had another reason, so he put this idea in my mind that there are some people in Calais that are eating and they have their own tent. It was good to try. If I enter the UK, it is good. If not, I will have to seek my rights in Spain, but nothing happened. To be honest, even in Spain I sent a formal letter to United Nations to ask them about my rights. This is a part of my email. I could send it to you. It is in my name. But nothing—no one is helping.

Q295 **Chair:** When you travelled across from France to the UK, when you finally came across the channel, how was that organised—how did that happen?

**A:** It was the second time with these traffickers. I crossed with 13 others; I was the 14th one. It was so horrible: the waves were so high, I never thought that I would live. I said, "This is the third time I have tried this sea and always it disappoints me, so I think this time I will die." I survived. I arrived at Dover. At Dover, they released my friend to Liverpool, but they detained me directly—in March.

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<sup>17</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "Careless" has the same meaning as at footnote 7, above.

<sup>18</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The first time (March 2020) was 20 days. The second time (August-September) was one month.



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Q296 **Chair:** Did the traffickers ask for payments for everybody getting on the boat?

**A:** I don't know about everybody, because I was the only one from this nationality; they were from others. But I paid.

Q297 **Chair:** Thank you very much for describing that. We will have lots of other questions, but thank you for doing that. Sam, can you tell us about your reasons for leaving and the journey that you took?

**Sam Rahimi:** My name is Sam and I am from Afghanistan. I live in London. I was 15 when I left my house. My dad died when I was two or three. He had been a member of the Taliban. I was studying at the mosque in my village. Because my dad died when I was two or three, my uncle had to manage everything in our family, because he lived next to us. He was in the Taliban as well. He was a good senior member of the Taliban, so he wanted me to study at the mosque probably till I was 17 or 18 and then take me to Kandahar with him. I liked playing cricket and I liked to study, but he would not allow me, because he said, "If you're doing these things, you'll go astray." Even if he wasn't there, he would say to the person in the mosque, "How is he doing?" Or he would ask other village people, "How is he doing? Is he doing cricket or other things? Is he focusing in the mosque?" But when he was in Kandahar, he would only come after five months, four months or six months, so I thought, "Okay," and I joined the school.<sup>19</sup> I would go only when he wasn't there. I studied there for three or four months, and he found out that I had been going to a school—someone may have told him—so when he came back home, he was beating me, and my mum. He was saying, "Didn't I tell you? Don't go to school. Didn't I tell you? Don't do this."

Then, with the cricket—I really, really liked cricket. Cricket is everything for me, so I had to go to cricket. I've been beaten quite a few times for cricket. I was playing cricket; I was studying and going to mosque, but I wanted to do other stuff as well. But he wouldn't allow me to do that. Then someone told him, "You know he's been playing cricket all day. He doesn't come to mosque as often." Then he called my aunt's husband. My aunt's husband lives there as well. He told them, "Tell him I am taking him within two or three days. You need to be prepared. I am coming to take him to Kandahar." He was furious. He was, like, "Why didn't you focus on your study at the mosque?" and this and that.

So, because he was coming in two or three days, my mum was very worried. She had lost her husband—"You are the only child—I live for you, and if I lost you, it would be hard for me to live. Even if I don't see you, at least I know you will be happy."

She had to tell my aunt's husband to do something about it, because she really didn't want me to go to Kandahar. My aunt's husband had a car repair shop in Jalalabad. He was like, "Okay; I will do something about it—we still have time." But over that night, because he was scared—my uncle

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<sup>19</sup> Additional note from witness following the session: This school is different from the mosque school mentioned earlier in the answer to this question



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said that he might come in two or three days, but he might come early—so over that night my aunt’s husband spoke to someone who I don’t know. He took me to that person and from there we started going to Iran and then from Iran.

In Iran, it was so hard. If I knew I had to come through so much stuff like that much hardship, I probably wouldn’t have come.<sup>20</sup> It was really hard. I did not know I would have to go through so much. I thought maybe you just go in a car and straight to where you want to stay and find a safe place, but it was really hard in Iran.

Most of the time we had to walk and when you could, it was in the boot of the car. You had to sit three or four people in the boot of the car. It was really, really hard. If you didn’t want to get in, they would beat you like an animal. I saw one person—he wasn’t going to the boot of the car. They would have metal with them. If you didn’t, they would smash you; they didn’t put any value on you. They would smack you. So, one of the guys, they beat him on the head and he was beaten on the head and all the blood was coming out. We couldn’t say anything. We were 15, so we were really scared. We had to follow what they said.

It wasn’t just one occasion. We had to sit in the boot of the car, or running. It was all in the desert. There was no city. You couldn’t say, “Okay, I want to stay here.” It was all in the desert. We had to run. For water—I had to drink water, the water in the desert was all dirty, but we still had to drink it because, you know, we had to survive. There was no water provided. It was all desert. We had to run. It was hot.

I was there for, I don’t know, one month or something. It was a long journey there. Even if we had to stop, for eating, in 24 hours, you would be given something like a very small biscuit or yoghurt. You didn’t have proper food—it was just surviving.

I was going all over the place, and I was so distracted because I was missing my mum as well, so I didn’t know where I was going. My mum didn’t tell me where I was going. She said, “Okay, they will take you somewhere—a safe place.” I didn’t know where I was going. Now, I play cricket, and some of the boys’ experience was similar. Now, I know where I’ve been through. At the time, I only knew Iran. I didn’t know how many countries I passed through.

Then from there I think we went to Turkey. They sent me to Turkey. We weren’t in the cities, so you couldn’t say to them, “Okay, I want to stay here.” It was all in the desert, in police cages and this and that, and then we couldn’t all go.

Q298 **Chair:** Where did you go from Turkey?

**Sam Rahimi:** From Turkey, I think it was Bulgaria. It was all mountains, deserts and forests, and it was raining, we walked for 24 hours.. You

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<sup>20</sup> Additional note from witness following the session: “I probably wouldn’t have wanted to come”



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passed one forest and came to another and another. It was really hard for my legs and feet. I nearly gave up. I was so tired that I couldn't see anything. My feet weren't working, but I still said, "Come on. You can't stay here."

I know one person who left; he couldn't walk because of his feet. He had been walking too much in the forest, and he couldn't walk, so he had to leave. The agent said, "Okay, I can't wait for you here." They give you like 15 or 20 minutes. If it is more than 30 minutes, they say, "We can't stay here. The police will come," and this and that, so you have 30 minutes to recover. He was going through real hardships, and twice we had to wait for him. I don't know what happened with him, but he had to be left in that forest. You couldn't see the road. It was really hard.

From there, we went to Serbia, I think. In Serbia, it was similar. It was the same: walking, then a car. It wasn't like a normal car or van. Again, it was—

Q299 **Chair:** How long did the whole journey take?

**Sam Rahimi:** It was three months from Afghanistan to France, and then I had to stay three or four months in Calais. Calais was really cold. It was raining and everything.

Q300 **Chair:** Did the people who organised your journey organise it only as far as Calais, or did they tell you that you had to wait in Calais before travelling on?

**Sam Rahimi:** Yes, that was the idea: you have to wait. I don't know, but maybe my uncle or something—my aunt's husband—must have paid. He had to send me somewhere, because he was like, "You can't stay here<sup>21</sup>." We had to live in tents in Calais. It was cold, and we had to wear three or four jackets to sleep, so we had to go somewhere. He was like, "We can take you somewhere where you can live safely and have your care."

Q301 **Chair:** Did anybody tell you when you got to Calais that you could claim asylum there?

**Sam Rahimi:** No. No one told us "Claim here" or anything. When I lived in Calais, I didn't like the place at all, because for three or four months we had to live—it was similar in the desert, so I didn't want to live there either. That agent, he was like, "I'm going to take you here where you're safe and you have everything you want educationally. You can do study, you can do this and that," but in Calais where I was, I didn't want to stay there as well. To get food, you had to wait in line for two hours; you lined up. For living, as well, there are no showers or anything. Perhaps once a month, you had to take a shower, so I didn't want to live there as well.

Q302 **Chair:** Were you offered any kind of support to go to a different centre in France, or to be able to claim asylum or get any kind of—

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<sup>21</sup> Additional note from witness following session: In this answer, "here" refers to Afghanistan



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**Sam Rahimi:** No. Nothing, no.

Q303 **Chair:** And was it the same organisation, or the same agents, who organised for you to travel from France to the UK?

**Sam Rahimi:** I don't know. Every time, it was a new person. In one country, in Bulgaria or Turkey, it was one person; in another country, it was a new person, and another. It wasn't like a friend, the person who went with you; every time, it was a new person.

Q304 **Chair:** But was it the same network, I suppose? Was it the same organisation from your family that arranged for you to travel all the way to the United Kingdom, or did they organise for you to travel just to France?

**Sam Rahimi:** Sorry?

Q305 **Chair:** Sorry. Did the same organisation organise for you to get from France to the United Kingdom—

**Sam Rahimi:** Yes.

Q306 **Chair:** Or did you have to organise that separately? Okay. And then you travelled by lorry from France to the UK. Is that right?

**Sam Rahimi:** Yes.

Q307 **Chair:** At what stage did anybody tell you that you were going to the UK?

**Sam Rahimi:** I didn't even know the UK at that time. They said "London," but I didn't know if it's a country or a city. Now I know, but at that time I didn't know that it's a city. They said, "You're going to London." That was what they were giving me, because I was 15; they said, "It will be a safe place. You can play cricket, you can play this, this and this"—all things I liked, so I was like, "Okay, so that's where I have to go," but when I was coming from home, they didn't tell me, "You're going to the UK as well." I didn't know if it's the UK or any other place, either. I lived in a village, and to my village to Jalalabad—the city—is, like, three hours. I had only been there two times, so I didn't know other cities either.

Q308 **Chair:** Thank you, Sam, for describing that. We will have some other questions as well, but I am sorry that you have had such a difficult experience. Thank you very much for describing it.

I think Mohammad has joined us. I think you can hear us, Mohammad, and that we can hear you but not see you. Is that right? Are you there?

**Mohammad:** Yes, I hear you.

**Chair:** Mohammad, thank you so much for joining us. I am Yvette; I am the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. Can you see everybody's faces, even if we can't see you?

**Mohammad:** I can't see you, but I can hear everything.

Q309 **Chair:** The different MPs who are on the Committee are all sitting



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listening, and all very keen to hear from you as well. Hopefully, you have heard the questions I have been asking the others. Can you tell me what your experiences were, why you left Yemen, and what your journey was?

**Mohammad:** I left Yemen because of two reasons. The first reason is that it is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world in my country. The ballistic missiles hit randomly, in the town. If you know about the war in Yemen, there is a place called the aviation college. It is near my home; it is one hundred metres from my home. And also near the Modern school and Alnaser University. It is an area full of people. Saudi Arabia hit that place frequently. I changed the glass in my room maybe three times. I can smell the smoke from the ballistic missiles inside my home. Also, the shrapnel from the explosions—it came above my home.

Also, I escaped to my friend's house in Attan. They also hit that place. They hit that place with ballistic missiles. I had nightmares there; I could not sleep. I feel that I could die any day, because of the ballistic missiles.

The second reason is the Houthi gang that is controlling Sana'a nowadays. They took my job from me. [\*\*\*] they took my business, because they accused me of being a Government spy and sharing their information with the Government.<sup>22</sup>

Q310 **Chair:** When you decided to leave, what did you do? Where did you try to go?

**Mohammad:** When I decided to leave, I decided to go anywhere that is safe for me.

Q311 **Chair:** What did you do first? What was the next step you took?

**Mohammad:** The next step, I went to Cairo, because it is the only city we are allowed to go from Yemen to Egypt.<sup>23</sup>

Q312 **Chair:** And then from Cairo?

**Mohammad:** From Cairo, I went to Ecuador.

Q313 **Chair:** And at what stage did you decide to travel to the UK?

**Mohammad:** From Ecuador.

Q314 **Chair:** How was the journey? What journey did you take and how did you organise it?

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<sup>22</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The Houthi gang arrested him and detained him for five days. They forced him to sign a document giving them half of the business. Later, they started spreading rumours that Mohammad was a spy so they could take the rest of his business.

<sup>23</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "It was a very difficult decision for me to leave Yemen. I had to leave my whole life behind, but there were many factors that forced me to do this. I knew the journey would not be easy, but I had no choice."



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**Mohammad:** My handler told me he would sponsor me from Ecuador to the UK. He was trying to arrange the trip, but he couldn't. So he sent me to Spain.

Q315 **Chair:** Did you want to go to Spain?

**Mohammad:** No. I went there by force, because there was nowhere to go.

Q316 **Chair:** Why did you want to go to the UK?

**Mohammad:** Because I couldn't go back to my country. I was threatened by the Houthi gang. They wanted me to fight with them, they took my business, they accused me of being a spy and transferring their information to the Government and they threatened to kill me. I couldn't go anywhere. Where should I go?<sup>24</sup>

Q317 **Chair:** Did you think of claiming asylum in Spain?

**Mohammad:** First I didn't think to claim asylum in Spain, but when I arrived at the airport they took my fingerprint by force. They told me it was for security purposes, and they gave me a paper, written in Spanish. I was asking people to help me in the airport. I couldn't understand them because they don't speak Arabic and they also don't speak English. No one understood me. I was asking people randomly. No one even understood what I needed or what I wanted. Finally, maybe after three hours, I found a taxi driver who could speak Arabic. He read that paper. He told me, "You have claimed now asylum. You are an asylum seeker. It says on this paper that you're an asylum seeker." He advised me to go to an organisation called CEAR. I went to that organisation to ask them to give me accommodation and support. They told me, "We can't give you support, because there is no capacity now. You must wait for six months."

Q318 **Chair:** So what happened then?

**Mohammad:** I went also the other day to another organisation. There was a very long queue. I was waiting for five hours in the queue. Finally I heard the same sentence. They told me, "You must wait for six months." Then I slept on the street. I didn't have enough money for food. No one supported me, and I didn't know their language. I couldn't even work to feed myself or to ask for help. No one understood me.<sup>25</sup> Finally I asked my friends to help me. They gave me some help;<sup>26</sup> I went to Sweden. In

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<sup>24</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "The UK became my destination partly because I could speak good English. But if my experiences in Spain or France had been better, I would have stayed there. I would not have risked my life on the Channel crossing if I had felt safe in mainland Europe."

<sup>25</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I slept in a place where many homeless people sleep. I stayed there a week. While I was there, a gang attacked me and took my clothes. They beat me up. I went to the police station but they refused to report the crime as I didn't have an address. I showed them the documents that showed I was an asylum seeker and explained that I had not been able to get accommodation. They still refused to help me and just told me that I should find another place to sleep. I felt there was no hope for me in Spain, so I decided to leave."



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Sweden I claimed for asylum there. They gave me accommodation. They helped me, but they refused my asylum case because of my fingerprint in Spain. They gave me a visa to leave Sweden.

Q319 **Chair:** So what did you do then?

**Mohammad:** They transferred me to Spain<sup>27</sup> and again I didn't find any support. No one helped me—the same situation. I didn't know what to do. Some people there advised me. They told me, "You can go to France, to a city named Calais. There are a lot of people there. They can help you go to the UK. They will understand your situation if you describe your situation to them."

Q320 **Chair:** The people who gave you that advice—what kind of people were they? Were they also asylum seekers? Were they part of a charity or an organisation, or were they people on the street? Who was it that gave you that advice?

**Mohammad:** Asylum seekers.

Q321 **Chair:** So you then travelled from Spain to Calais. Is that right?

**Mohammad:** Yes. I stayed in Calais, yes. There were a lot of people there, in the place called "the jungle".<sup>28</sup>

Q322 **Chair:** How long were you there for?

**Mohammad:** A week.<sup>29</sup>

Q323 **Chair:** And can you tell us about the boat? You crossed by boat, didn't you? Can you tell us about the sea crossing, about what happened, about what kind of boat it was, and so on?

**Mohammad:** It's a small boat—air boat. We were 17 people inside the boat. The smuggler brought the boat at 12 am.<sup>30</sup> He prepared the boat

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<sup>26</sup> Additional note from witness following session: Mohammad was booked onto a flight from Spain to Sweden.

<sup>27</sup> Additional note from witness following session: Mohammad was removed on a flight to Spain.

<sup>28</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "While I was in 'the jungle', I was beaten by the police, who used their batons to hit me. I was scared to stay there because of the police and because there were so many smugglers. They made the jungle a very scary and intimidating place, especially as they were doing their business and the police were doing nothing to stop it."

<sup>29</sup> Additional note from witness following session: Mohammad made contact with a smuggler in "the jungle", who promised to help him cross the Channel. The smuggler said he would give him a better rate if he helped prepare a boat for the crossing. Mohammad was scared that the smuggler would hurt him if he said no, so he did this, but the next day the smuggler showed him a video he had taken of Mohammad preparing the boat. The smuggler said he would show this to the police and accuse him of being a smuggler if Mohammad didn't work for them. Because of this, he worked for the smugglers for around four days. In the end, he still had to pay the same price as everyone else for the crossing.



and we helped him to put the air inside the boat. Then at 6 am we moved from the beach to the sea.<sup>31</sup>

Q324 **Chair:** Why did you try to come across by boat?

**Mohammad:** Because I didn't know anyone who can cross by car or by other way, and it was fast to reach the UK, even if it's dangerous—but I didn't have another way to live. I didn't know where to go. It was the last chance for me.

Q325 **Chair:** Did you and the other people on the boat have to pay to get on the boat? *[Interruption.]* Are you there, still, Mohammad? Mohammad, can you hear us? Hopefully he will be able to connect back again.

A, are you still there?

**A:** Yes.

Q326 **Chair:** Hi. Can I just ask you a bit more about the boat crossing and just what it was like, and what kind of boat it was?

**A:** Of course. I remember in February we attempted to go to the United Kingdom. We were heading to a place in the jungle. We walked for two hours. At three in the morning, we tried to go to the United Kingdom, but the waves were so high. The people were screaming and crying, as was I, because I was exhausted. As I told you, on the 1 January this year, I almost died, so the second time doesn't mean a lot for me. But the people were scared and begged the driver to go back to Calais after 30 minutes from starting. They went back to Calais and everyone stayed for 20 days, as I told you, then they go again to the United Kingdom.<sup>32</sup>

The traffickers were taking my money until 10 February,<sup>33</sup> and I decided to give up and go back to Spain, to be stable without feeling all this nightmare, without even looking again to those police or to the Government in France. In the first week in Calais, I was sleeping, and they kicked my tent and asked me to move. During that time I was preparing my things, but the police banged me on my head and in my eyes. I still have the scars. I still have them, after one year. I still have it in my eyes.

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<sup>30</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This was after Mohammad and the others walked for three hours to reach the beach. He had made a first attempt to cross the Channel one day earlier – after around 15 minutes, the engine stopped and the boat wasn't going any further. When they came back to the beach, they had to walk three hours back to the jungle in wet clothes, before making the same journey to the beach the next night.

<sup>31</sup> Additional note from witness following session: During the crossing, the engine stopped twice, each time for around two hours. The second time, it was raining heavily.

<sup>32</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A meant that there was another attempt to go to the UK after the 20 days.

<sup>33</sup> Additional note from witness following session: By 10 February, A had paid 1,500 Euros to the traffickers and they had kept this money, even though he had not reached the UK.



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I hate that. Those police sometimes don't understand what is going on. Maybe I don't understand their language, but they took me to the police station.<sup>34</sup>

I went back to Spain, and after that I didn't find anything. The streets, the fights, the police, asking for help from the police, who told you there is no blood and there is no case, so nothing is here—you feel disappointed.<sup>35</sup> The traffickers call you and say there is another chance, and all you need to do is pay, so why not? You will go without even thinking.

Q327 **Chair:** So you got on the boat. What time of day or night was it?

**A:** 4 March.

Q328 **Chair:** Was it morning, afternoon, evening or night?

**A:** 4 am.

Q329 **Chair:** Four in the morning. Were there other boats in the Channel as well that you saw?

**A:** No. I didn't see any boats, but when we arrived in Dover there was a boat with us.

Q330 **Chair:** Did any other boats try to intercept you or try to stop you on the journey?

**A:** No. All the people were scared. I called the French authorities by myself to give me support, because I saw the driver was not driving well, and I felt scared about myself that time. It was the third time. I am still young and I still love this life, so I called the authorities in France to give me support. They reached me to UK borders.

Q331 **Chair:** So you rang for help from the boat?

**A:** Yes.

Q332 **Chair:** Can you say that again, so that I understand it properly? Who did you ring while you were on the boat?

**A:** I understand how it is going on in Calais, because I stayed three months. Usually the driver is only a human. Usually he is going for free, regarding to his experience.<sup>36</sup> When I saw him, he is not driving so well

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<sup>34</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A was detained for two days by the police. They asked for his fingerprints, but he did not give these.

<sup>35</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I was living on the streets. One time, a man threatened me and told me he was going to kill me. He started hitting me, then some other people stepped in and took me to safety. I called the police but they just told me to go to the hospital if I was hurt and that they would only open a case if there was blood. My concerns weren't taken seriously, because the police knew I was living on the street."

<sup>36</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The driver is usually one of the refugees who then gets to travel for free.



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and he is not taking care of those people. I called the authorities of France and they were nice in the end, so it ends with peace.

Do you want me to show you the video when the police in France banged me? You can see my face and my eyes. I will show you the other video. My eyes also have some blood in the other place. So, it was not a good feeling. From the first week, when you see this police action, you will not feel safe to say, "I'll stay in France." You would not think to claim asylum, to be honest. At the same time, if you want to go to another country to claim asylum, they will kick you back to Spain.

I asked a lot of people in Calais, and they always told me that the United Kingdom had a good reputation in how they deal with people, so there was an advantage for me and my sons to come to this country after all of that.<sup>37</sup>

**Q333 Chair:** In terms of the boat crossing itself, when you rang for help, was that the people you knew in Calais or the French authorities, who you had been asking?

**A:** Actually it came from the people in the boat, who asked if I could speak in English with the French authorities, so I called them. It was an order from the people with me in the boat.

**Q334 Chair:** So you rang the border force—

**A:** I called the police and asked for an interpreter to speak with me. I said, "I'm stuck in the sea" and I gave them the numbers on the map—how do you say it in English?—and they came to see us.<sup>38</sup>

**Q335 Chair:** When you called the UK police and the UK authorities, what did they do? Did they send out a boat to meet you? Did they respond?

**A:** Actually, I did not call the UK Border Force; I called France. The signal gave me the French border force. We were the middle of the sea. I called 999 and they answered, "Bonjour." I said, "I speak English and this is my problem." They called the UK Border Force to meet me in that area, because it was—

**Q336 Chair:** I see. So you spoke to the French emergency authorities and they contacted the UK Border Force. Did the Border Force send a boat to meet you, or were they there to meet you when you arrived?

**A:** They sent a boat to meet me in less than 15 minutes, which I appreciated.

**Q337 Chair:** When the Border Force boat arrived, what happened? What did they do?

**A:** Actually, our engine stopped twice on the sea. We were in the middle of the sea, our engine had stopped twice, and some of the people were dizzy,

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<sup>37</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A doesn't have any children currently. By "my sons" he was referring to his future sons.

<sup>38</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This refers to GPS coordinates.



so they were seeing heaven when they saw the boat. He said to the driver, "Stop the engine and stay calm." When he threw the rope, all the people wanted to jump. He said, "Stay calm," but they did not understand his language so they jumped. I was the last one because I understood, so I arrived safely. We were all taking in water because of the waves and we were freezing because of the weather.

Q338 **Chair:** So did other people jump out of the boat?

**A:** They jumped into their boat.

Q339 **Chair:** I see. What was the time in the morning when you finally arrived?

**A:** We arrived at seven. It had stopped for five hours.<sup>39</sup> It was about 40 minutes for us to arrive at Dover.

Q340 **Chair:** Mohammad, I think you are back on now. Can you hear us?

**Mohammad:** Yes, I can hear you.

Q341 **Chair:** Sorry we lost you. I was just asking A about the crossing and what happened. Can you tell us a bit more about what happened with the boat crossing and how that worked?

**Mohammad:** As I told you, we helped the smugglers to prepare a boat. Two or three of them had lifejackets and we did not, because they said, "If the police come, they will accuse you of being a smuggler, not us." So we were afraid of the police, and when we finished and arranged the boat, we jumped inside the boat and we started. After an hour, the engine stopped. We were stuck there maybe for two hours. After trying to restart the engine, the engine started again and we moved. We maybe moved for an hour. After that, it was raining heavily and the boat started to sink, because there was a lot of water inside the boat. After that, one of us called the British border authorities. They came maybe after 20 minutes. They found us stuck in the sea and they came to help us.

Q342 **Chair:** What happened then?

**Mohammad:** When they arrived, they gave us rope. Actually, half of the boat was sunk in the sea. The people who were sunk jumped first, held the rope and we entered the UK boat. They took our temperature to see if we had coronavirus and they asked us a lot of questions.

Q343 **Chair:** Did nobody on the boat have life jackets?

**Mohammad:** Yes, every one of us had a life jacket.

Q344 **Chair:** So you did all have life jackets at that point.

**Mohammad:** Yes. When we entered the boat, before we left, the smugglers took off their life jacket to give it to the refugees, to the asylum seekers, and they ran. So all of us had life jackets.

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<sup>39</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A isn't sure exactly what time he arrived in the UK, possibly around 8am UK time. He believes the whole journey took five hours.



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Q345 **Chair:** How far had you gone before the engine stopped working?

**Mohammad:** Maybe after an hour. After we moved from the beach, an hour.

Q346 **Chair:** A, can I ask you again: you said you had tried to get across by boat previously, before. Can you describe what happened then?

**A:** For me, I did not wear a life jacket because I did not have enough money to buy it, or to give to the smugglers to give me one. The same time, I tried twice, so I said, "The life jacket will not even help me any more, to be honest." But some of us had life jackets and some of us did not. If you are asking about when we arrived into United Kingdom, we arrived and they took our temperature—no, I don't think they took our temperature. We arrived before coronavirus, but they were asking if we have any circumstances, any emergency cases.<sup>40</sup> After that, they took us to Dover. It was smooth.

Q347 **Chair:** I think you said that you had tried previously on your own to get across on a boat as well.

**A:** No, I tried previously to cross from the beach to the boat<sup>41</sup> by swimming, but I got stuck in the middle of the sea. The waves, they threw me out to the middle of the sea. I was drowning.

Q348 **Chair:** So when you tried that time, you were swimming to a boat the first time?

**A:** No, I was swimming alone, through the boats, because when I arrived at the boat,<sup>42</sup> I would go inside and hide myself to enter the ship, to go with the people.

Q349 **Chair:** So you were just swimming in the sea—

**A:** Yes. After two or three minutes, all of my blood had stopped. I am a good swimmer, ma'am, but the weather disappointed me, and because I am new in this area, I did not think I would feel all of that. My body stopped, and I almost died.

Q350 **Chair:** Okay. What time of year was that?

**A:** When the people were celebrating—the first day, one month, 2020.

Q351 **Chair:** Which month was that, when you were swimming?

**A:** It was the first day of the year, 1/1/2020, when people were celebrating. I took my chance. I said, "It is a good time to hide," but it was not actually.

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<sup>40</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This was specifically regarding health/medical emergencies among people on the boat.

<sup>41</sup> Additional note from witness following session: By "Boat", A meant "port".

<sup>42</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This should read: "through the port, because when I arrived at the port".



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Q352 **Chair:** That must have been incredibly cold. Thank you. May I ask all of you about when you arrived in the UK? What happened for the first few days, when you arrived? I will start with you, N—but I think your mute is still on.

**N:** Sorry, could you repeat that again, please, if you don't mind?

**Chair:** I was asking about when you arrived in the UK. What happened when you first arrived in the UK?

**N:** When I came to this country, it was Northampton, along with two Iranian men in the lorry. It was evening when the lorry parked in the petrol station to put some fuel in. The guys I mentioned—I don't want to repeat it all, but I started from there. The driver called the police, the police came, and they took the two men somewhere else. They took me to the police station and called for a translator; then they were speaking to me in my language, which is Pashtun.

They were asking me questions: my date of birth, my name, my family names, how I came, do I have people here—family and things like that. Then I told everything to them. They gave me some food there as well, in the police station. I was there for about a couple of hours, then they said, "We will take you somewhere. You stay there for the night, then in the morning we will hand you to a social worker, who will take you to a foster family."

In the morning, they took me to an Afghani family—from Northampton to Coventry. I stayed with them for some time. They had a new child, and they were working as well—the guy was working in a factory. They had too many responsibilities, so my social worker came and brought me to Birmingham where she gave me to another family.

I lived with that family for four years. When I turned 18, I had to leave, because another foster child was coming to their house, so there was no place there. My social worker came and took me back to Northampton, because I am registered there.

I was there for about one week, but I was travelling all the way to college—I was attending Solihull College, near where I live now. Every day I was travelling, and my teacher said to me, "You look tired this week," and I said, "I have been travelling all the way from Northampton. I wake up very early." He said, "Speak to the office. Go there, and they will probably give you accommodation here"—they have blocks of flats, where students were living. They gave me a flat, and I stayed there when I was studying there. Then I applied for a council flat.

Sorry, I think I went too far. In the first place, when I was with the first Afghani family, my asylum process was started. After about, I think, three or four weeks, we went to a solicitor, I think—yes, a solicitor. I told everything, what happened to me in Afghanistan and why I came, where I lived. But I didn't spend that much time in Coventry—it was one and a half months, and I went to school there as well for a bit.



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Then everything changed suddenly, when they brought me to Birmingham. I was registered with a solicitor, but I think they were closed or something, so I had to find another solicitor. Things were a bit messed up with my case as well, because the other solicitor was closed or something; I can't remember why—he went to a demonstration or something. I told my case and everything to the new solicitor, and that is how my asylum process started.

When I gave everything—my case and stuff—they refused my case. I was 14 years old, and they gave me a three-and-a-half-year status, because of my age—it was not leave to remain—until the age of 18. When I turned 18, I reapplied, and after that my life became a nightmare. [\*\*\*] I was campaigning for my right to stay here. I was studying public services. I want to be a firefighter.

I was going to courts—first-tier tribunals for immigration. It was a joke, to be honest with you. I used to go there, and after one month my case was turned down. The Home Office were asking me for evidence and things. How can I get evidence when I am 13 years old and have run away from my country? I had never been to school here. I lost my dad, I lost my mum, and my brother is still missing in Afghanistan; the Red Cross is trying to find them. I lost all my family and everything. That did not hurt me as much as I have been hurting in this country. I have been through a lot here.<sup>43</sup> It has affected me in education ways. I used to sit during exams and think about court, because it was coming up, and stuff like that. Sorry, I think I am going too far.

**Q353 Chair:** It's alright. N, are you living and working in Birmingham now?

**N:** Yes, that is correct.

**Q354 Chair:** What job are you doing?

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<sup>43</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I had an English exam in college about one week before my court hearing. I failed that exam because I was just thinking about the hearing. I was in a very bad condition in those years – I didn't leave my flat apart from going to college. I lost a lot of weight. During that time, I thought I might die. Mentally, I was so tired. I kept telling the truth about my case, but they didn't believe me, they kept turning it around. It hurt a lot that they didn't believe me. I was thinking about my case every single day. If they send me to Afghanistan, where would I stay? I didn't have anybody there. Nobody was helping me in the UK either. I had friends but they couldn't help. It was a terrible time for me and I'll never forget it. My foster mother could see that I had lost weight and was suffering. I think the asylum system in the UK is very bad. I left my country at a very young age, I was nearly killed on the way here, and when I got here, I went through this process and it nearly killed me again. When you're in a difficult situation, sometimes you want to kill yourself. The system is designed to make people physically and mentally tired, so they either go back on their own, they are sent back, or they kill themselves. You tell them the truth and then they say different words back to you. For example, they told me that my family is still alive and I could go back and live with them. But the Red Cross has been looking for them for eight years and can't find them. This isn't a joke – it's my life. What I went through in the UK hurt me even more than what happened to me in Afghanistan. I couldn't live a normal life."



**N:** I am working in KFC. Last year, I applied for a firefighting job, and my application was unfortunately unsuccessful. I reapplied again about 10 months ago. I am just trying to get into a firefighting job, but at the moment I am working in KFC, just to live on. I will wait for the process to start for the firefighting thing.

Q355 **Chair:** Good luck with that.

Some of the other Committee members want to ask some questions as well. Can I very briefly just ask Sam, A and Mohammad what happened when they first arrived?

**Sam Rahimi:** I came on the ship, and the truck was in the ship. When we passed the sea, the truck stopped for a long time. We had to get out at a petrol station. There was only a petrol station, no other houses or anything. There was me and one other guy—two people. We had to wave hands to— The agent was like, “The police will you take you from here,” or something, but we did not see the police. We were waving hands to random people with their car. We were there for a long time—like an hour or something—but then one guy stopped, a Syrian guy.

Q356 **Chair:** Yes, okay. A, can I ask you very briefly: when you first arrived, what happened?

**A:** They took me to detention.

Q357 **Chair:** How long did you spend in detention?

**A:** It was twice, but the first time they detained me for one month. To be honest, it was 20 to 30 days.<sup>44</sup>

Q358 **Chair:** After that month, what happened?

**A:** They leave me and, after several hotels, they detained me again, because [*Inaudible*]<sup>45</sup> Until now, I have been seven months, but because I have fingerprints in Spain my asylum is not being considered in the UK.

Q359 **Chair:** And is your asylum claim being considered here at the moment, or are they saying that it needs to be considered in Spain?

**A:** It needs to be considered in Spain. I was released one or two weeks ago.

Q360 **Chair:** Mohammad, when you first arrived, what happened?

**Mohammad:** They asked me, “Why did you come from France to here?” They took me first to the police station. I told them the truth: I didn’t feel safe in Spain and in France. If I felt safe there, I would not jeopardise my life to come to the UK. I explained to them everything, and after four days in Dover they released me.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The first time A was detained, it was for 20 days.

<sup>45</sup> Additional note from witness following session: Because “I had an asylum application in Spain so they wanted to send me back there”.



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**Chair:** Thank you. Other Members have questions as well. Let us go to Diane Abbott first.

Q361 **Ms Abbott:** Hello. I want to ask Sam and N the same question. I understand why you left your country, but when you did, had you made up your mind that you were going to London? Sam? N, can you hear me?

**N:** Yes.

**Ms Abbott:** I understand why you left your country, but when you did, had you made up your mind that you were going to London?

**N:** No.

Q362 **Ms Abbott:** So when did you decide that you were going to London?

**N:** Sorry, let me just repeat so I have understood you. When I came from my country, Afghanistan?

**Ms Abbott:** When did you decide that you wanted to go to London?

**N:** I did not decide it. That was my mum—all done for me—and she handed me to an agent, a smuggler, and that is how my journey started. He took me to Kabul, which I said earlier, when Yvette asked me questions. That was in 2009. I did not decide anything; it was my mum. I was very young—a child at that time.

Q363 **Ms Abbott:** Did your mother know that she was sending you to London?

**N:** Well, no, I don't know if she knew or not. I do not know anything about that. I did not know I was coming to England. I did not know at all. She just handed me to the guy—the smuggler—and he took me to his house, from Uruzgan to Kabul, which is the capital. Then, I was staying with kids at that time in his house.

Q364 **Ms Abbott:** That's fine—you did explain all that to us. I want to try to understand at what point you decided to come to London, but you are saying that it was not your decision, it was your mother's?

**N:** Yes.

Q365 **Ms Abbott:** Is Sam there? I seem not to be able to see him on my screen.

**Chair:** Sam's screen seemed to freeze. I am not sure whether he is still on.

**Antonia Cohen:** I am just texting him to see if he is still around. It froze.

**Chair:** Thanks, Antonia.

**Antonia Cohen:** I can answer the question if that is appropriate, but I understand—

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<sup>46</sup> Additional note from witness following session: Mohammad was detained again a month later, this time for 20 days, due to his fingerprints being taken in Spain.



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**Ms Abbott:** I am sure you can, but I was trying to ask the men themselves. Thank you, Chair.

Q366 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I just say thank you to our witnesses for talking to us and explaining your stories to us today? It has been really interesting, so thank you for that. I want to ask a question to A and Mohammad about their experience in the boat. Was it all men in the boat when you came across? Were there any women or children in the boat?

**A:** For me, we were 14. We were all men, but the other boat had around four women.<sup>47</sup>

Q367 **Dame Diana Johnson:** The other men on the boat—do you know where they came from?

**A:** Some of them were from Syria, some of them were from Iran, and some of them were from Sudan. This is what I saw from the nationalities in Dover. But my boat was only two nationalities. I was the only one from Yemen, and the others were from Syria.

Q368 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Mohammad, are you able to say whether you had any women or children in your boat? I don't know whether you are still there.

**Mohammad:** I can hear you. No, there were no women. We were 17, all of us men.

Q369 **Dame Diana Johnson:** And do you know where the people came from in your boat?

**Mohammad:** Syria and Palestine, and there were two Iranians.

Q370 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Could I just ask one other question? A, you talked about, and gave examples of, how you were treated in Spain and France. You told us that you were given appointments a long way ahead in Spain to be dealt with as an asylum seeker, and that you did not have any accommodation. What did the Spanish authorities say to you about what you should do if you had nowhere to live? What were they saying to you?

**A:** Thank you for your question. Actually, I asked them how I can survive. In Barcelona, they told me there is a homeless shelter—it is like a hotel. You will come at 9 to enter, and you will leave at 7. I tried twice, but all of those people are not refugees. I'm sorry to say that there are homeless. They treated me as a homeless person, so when I was sleeping, I was sharing my room with four. They were drunk and they were annoying me, and I could not sleep with them. With regards to language, I did not understand them clearly. It was a bad experiment to stay in the homeless shelter for this long. Until this moment, I should just stay in [*Inaudible*].<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "The other boat" refers to a second boat that arrived in Dover soon after A's boat.

<sup>48</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This should read: "If I had stayed in Spain, I would still be in that shelter now."



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Even the food—they provide one meal, which is the lunch, and they do not provide anything more. So fight for your faith in Spain.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Just one other question, if I can. Actually, Sam has gone, hasn't he? I wanted to ask him about France and what happened when he was in Calais, but that's fine.

Q371 **Adam Holloway:** Thank you very much for coming. It is a very interesting session, and I am very relieved to hear that Britain treats people rather better than Spain and France do. A, I also noted your comment about not having enough money to buy a lifejacket. I would be very interested to hear from the three of you who remain, particularly Mohammad, who has crossed so many countries across the world, how much you think the total cost of your journeys was? They lasted many, many months—many countries, many smugglers. Perhaps N can go first. I know your mother paid, but do you have any idea what it cost?

**A:** For me, I think I have spent over £11,000 until this moment.<sup>49</sup>

**N:** As I said earlier, I don't know anything at all about how much it cost. It was all arranged by my mum. She gave me to an agent, and then he brought me to the capital. After that, my journey started. As far as I know, she did not mention anything. Since I left Kabul, I have not spoken to her again. I don't know how much she paid; I don't know anything at all.

Q372 **Adam Holloway:** Mohammad, how much do you reckon you paid in total?

**Mohammad:** In total, more than \$13,000.

Q373 **Tim Loughton:** Sorry I missed the first half of this session—I had a debate—so forgive me if I repeat anything that has been said already. I am interested to know—this is really following what Diane Abbott was trying to get at—what you were told about the United Kingdom from the smugglers you were with or from other people. What we want to know is why you thought the UK is the place to end up?

**A:** First of all, when I arrived in Spain and found myself in the street, to be honest with a lot of people there was racism regarding their feelings. A lot of people who came from the north of Africa stole from them, so they look at me as a thief. In France, I didn't find this clearly, but what I love about the United Kingdom is that there is a lot of variety and nationalities. I heard before I came that they treat refugees well and they have justice, such as this thing, so that is what made me attracted to coming to this country and telling my story: "This is what happened to me, and I need to be cared for by this country."

Q374 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but who told you that the UK treats refugees well and that it is a very diverse country? How did you find out that information?

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<sup>49</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A sold all his possessions to raise this money, including his land in Yemen, his car and his phone.



**A:** In Calais, you find a lot of refugees who have the same goals, and you ask them, as I find myself asking: why especially this country? I asked myself many times why I chose to go to the United Kingdom. Actually, I go to the United Kingdom just because of my language. I could speak this language clearly. In Spain, the translations are not good, or they do not explain what I could say.<sup>50</sup> I came to this country to speak directly, eye to eye, face to face. In other countries, I don't think I could do that. That is one of the things for me.

Q375 **Tim Loughton:** In Spain and France—forgive me if you have already said this—did you come in contact with police, immigration officials or refugee agencies that gave you advice, or did you avoid all of them?

**A:** As I said, from the first of the week, I was hit by the police, so I took this idea from my mind. In any country, I should feel safe when I meet the police. I have anxiety because of them. I never in my life thought that the police in Europe that will bang me because of nothing. In France, I excluded this idea.

Q376 **Tim Loughton:** So you spoke to the police in Spain and in France, and they treated you badly. What did they tell you to do?

**A:** I'm sorry; I think your signal is not—

**Tim Loughton:** The police in Spain and France that you had contact with treated you badly.

**A:** No, the police in Spain didn't treat me badly, but I was in the street and there was a fight. There was someone who came to fight—they were threatening me directly—so I called the police and they didn't help me, because they said, "If there is no blood, we cannot help you." In France, they banged me directly; there is no need to explain more.

Q377 **Tim Loughton:** And N, what is your experience with the authorities in the countries you were in?

**N:** At the time, I was in Dunkirk, which is not far from Calais. At that time, it was very tough. I don't really remember that much. It was 11 years ago. I had a friend who really wanted to cross and come to this country. He went with another smuggler, and he went in the morning. He actually got in the lorry at the back of the tyres, and he was just hiding there.<sup>51</sup> Nobody knew, and when the driver walked in the lorry, he started it. I wasn't there, I heard it from people, but I saw that the guy died. He picked up the back tyres,<sup>52</sup> and the guy was frozen there at the back, and

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<sup>50</sup> Additional note from witness following session: A speaks some Spanish but he doesn't speak it well enough to be able to manage without an interpreter in the asylum system. He found that the interpreters spoke northern African Arabic as opposed to Arabic from the Middle East, and he struggled to understand and be understood.

<sup>51</sup> Additional note from witness following session: The boy was hiding underneath the lorry, near the back wheels.

<sup>52</sup> Additional note from witness following session: N believes the lorry driver was checking something to do with the tyres when he found the boy, but he doesn't know



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he unfortunately died. I actually cried for days. He was the same age as me; he was 14 years old. I was having very bad dreams when I came to this country.

**Q378 Tim Loughton:** That sounds like a horrible, horrible experience, and I am sure we would all feel very badly about that, but what I am trying to understand is what people told you, or your friend or whatever, particularly given how dangerous it is to come to the UK, whether in the back of a lorry or in a boat. Why was it that you wanted to come to the UK? What did your friend tell you about the UK? Why was it so important to leave France in order to do a dangerous journey to the UK?

**N:** As I said earlier, I didn't know anything about England. That guy was with us—that young guy and me, obviously—so the smuggler was putting us in the car, and he wanted to send us here. My mum arranged it, and I think she paid for all the juniors,<sup>53</sup> but I didn't know I was coming to England. He was just putting us in the car.

**Q379 Tim Loughton:** So you could have ended up anywhere, by the sound of it.

**N:** Yes, anywhere. I was in their hands.

**Q380 Tim Loughton:** Mohammad, did you hear my question about what you were told about the United Kingdom, and how it was that you ended up in the United Kingdom and not one of the other countries you passed through?

**Mohammad:** Yes, I came here because I didn't feel that I was safe in Spain and in France.<sup>54</sup> In Spain, I was beaten by the police in the airport.<sup>55</sup> When I lived in "the jungle" in Spain,<sup>56</sup> I was beaten by a gang, and when I went to the police station, because I was an asylum seeker, they didn't even make a report. They didn't help me, and they didn't come to me to see what happened; they just told me, "Okay, okay. Go to sleep in another place."

**Q381 Tim Loughton:** So they didn't do anything to protect you. You were  

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exactly.

<sup>53</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I think she paid for the whole journey".

<sup>54</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "Even when I lived in Yemen, I had an idea of the UK as somewhere where people are respected, where people have their rights, and where there is no racism. I heard this from the news media and from social media."

<sup>55</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "The police also took my phone, jacket, shoes and bag and detained me. I asked to have my jacket and shoes and they refused to give them to me. This happened when I arrived from Ecuador. This was my first impression of Europe and it shocked me."

<sup>56</sup> Additional note from witness following session: This is the place in Madrid where lots of homeless people sleep. Like the camp in Calais, it is known as "the jungle".



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assaulted, and they basically just said, "Go away."

**Mohammad:** Yes, they did nothing. The guy I spoke to was a police officer. I told him everything; I showed him the scars on my body and said, "A gang hit me." He did nothing. He told me, "Okay, go another way." He asked me, "Why are you sleeping in the street?" I explained to him, told him that I was an asylum seeker; I showed him my papers. They didn't give me accommodation. He told me, "It's not my problem."

Q382 **Tim Loughton:** And while in France, what did you experience there?

**Mohammad:** In France, I saw many gangs there. They took a photo and told me, while I was preparing a boat, to help them. They threatened to tell the police I am a smuggler—to accuse me of being a smuggler. Also, once, a police officer hit me in "the jungle". They hit many people there; they tried to take them out of "the jungle".<sup>57</sup> I do not know what happened there. They were speaking French; I didn't understand them.

Q383 **Tim Loughton:** Who told you about coming to the United Kingdom? Why was it the United Kingdom, rather than another country next to France, that you ended up in?

**Mohammad:** In Spain, one of my friends advised me to go to the UK. He told me you will not be able to live here, and they will give you nothing.

Q384 **Tim Loughton:** So it was purely because you had heard that the system is much more generous to asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. That was what you were told.

**Mohammad:** Yes, and also because I can speak English, and I heard that the UK treat human beings in a good way and I will find people to take care of me.<sup>58</sup>

Q385 **Tim Loughton:** Who did you hear that from? Where did you get this information that the UK is so much better than all the other European countries that you could have gone to?

**Mohammad:** From the internet. From Facebook, to be honest, I heard about it. I heard from people in France and in Spain. When I arrived in Calais, I heard about a lot of people who seek UK, but they are in France. Why do they not want to claim asylum in another country? I ask myself also, if I find myself safe in another country, why will I jeopardise my life? Why seek the UK? There is no choice.

Q386 **Tim Loughton:** You came from Yemen, didn't you?

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<sup>57</sup> Additional note from witness following session: Mohammad means that the police tried to force people to leave, often using physical aggression. People staying in the camp also received written notices to leave.

<sup>58</sup> Additional note from witness following session: "I wanted to be somewhere I would be treated fairly and would be safe. I'm happy that I have accommodation in the UK, but the asylum system isn't easy and I'm disappointed that I'm not currently allowed to work, study or improve my English. I had a very good life in Yemen and left purely to reach safety."



**Mohammad:** Yes, from Yemen.

Q387 **Tim Loughton:** Did you have any links with the UK when you were in Yemen? Did you think that you would end up in the United Kingdom when you left Yemen?

**Mohammad:** To be honest, when I left Yemen, I just want to travel to any safe country, but in Ecuador, I thought about England because I speak English, so I thought it will be easier for me to communicate with people here.

**Tim Loughton:** Okay. Thank you, Chair.

Q388 **Chair:** We need to finish in a moment, but can I briefly ask you a question, Sam? I think you had to do the age assessment when you first arrived, and you had difficulties with it. Is that right?

**Sam Rahimi:** Yes.

Q389 **Chair:** We are about to run out of time, but could you quickly tell us what happened?

**Sam Rahimi:** Another Syrian guy had a friend, and he took me to his friend who was in Croydon. It was late night, about 11 or 12, so he said, "You stay there and I will take you to the Croydon Home Office tomorrow." I went there and a woman asked if I am 15, and she was like, "Okay. We will arrange this, this, that." But then the other woman came. She was like, "No, your hands look big," or something, "You are 25." So I was like, "Okay. I lived in Afghanistan. It is very hot; it is so different than here. So it is obviously different with the hands and everything. The weather is so hot." Other than that, they did not discuss any more. "You are 25. That's it." And then they give me the card, and we were there for four or five hours sitting there. And then they take me to the adult place.

In the adult place, we had to live like four people<sup>59</sup>. The other adults were 30 or 35. One of them was 40. They were smoking and everything. I cried so much. I couldn't eat, I couldn't do anything. I didn't want to live with three people that were smoking. Then, one other guy—he was far advanced staff; he was working in the office because he was big in that adult place—he told me, "You are not 25. You know you are 15. You go to the Refugee Council." I said I don't know anything, so he gave me a ticket for the bus. Where I live now is nearer than where I lived before. So there was one man, and he took me to the bus and then we went to the Croydon Refugee Council.

I stayed for three days in that adult place. I couldn't eat anything. Then I was told, "I am taking you to Liverpool tomorrow." This is when the guy was like, "No, you should go to the Refugee Council." Then from there—someone from the Refugee Council took me to Peckham. And then in Peckham, in Southwark borough, they did my age assessment and everything. It was going on for long. From that time, I lived with a family,

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<sup>59</sup> Additional note from witness after the session: four people lived in one room.



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but it was still going on for long—for one year or something. Then finally it was sorted, but it was a really big headache.

**Chair:** Thank you. We very much appreciate your time and your talking about experiences that must have been immensely difficult, so thank you very much for your time this morning and the very best wishes to you. We have to close the session now, because we all have other sessions that we need to start shortly, but we are very grateful for your time this morning. This evidence will be hugely informative for the report that we are doing on this issue. I think that Elizabeth and the rest of the team who work with the Committee will be in touch with all of you about the transcript, to make sure that we have not got anything inaccurate and that we have all the information properly. I thank also the Refugee Council and Migrant Voice for helping us to organise today's session. Thank you very much, all of you. We are wishing you the very best.