

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## European governments return nearly 10,000 Afghans to risk of death and torture

- Returns from Europe increase as Afghanistan becomes more dangerous
- Europe governments are wrong to claim parts of Afghanistan are safe
- 2016 was deadliest year on record for civilians and 2017 is going the same way

European governments have put thousands of Afghans in harm's way by forcibly returning them to a country where they are at serious risk of torture, kidnapping, death and other human rights abuses, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

At a time when civilian casualties in Afghanistan are at their highest levels on record, the new report says, European governments are forcing increasing numbers of asylum-seekers back to the dangers from which they fled, in brazen violation of international law.

The new report, [\*Forced Back to Danger: Asylum-Seekers Returned from Europe to Afghanistan\*](#), details harrowing cases of Afghans who have been returned from Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany only to be killed, injured in bomb attacks, or left to live in constant fear of being persecuted for their sexual orientation or conversion to Christianity.

“In their determination to increase the number of deportations, European governments are implementing a policy that is reckless and unlawful. Wilfully blind to the evidence that violence is at a record high and no part of Afghanistan is safe, they are putting people at risk of torture, kidnapping, death and other horrors,” said Anna Shea, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Refugee and Migrant Rights.

Afghans forcibly returned from Europe, the report says, include unaccompanied children and young adults who were children at the time when they arrived in Europe. Several people Amnesty International interviewed for the report were sent to parts of Afghanistan they had never known, despite the dangerous situation and impunity for crimes such as torture.

“These returns brazenly violate international law and must stop immediately. The same European countries that once pledged support for a better future for Afghans are now crushing their hopes and abandoning them to a country that has become even more dangerous since they fled,” said Horia Mosadiq, Amnesty International’s Afghanistan Researcher.

### ***Forcible returns and civilian casualties soar***

The numbers of forcible returns from Europe have soared at a time when civilian casualties recorded by the UN are at their highest levels.

According to official EU statistics, between 2015 and 2016, the number of Afghans returned by European countries to Afghanistan nearly tripled: from 3,290 to 9,460. The returns correspond to marked fall in recognition of asylum applications, from 68% in September 2015 to 33% in December 2016.

At the same time, the numbers of civilian casualties have risen, according to statistics from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

In 2016, according to UNAMA, 11,418 people were killed or injured. Attacks on civilians took place in every part of the country and most of them were carried out by armed groups, including the Taliban and the so-called Islamic State. In the first six months of 2017 alone, UNAMA documented 5,243 civilian casualties.

On 31 May, in one of the largest attacks in Kabul’s history, more than 150 people were killed and twice as many injured when a bomb exploded near several European embassies.

### ***Killed, injured and living in fear of persecution***

Amnesty International researchers interviewed several families who hauntingly described their ordeals after being forcibly returned from European countries, losing loved ones, narrowly surviving attacks on civilians, and living in fear of persecution in a country they hardly know.

**Sadeqa** (not her real name) and her family fled Afghanistan in 2015 after her husband Hadi was kidnapped, beaten and released in return for a ransom. Hazzarding a months-long journey, they arrived in Norway with

hopes of finding a safe future. The Norwegian authorities denied their asylum claim and gave them a choice between being detained before being deported or being given EUR 10,700 to return “voluntarily.”

A few months after returning to Afghanistan, Sadeqa’s husband disappeared. Days passed without any knowledge of his whereabouts. Hadi had been killed. Sadeqa believes his kidnappers murdered him and now even fears visiting his grave.

**The Farhadi family** were also forcibly returned from Norway, in October 2016. The following month they were near the Baqir-ul-Uloom mosque in Kabul when it was bombed, killing at least 27 people. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the armed group calling itself Islamic State.

The intensity of blast was such that Subhan Farhadi, then two years old, fell from his mother’s arms and was injured. When the family returned home, Subhan began to bleed from his ears. He continues to suffer pain in one ear, several months after the attack.

**Farid** (not his real name) fled Afghanistan with his family when he was a child. They first made their way to Iran and he subsequently fled alone to Norway, where he converted to Christianity. In May 2017, he was deported to Kabul - the site of the highest levels of violence in Afghanistan, accounting for 19% of all civilian casualties in the entire country in 2016.

Farid had no memories of Afghanistan. Now, he lives in fear of persecution, in a country where armed groups including the Taliban have targeted people for converting to a different faith from Islam. “I am scared,” he told Amnesty International. “I don’t know anything about Afghanistan. Where will I go? I don’t have funds to live alone and I can’t live with relatives because they will see that I don’t pray.”

**Azad** (not his real name), who also grew up in Iran, fled to the Netherlands with his brother. Returned to Afghanistan in May 2017, he identifies as gay and is fearful that his sexual orientation will be discovered by people who wish him harm. He was so frightened of being returned, he attempted to commit suicide prior to his deportation. “I try to be a man here. I’m losing my mind. I am fearing a lot at night – I am really scared,” he told Amnesty International.

***“A poisoned cup”***

Far from being ignorant of the dangerous situation in Afghanistan, European governments recognized it when the European Union (EU) signed the “Joint Way Forward,” an agreement to return Afghan asylum-seekers.

In a leaked document, EU agencies acknowledged Afghanistan’s “worsening security situation and threats to which people are exposed,” as well as the “record levels of terrorist attacks and civilian casualties”. However, they callously insisted that “more than 80,000 persons could potentially need to be returned in the near future.”

There is credible evidence that this “need” was expressed in the form of pressure on the Afghan government. Ekil Hakimi, Afghanistan’s Finance Minister, told parliament: “If Afghanistan does not cooperate with EU countries on the refugee crisis, this will negatively impact the amount of aid allocated to Afghanistan.”

Similarly, a confidential Afghan source with knowledge of the agreement described it to Amnesty International as “a poisoned cup” the Afghanistan government was forced to swallow in exchange for aid.