

Maria and Madalea, Angola

Arrived in the UK aged 15 and 7

Maria's childhood was brought to an end when her father was slaughtered in front of her by soldiers. She was imprisoned, raped and tortured

DUMPED ON OUR DOORSTEP

Thousands of children traumatised by civil war or trafficked for profit are abandoned in Britain every year. But this is no safe haven. Asylum is routinely refused – and now they face being sent home to be exploited, tortured or raped.
By Christine Toomey. Portraits: Jodi Bieber

The language of the letter will make you blanch. The scepticism and sheer inhumanity of its tone cannot fail to anger you. Or it could not if you had sat, as I have for the past hour, listening to Maria describe how her childhood was brought to an end when her father was slaughtered in front of her by government soldiers, and how she was then imprisoned, repeatedly raped and tortured.

As Maria's slight frame begins to tremble when she comes to the darkest details of her account, her young niece Madalea, who has been lying curled up by her 19-year-old aunt's side, gets up and leaves. From the next room I hear the 11-year-old singing to herself, as if to block out memories of the atrocity she too witnessed.

Maria and Madalea, 15 and 7 at the time, had tried to escape the soldiers, like everyone in their small community in a remote part of Angola, by fleeing into the forest. But most were captured and forced to march through the night to a prison, where they were abused for five weeks until soldiers opposed to the government freed them. The two girls spent the next 18 months in a refugee camp, before being smuggled ➤ 53



Antonio, Angola
Arrived in the UK aged 13
Antonio fights back tears. His parents were taken away when he was six and his brother was recruited as a child soldier

over the border into the Democratic Republic of Congo in the back of a lorry by an aid worker who had befriended Maria.

Though Maria does not say so, I later see documentation that suggests she was abused by the aid worker, who was white but whose nationality the girls did not know. Perhaps owing to a guilty conscience, he then took the two girls to an international airport and, using hastily acquired documents, accompanied them on a flight to London. From the airport he took them to a restaurant in east London, where he left them, saying he would return. When he did not come back, the girls were found crying by a customer who knew enough Portuguese to realise what had happened. She took them to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate of the Home Office, where they claimed asylum. Little over six months later their request was refused.

Like so many of the thousands of children who arrive alone in this country claiming asylum

each year, many on the basis of appalling violence, deprivation and abuse they've suffered in their own countries, the two girls were held to be lying. As far as the government is concerned, the main reason nearly all have come here is to improve their education or standard of living.

The wording of the Home Office letter in which Maria and Madalea's plea for safe refuge was refused illustrates how entrenched this culture of disbelief is. It throws into stark relief how some of the world's most vulnerable children are treated on arrival here.

The girls' account of being helped out of the country by a man the letter refers to as "the Good Samaritan" is dismissed as "implausible". "She [Maria] would then have me believe that a complete stranger helped them," it scoffs at their explanation of what happened when they sat crying in a restaurant after being abandoned. "It beggars belief," the letter continues, that neither Maria, nor her legal representative or a medical professional, had "sought to elicit information" from Madalea about her experiences in the camp, nor have her "medically tested". This takes no account of the fact that for two months the girls, whose only support initially came from the Refugee Council, repeatedly sought help at the offices of social services in the London borough where they were staying, and were refused.

As to what it calls Maria's "alleged rape", the letter says: "There was no evidence that she suffered untoward consequences like HIV or sexually transmitted diseases. Even assuming she was raped, I do not find that it was for Refugee Convention reasons but for reasons of

Hien, Vietnam
Arrived in the UK aged 11
He was driven to a town in the West Midlands, dropped off and told to wait. Nobody came, so he went up to a passer-by

sexual gratification..." In other words, her rape did not contravene the Geneva convention, which defines a refugee as a person persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, social group or political opinion – although her father was an opponent of the government. So, in the eyes of the immigration authorities, such abuse was not their concern.

A sinking feeling overwhelms me as I read the conclusion that the immigration official "does not accept" that returning them to Angola "to live in conditions, wretched as they are" would breach their human rights. Only when Maria leafs through her folder of correspondence from the Home Office and produces a more recent letter do I see that a year later, after two appeals, their account of what happened to them was finally believed and they were granted refugee status.

LIKE SO MANY OF THOSE ARRIVING ALONE, THEY WERE HELD TO BE LYING

Maria and Madalea are among the lucky few. Of the 2,500–3,500 children who have arrived in this country seeking asylum alone every year for the past eight years, on average just 5% or fewer are granted permanent refuge. Most are brought on planes by adults they hardly know, and abandoned at airports before immigration control or later at the roadside, in restaurants or close to Home Office buildings. Others are smuggled in via ports and caught by immigration authorities or dumped by the road. They are usually brought in by agents paid by relatives or others, or by traffickers trying to sell them for domestic servitude or sexual exploitation.

Until now, most such children have been given leave to remain in the UK until they are 18, after which, like unsuccessful adult asylum seekers, they are liable to "removal". But this temporary

safety net now looks set to be taken away from thousands of children from some of the world's poorest and most dangerous countries, such as Angola and Congo, and from Vietnam, where children are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked abroad. Plans are being drawn up to repatriate children from these countries once their asylum claims are rejected and appeals denied. This is part of the government drive to step up removals amid mounting pressure over immigration controls, which culminated in the home secretary John Reid's admission that the Immigration and Nationality Directorate was "not fit for purpose" in the wake of the foreign-prisoners scandal. If such a "pilot project" is deemed a success, child-protection experts fear it will mean the start of children from many more countries being swiftly dispatched back home.

I set out to speak to 10 youngsters – the average number arriving alone seeking refuge every day in this country – from the three countries initially targeted, to hear their stories and put names and faces to that stark statistic. Finding those willing to speak is no easy matter. Many are afraid. Since news of the government plan leaked out several months ago, some have gone on the run out of fear they will be returned. Of those I meet in different parts of the country – four boys, four girls and two young women, including Maria, who arrived here as children – only Maria and Madalea have been granted asylum. Half have already received the standard letter sent out to failed asylum seekers offering them financial incentives worth around £3,000 to go home voluntarily before risking arrest.

When I listen to the children's stories it becomes clear – as the British charities that work with them say – that the government views them as foreigners first, children second. That is if they are seen as children at all. Their passports frequently having been kept by those who bring them into this country, many cannot prove their age. In recent years, growing numbers are not even believed when they say how old they are. Many are wrongly deemed to be already adult, often after little more than a swift visual assessment by immigration officials.

Such age disputes have serious implications for the level of support the children receive. Those who are believed when they say they are 16 or under are placed in the care of social services, many of them with foster families. Those aged 16 to 18 receive more limited support in bed-and-breakfast accommodation or shared housing, and can gain some access to further education, while those who are deemed to be adults receive the most basic support and face being sent to immigration detention centres, where it is prohibited for children to be held.

Maria, for instance, was initially held to be lying about her age and told she must be "at least 18" on the basis, she says, "that they didn't believe a 16-year-old would be able to look after my niece the way I did". Even when social services did finally help, she was treated as an adult, left to care for her young niece alone in a hostel, then put in a shared house with adult asylum seekers. "It was terrible," she says. "As a child you know your age, but they don't even believe that."

"The culture of disbelief is so widespread that these children are thought of just as people who have been sent by their parents to get a job or an education," says Nadine Finch, a barrister and co-author of the recent report Seeking Asylum Alone, partly sponsored by Harvard University.

"All too often the children are not held to be credible because what they have gone through is beyond the experience of the person assessing them," says Sheila Melzak, principal child and adolescent psychotherapist at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, which counsels hundreds of such children every year. "There is this dance that goes on between adults who don't want to hear and ➤ 55



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There are striking similarities between Hien's early life and that of 17-year-old Viet, whom I meet at the same location on the outskirts of Birmingham. Viet's family was also drowned when he was young and, after being looked after for several years by a neighbour who he says did not treat him well, he made his way to Hanoi, where he scraped a living cleaning pots and sweeping floors in a street market. It was there that a stranger found him sleeping under a market stall, took him home and, after several weeks, told him he was going to a "better" country. "I thought he was a good man, but now I think

A person is shown in silhouette, walking up a staircase. The scene is dramatically lit from above by a single, glowing light fixture, creating a warm, yellow-orange glow that fills the walls and ceiling. The person is positioned in the center of the frame, with their hand resting on the railing. The perspective is looking up the stairs, emphasizing the height and the light source.

She was arrested after her stepfather forced her to attend an opposition rally. 'I was afraid they would kill me like my mother'

It was partly in an attempt to crack down on trafficking that a national register was recently set up to log the whereabouts of children who

Those children who need it, they argue, should be given longer than the standard four weeks – compared with 10 days for adults – to disclose through a lawyer in a written statement what has happened to them. They should also be allocated their own legal guardian to protect

TRAFFICKED CHILDREN ARE NOT ENTITLED TO PROTECTION AS REFUGEES

Sheila Melzak has worked with traumatised children for 17 years. She stresses that boys in particular find it difficult to speak up: none of the adolescent boys she has counselled has been able to divulge that he has been sexually abused ►►► 57

or raped until she has worked with him for at least six months: "Many children come from cultures where their private experiences are so perverse they simply cannot speak of them."

Oswaldo has a haunted look when he says: "I think they don't know what I have been through. If they did, they would never consider sending me back." The 17-year-old Angolan has struggled to reveal the extent of the trauma he suffered before arriving in the UK. His father, an outspoken critic of the government, was killed after being arrested on suspicion of possessing material that would compromise a leading politician.

Oswaldo was arrested and tortured in prison before a friend of his father secured his release and paid for a flight to the UK. Yet he is one of those who has recently received a letter offering him money to return to Angola after his request for asylum was turned down. "How could they believe any amount of money would make me want to go back?" he says through an interpreter.

Antonio, also from Angola, who arrived in the UK at the age of 13, says: "I don't like to talk, or even think, about what happened before I came here." The broad-shouldered 16-year-old is full of swagger and bravado as he kicks a ball around with friends. But when we sit quietly to talk, he fights back tears as he explains how his parents were taken away by soldiers when he was just six, and his elder brother was recruited as a child soldier. Antonio spent the next seven years in a refugee camp until friends of his parents arranged to bring him here. One accompanied him on a flight to London and took him to an immigration office, where he was refused asylum but given leave to remain until the age of 18. He has since been living with a foster family but knows he now faces being returned.

In contrast with the reticent Oswaldo and Antonio, Mami, 17, from Congo launches straight into some of the most wretched details of her abuse by soldiers. Mami, whose mother had been killed by soldiers when she was 10, was arrested after her stepfather forced her to attend an opposition rally. "I was afraid they would kill me like they did my mother," she says. "The soldiers kept taking me away at night. But one who came did not touch me. He said that he had a daughter the same age as me. He helped me."

The sisters Vanessa, 17, and Aurelie, 15, also from Congo, talk only of the day their father's body was brought to their house and their mother collapsed before being taken away by soldiers. "She was kidnapped; I don't know where she is," says Vanessa. "You know she's dead," says Aurelie, abruptly leaving the room as her sister sits with tears rolling down her cheeks. They say they were brought here two years ago by a friend of the priest at the church their family attended. They too have been refused asylum. All have been sent letters offering financial incentives to leave.

When I explain a little of what I am writing about to the taxi driver who takes me to the church hall in east London where I meet the sisters, his response is: "Shit happens everywhere.

58 I bet these kids know more scams than any of us



Oswaldo, Angola

Arrived in the UK aged 15

Oswaldo has a haunted look. 'They don't know what I have been through. If they did, they would never consider sending me back'

brought up in this country." It is hard not to conclude that, as far as the majority of children who arrive here alone are concerned, many immigration officials hold a similar view.

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The Home Office stresses its proposal to return many of these children is still "at an early stage". But if the scheme is introduced – and many child advocates are convinced it is only a matter of time – it confirms that it would "most likely be applied to those already in the country", not just new arrivals. Since the 1971 Immigration Act includes the provision that unaccompanied children whose asylum request and all appeals have been refused can be returned if "adequate reception and care arrangements are in place in the country to which the child is to be removed", the scheme would not require new legislation. It could be implemented with speed if such arrangements could be proved to exist.

The Home Office insists the proposal is "not far advanced", yet a team of its experts is known to have visited Congo, Angola and Vietnam in the past year, the last twice, to assess the suitability of various reception centres if they were provided with extra British funding. The Home Office says only that the visits were "fact-finding opportunities to see how to take things forward".

In Congo the team is understood to have discussed funding an Italian monastic order in Kinshasa to look after returned children. In Vietnam the option being considered is to return children to state-run orphanages. Jeremy Stoner, director for Save the Children in Vietnam, who met the Home Office team, points out that

traffickers are suspected of having drawn children from state orphanages in the past. "If those children were trafficked to the UK in the first place, there is a considerable risk they would be re-trafficked," he stresses. "We are very concerned about this. We do not feel it would be appropriate in any context."

The Home Office says Vietnam, Congo and Angola were chosen because of the large and growing numbers of children coming from these countries. Yet numbers from all three declined in 2005 – to 120 compared with 185 in 2004 from Vietnam; 145 compared with 150 from Congo; and 35 compared with 60 from Angola. The countries from which the greatest numbers have come in recent years are Afghanistan (530 in 2005), Iran (450), Somalia (235), Eritrea (195) and Iraq (170). The Home Office may balk now at returning children to countries with which we have tense diplomatic relations, or which we have recently bombed or which are in the throes of ethnic slaughter, anarchy and famine. But what does it say of its ethics that it does consider returning them to Congo, a country emerging from a civil war that has claimed the lives of 3m and where sexual violence against women and children has been widely used as a weapon of war, and to Angola, recently ranked by Unicef as one of the worst places in the world to be a child?

If you adopt the same degree of cynicism towards the motives of the Home Office as it does towards these children, you might simply conclude that they are easy targets. Unlike many of the estimated 250,000 illegal immigrants in this country, the government knows where these children are. (Apart, that is, from those who have "disappeared" from the system.) They are with foster families or in supported housing, and most are receiving some kind of education, perhaps for the first time. Many are beginning to nurture hopes about the future. Anh, Mami and Aurelie dream of becoming nurses. Oswaldo wants to become a computer engineer, Antonio a sports teacher. Hien says he wants to be an astronaut.

As with other recent proposals to move child asylum seekers to parts of the country where they can be looked after more cheaply, there is little doubt that the main reason for the proposed return of such children is cost. "This is being driven by concerns about the expense of looking after children the government doesn't think should be here in the first place," says Syd Bolton, the legal and policy officer for children at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. "But what price do you put on the life of a child?"

What beggars belief is not that a teenage girl who has seen her father murdered and been repeatedly raped and beaten will not pressure her equally traumatised younger niece to speak about the horrors she has gone through. What beggars belief is that we, one of the richest countries in the world, treat some of the world's most vulnerable children in such a callous way and are now considering washing our hands of them even further ■

Names have been changed to protect identities