

# CELEBRITIES AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY EXPERTS JOIN CALL FOR BRITISH FAMILIES TO BE BROUGHT HOME FROM UNLAWFUL DETENTION IN SYRIA

## New research shows UK public supports action to repatriate British families

- War Child UK, Reprieve, Child Rights International Network, and Human Rights Watch are calling on the UK government to urgently repatriate British families currently detained unlawfully in inhumane conditions in Northeast Syria.
- Celebrities have joined high profile signatories of an open letter to the UK government, saying that it is time to bring them home, after almost four years in unlawful and indefinite detention.
- 53% of UK adults surveyed said they would support the UK Government acting to bring home British families being detained in Northeast Syria compared to only 13% who would oppose it.

London, 13 June 2023 – War Child UK, Reprieve, Human Rights Watch and Child Rights International Network, have today launched a campaign urging the UK Government to repatriate the estimated 25 British families currently being unlawfully detained in Northeast Syria after the collapse of the Islamic State. These organisations, alongside security experts and celebrities including Stephen Fry, Stanley Tucci and Vanessa Kirby, have released an open letter to the UK government saying that it is time to bring these families home.

Most of the British detainees are children and of these, the majority are under 10 years old. They have been in unlawful and indefinite detention since 2019.

War Child commissioned a survey to assess public opinion. It found that while almost two thirds of the public were not aware that British families are currently in detention in Northeast Syria, the majority believe that British children (aged under 18) and British women who were trafficked into conflict who are now detained in camps in Northeast Syria should be treated as victims of conflict and protected by the UK Government. 60% of those surveyed believe that the UK Government has a responsibility to repatriate British families.

The UK government is out of step with its international partners on the issue. The US has brought almost all of its citizens home from the camps, and since 2019, at least 38 countries have repatriated some or many of their nationals including, in the last year alone, France, Spain, Australia, Canada, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The British families are living in squalid conditions where they are exposed daily to life-threatening violence, disease and other deprivations. Many of the British women in detention have been sexually abused and exploited, trafficked to Syria as children or coerced into travelling to the country. Boys as

young as 9 in the camps are being forcibly separated from their families and moved to other detention facilities where they endure catastrophic conditions and have little to no contact with the outside world. On average, two people are killed in the camps each week.

British children are growing up with very limited access to education, sufficient food, clean water, shelter and medical care while the government continues to refuse to bring the families back to their home country.

**Rob Williams, War Child's Chief Executive Officer, said:**

"The British children detained in Northeast Syria are innocent victims of conflict. Like all children held in the region, they have lived through violence, displacement and acute deprivation, and need specialised help to recover from their experiences. The UK should take responsibility for these British families and bring them home."

**Vanessa Kirby, War Child Ambassador, said:**

"British families are currently being held in horrible conditions where they are exposed daily to disease and violence. The majority of British people agree that the UK has a responsibility to bring back these British families and it is now time to take action."

The open letter to the government, calling for them to bring these families home and highlighting the importance of immediate action has been signed by charitable organisations, celebrities and security experts including Richard Barrett, former head of the United Nations Al Qaeda/Daesh Monitoring Team, who said:

"We can and should repatriate British families from these insecure detention centres, and reintegrate them into society, prosecuting them within the law where appropriate. Britain is being left behind as countries around the world repatriate their own citizens. If we truly believe in human rights and the rule of law, we should bring these families home; and in so doing, regain our leading role in counter terrorism and help reduce the threat of terrorism that a resurgent ISIS would bring."

Bring British Families Home is a collective of British families who have relatives unlawfully and indefinitely detained in North East Syria. They said:

"Every day we suffer the pain of knowing our loved ones are living in dangerous and inhumane conditions. Our nephews, nieces and grandchildren, many of them infants, are growing up in a desert camp, denied access to education, healthcare, and the basic rights other British children take for granted. We have sisters, cousins and aunts who are victims of trafficking but are denied the right to come home. Our families have been torn apart by the government stripping citizenship from our relatives in blanket politicised decisions, abandoning them to face death, disappearance or re-trafficking.

We watch as other countries repatriate their nationals. Their kids re-enter school, get the medication and nutrition they need. The mothers and trafficking victims get support and rehabilitation. And those who need to be prosecuted go through fair trials in courts of law. We are astonished that the British government is alone in refusing to bring back these families. That they are alone in mass citizenship deprivation. That they are financing and propping up indefinite detention centers for British children. We are appealing to the government to Bring British Families Home.”

**Maya Foa, Joint Executive Director, Reprieve said:**

“These are British families, and however much the Government pretends otherwise, they are Britain’s responsibility. Many are victims of trafficking, many others innocent children. There was never a legal, moral or security justification for abandoning them in the desert, and each repatriation by our allies exposes the UK Government’s refusal to bring them home as political posturing. Britain is the only country burying its head in the sand, vainly hoping the problem will go away. For the sake of these British children and their families, the Government must urgently rethink this damaging do-nothing policy.”

Find out more about what these families are experiencing and why this coalition of charities, celebrities, security experts and more think it's time to bring them home here:

## **ENDS**

**Notes to editors**

For more information, please contact Emily Cooper: [emily@forster.co.uk](mailto:emily@forster.co.uk) / 0203 833 4774

**About the campaign**

Please see the open letter and full list of signatories available here: [Open letter](#) | [Bring Them Home](#)

Please see the campaign video here: [Campaign videos](#) | [Bring Them Home](#)

For more details on the research and full survey findings, please contact Emily Cooper at [emily@forster.co.uk](mailto:emily@forster.co.uk) or 0203 833 4774.

**About War Child**

At War Child we are driven by a single goal - ensuring a safe future for every child living through war. We work to protect, educate and stand up for the rights of children living through conflict and go to the

hardest to reach places to support them. We aim to be there for children who need us most, when they need us most because no child's life should be torn apart by war.

Wherever we work, we are guided by the following values:

- **Accountable to children:** The safety and security of the children, communities, and staff we work with and support is our top priority. We make sure that children can rely on us to listen to what they have to say and treat them with respect and dignity.
- **Bold:** Our passion, bravery and creativity allow us to deliver high-quality projects with the maximum benefits for children living in conflict.
- **Committed to each other:** We are open about sharing both our successes and our challenges. By supporting each other and our partners we can reach ambitious goals.
- **Transparent:** We expect to be held accountable by our supporters and beneficiaries and promise to respond honestly.

For more information visit [www.warchild.org.uk](http://www.warchild.org.uk) and follow @WarChildUK

## **About Reprieve**

Reprieve is a legal action NGO. Its investigators, lawyers and campaigners fight for people who are on death row or have been tortured, imprisoned without charge or targeted by illegal and lethal drone attacks.

For more information, visit [www.reprieve.org/uk](http://www.reprieve.org/uk) and follow @reprieve