

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **JOINT STATEMENT: NGOs welcome reported move to repatriate Australian women and children from Northeast Syria**

**CANBERRA, 3 October 2022** - International aid and human rights organisations welcome news of the Australian Government's reported intent to imminently repatriate Australian children and their mothers from northeast Syria.

Save the Children Australia, the Australian Council for International Development, UNICEF Australia, Plan International, CARE Australia, Amnesty International, Islamic Relief Australia, and the Human Rights Law Centre, said the news had the potential to pave the way forward for these Australian citizens, who have suffered immensely over the past three years, to return home to their families and begin their recovery.

The reported death of Australian teenager Yusuf Zahab earlier this year provided heartbreaking proof of the critical need for Australia to uphold its obligations under international law to repatriate the women and children stuck in Syrian camps.

The first Australian children to be brought home, back in 2019, are reported to be now living normal lives in the community, attending school, and playing sport. A decision to repatriate the remaining children would provide them with the same opportunities.

**Save the Children Australia CEO Mat Tinkler said:**

*"Australians would be shocked to see the conditions Australian children have been languishing in for the past three years. They are living in uninsulated tents, exposed to the freezing cold winters and scorching hot summers, with inadequate access to nourishing food, and suffering from untreated wounds and poor mental health. We eagerly await the news of the safe arrival of these children on home soil, where their families are ready to wrap love and support around them."*

*"To the extent that any of the women have been exposed to radicalisation, or should there be evidence that crimes have been committed, Australia has a very robust judicial and national security architecture that can respond to and mitigate these risks. All of the women have offered to cooperate fully with law enforcement authorities and be subject to onerous control orders upon their arrival here."*

**Australian Council for International Development CEO, Marc Purcell said:**

*"This is a welcome decision by the Australian Government. Repatriation is in the children's best interest and Australia is legally obliged to repatriate its nationals. These children and their mothers should be brought home as a matter of urgency."*

**UNICEF Australia CEO Tony Stuart said bringing these children home now “is the right thing to do”.**

*“It is time these Australian children are brought home following the successful repatriation of eight others in 2019,” Mr Stuart said. “They have been languishing for years, based solely on family ties, and it is clear these squalid and unsafe camps are lacking many of the most basic necessities and are not fit for children.”*

**CARE Australia CEO Peter Walton said it was:**

*“An important acknowledgement from the Australian Government that our citizens remain our collective responsibility, and should be protected from harm. Despite the best efforts of CARE and other humanitarian organisations in the camps of Northeast Syria, we cannot meet the most basic needs of so many mothers and their children. It’s right that we step up and play our part.”*

**Plan International Australia CEO Susanne Legena said:**

*“The conditions these Australian children and their mothers have been subjected to are appalling, dangerous and inhumane – we agree that repatriation is the right thing to do.*

*“However, social reintegration and addressing severe trauma are complex processes, and it is critical that upon their return, the Australian Government has in place for these children – and their mothers – high quality, accessible and integrated support and reintegration services, in line with international best practices, available for as long into the future for as they are needed.*

*“We also call on the government to recognise that many girls and young women were trafficked from Australia and forcibly married in Syria and to provide them with specialised, survivor-centred support on their return.”*

**Amnesty International Australia Impact Director Tim O’Connor said:**

*‘Amnesty has long encouraged the Australian government to bring home our citizens from these inhumane camps and we welcome their efforts to do so now before these children and their mums face another life threatening winter.*

*“Many other countries have acted to repatriate their citizens and we welcome the Albanese Government moving to safely reunite these children with their families in Australia where they can get the care and support they so urgently need.”*

An estimated 1,400 children have been repatriated from al Hol and Roj camps to their home countries since 2019, including the US, France, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Eight Australian children were also repatriated by the Morrison Government in 2019. The United Nations has strongly criticised Australia for failing to take steps to uphold the rights of the remaining Australians in the camps. A letter from 10 UN

Special Rapporteurs in April decried the 'sheer obliteration' of their rights and arbitrary deprivation of their liberty.

The Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) has asked foreign governments to take back their citizens, while the US Government has previously offered Australia support to extract the women and children.

A range of non-government organisations stand ready to work with government agencies and the families of the children and women to support their repatriation and reintegration into the Australian community.

**ENDS**