

# REFUGEE COUNCIL USA

July 8, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

I am writing on behalf of RCUSA, a coalition of organizations serving and advocating for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, to ask that you, above and beyond the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, urgently welcome Afghans fleeing violence and persecution to the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), expedite family reunification petitions, and grant humanitarian parole applications.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan leaves many Afghan civilians at risk of targeted attacks from the Taliban and will likely force thousands to flee from their homes and join the millions of Afghan refugees abroad seeking safety. Many of these Afghans have family members in the United States or are being targeted because of their ties to the United States. Unfortunately, the status quo - limited refugee processing and error-laden and backlogged immigration processes - is insufficient to protect these Afghans. It is imperative that the administration take decisive action to bring these Afghans to safety.

RCUSA is encouraged that the administration is considering an evacuation to protect certain Afghans who served alongside U.S. forces. However, we are concerned that no formal plan has been articulated since the first report over three weeks ago. We are also alarmed that reports suggest the administration plans to evacuate [9,000 SIV applicants](#), far short of the 18,000 applicants currently awaiting processing and the estimated 53,000 family members in need of protection, and that the evacuation might be to the Middle East or Central Asia, rather than to U.S. soil. [American veterans](#), [70 community-based and human rights organizations](#), and nearly [200 faith leaders and faith groups](#) across traditions have called on your office to immediately evacuate all U.S.-affiliated Afghans to U.S. soil and to work with Congress to authorize as many SIVs as are necessary to meet the need. There is currently a deficit of [at least 7,100](#) visas, but it may be closer to 20,000. Given that the Afghan SIV program was created to provide a pathway to protection for those who face danger because of their service to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, it is our moral imperative to keep our promise to those we pledged to protect.

However, even if the administration plans and executes an evacuation of Afghan allies waiting for SIVs, the lives of countless U.S.-affiliated Afghans who do not qualify for SIVs, other Afghan refugees, and family members of Afghans in the United States will be in grave danger following the U.S. withdrawal. We are

Amnesty International  
Bethany Christian Services  
Boat People SOS  
Center for Migration Studies  
Center for Victims of Torture  
Church World Service  
Ethiopian Community Development Council  
Episcopal Migration Ministries  
HIAS  
Human Rights First  
International Catholic Migration Commission  
International Refugee Assistance Project  
International Rescue Committee  
Islamic Relief USA  
Jesuit Refugee Service USA  
Jubilee Campaign  
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service  
Oxfam America  
Refuge Point  
Refugee Congress  
Refugees International  
SEARAC  
USAHello  
United Stateless  
US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants  
World Relief

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concerned that the administration has provided no signals on what steps will be taken to protect this broader population of Afghans and their families. The administration must immediately open and expedite [additional pathways](#), such as utilizing the U.S. refugee resettlement, family reunification, and humanitarian parole programs, to ensure that these Afghans are not left behind.

While no one solution can provide a sufficient response, RCUSA offers the following recommendations for utilizing existing refugee and humanitarian programs to complement the Afghan SIV program:

## *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)*

The USRAP provides an important pathway to safety for Afghan refugees. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul should immediately begin referring substantial numbers of Afghan refugee cases to USRAP. The post-withdrawal security situation in Afghanistan will make future in-country processing difficult. However, USRAP could still benefit Afghan refugees who have fled Afghanistan if the U.S. government were to sufficiently expand the quota of refugee admissions, surge adjudication capacity, and address processing backlogs and delays, particularly at the security vetting stages. To effectively carry this out, the administration must build up refugee processing infrastructure in the region - in countries such as Pakistan and Tajikistan, so that Afghan refugees can be quickly interviewed and processed for admission. For example, technology to enable remote interviews should be put in place to allow for a greater number of interviews in areas where travel for refugee officers may be difficult.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) submitted only 80 Afghan refugees for resettlement to the United States in 2020 due to U.S. restrictions on refugee resettlement. The Department of State can, and should, direct UNHCR to increase individual referrals from Afghans in the region (including Priority 1 [P-1] referrals). The Department of State could also designate one or more categories of Afghans as priority groups of special humanitarian concern. These could include family members of U.S. government employees, U.S. government employees not covered by the SIV program, and other at-risk populations such as activists, journalists, and humanitarian workers. Designating these groups would provide comfort and refuge for Afghans who can send their families to a third country for safety, while they remain behind.

## *Family Reunification*

Many Afghan asylees, refugees, U.S. Lawful Permanent Residents, and U.S. Citizens in the United States suffer from prolonged separation from family members who remain in Afghanistan because of delays in the processing of family reunification applications. Moreover, their family members stuck in Afghanistan face increasing risk due to the deteriorating conditions.

Often, SIV recipients are unable to travel with their spouse and/or children and must instead apply to be reunified after they arrive in the United States through the SIV follow-to-join (FTJ) process. Processing delays at the Department of State, including delays caused by repeated embassy closures, have unreasonably delayed the reunification of these families and placed them at additional and unnecessary risk. Afghan refugees and asylees seeking to reunify with spouses and children through the FTJ process also face [severe delays](#) caused by a USCIS processing backlog, logistical hurdles in

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communicating with the National Visa Center, and interview and administrative processing delays at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Especially in light of deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan that will put the lives of spouses and children of allies who assisted the U.S. and individuals who fled persecution at further risk, the administration must expedite the processing of these petitions.

Afghans who are unable to reunify with their families through the FTJ process are forced to rely on another backlogged immigration petition called the I-130 process (Petitions for Alien Relatives). These cases face even longer delays, particularly for non-nuclear family members for whom the wait for a visa can stretch several decades. The Department of State must explore all avenues for expediting the processing of these applications and, where a family member faces delays because a visa is unavailable, the person should be paroled into the United States while they await a visa.

Ensuring that families can remain together is a critical element of the U.S. humanitarian commitment to Afghans who have assisted U.S. forces or been forced to flee because of persecution. While this administration has already affirmed that [family reunification is in the national interest](#), it must take concrete and swift action to ensure that this affirmation is actually reflected in how executive agencies process requests to be reunified with family members. The need has never been more urgent.

## *Humanitarian Parole*

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should allow some Afghans at risk of grave danger to enter the United States through humanitarian parole. While parole does not confer immigration status, through parole programs, the U.S. government can quickly admit large numbers of Afghans for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit, who can then apply for various pathways to permanent status. DHS should also establish these parole programs for groups of at-risk Afghans, such as activists, journalists, humanitarian workers, and at-risk women and children, to give them expedited access and processing. While the administration has the discretion to grant parole to individuals or create categorical parole programs, the administration should also work with Congress to pass legislation to extend refugee reception and placement benefits to Afghan parolees in the United States.

\* \* \*

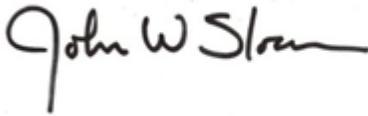
The manner in which the administration leaves Afghanistan will leave an enduring mark on our nation's history. As we draw an end to America's longest war, we must remember that our departure from Afghanistan will put countless Afghans, including many who have saved American lives, at grave risk. They include local translators, engineers, security guards, embassy clerks, logisticians, cultural advisors, and soldiers. It is our imperative to also protect Afghans fleeing violence and persecution and respond to the impending refugee crises driving displacement. As we withdraw, we cannot abandon our Afghan allies, Afghan refugees, and Afghan families in need of reunification.

RCUSA further requests a follow-up meeting with the National Security Council (NSC) and other relevant actors and agencies to discuss our recommendations around the protection of Afghans. We look forward to working closely with your administration to welcome Afghans and their loved ones and to restore America's long-standing humanitarian leadership.

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Should you have any questions or wish to discuss, please don't hesitate to contact me at [jslocum@rcusa.org](mailto:jslocum@rcusa.org).

Sincerely,



John Slocum  
Interim Executive Director  
Refugee Council USA

CC:

The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State  
The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III, Secretary of Defense  
The Honorable Xavier Becerra, Secretary of Health and Human Services  
The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security  
The Honorable Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor  
The Honorable Susan Rice, Director of the Domestic Policy Council

*RCUSA is a diverse coalition advocating for just and humane laws and policies, and the promotion of dialogue and communication among government, civil society, and those who need protection and welcome. Individual RCUSA members do not all address all refugee-related issues, nor do all individual members approach common refugee-related issues identically.*