What is happening in Afghanistan?

Over the past 20 years, the U.S. military in Afghanistan has depended on the vital services of Afghan nationals who aided with translation, interpretation, transportation, and more during the intervention there. Now that the U.S. military is withdrawing from the country, these Afghan allies and their families face significant dangers. Reports indicate that many Afghan allies and their families have been killed or targeted because of their work with the United States. These dangers are likely to increase in the coming weeks and especially once the United States has completed its withdrawal by the target date of September 11, 2021.

What is the Afghan SIV program?

In 2009, Congress created the bipartisan, humanitarian Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghan nationals who assisted the U.S. government. The program offers admission to the United States, resettlement services, and legal permanent residence for approved applicants and their family members.

Why do Afghan SIV applicants need to be evacuated?

Unfortunately, the Afghan SIV program is plagued by significant processing delays. Consequently, applicants face severe backlogs that stretch multiple years. With the U.S. rapidly withdrawing from Afghanistan, over 17,000 Afghans who served our country and their families are at risk of being left behind while they wait for their applications to be processed. [1] Failure to evacuate these people in a timely manner puts their lives in serious danger. Families that live in rural areas outside of Kabul are particularly at risk and must be evacuated before airports become compromised and insurgent groups begin to target these families.
What is the Biden Administration doing?

In a July 8 [statement](#), President Biden expressed his intent to bring SIV applicants and their families to the United States, saying, “Our message to those women and men is clear: There is a home for you in the United States if you so choose, and we will stand with you just as you stood with us.” The President further stated that relocation flights from Afghanistan would begin later this month, though he did not specify how many would be evacuated, nor where they would be evacuated to. [2]

According to White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, the Administration has “identified U.S. facilities outside of the continental United States, as well as third countries, [but] because of security reasons, we’re not going to outline and detail at this point where these are.” She also [added](#) that the Administration has “already dramatically accelerated the [visa] processing timeline” and is “continuing to work closely with Congress… so that we can streamline the process for approving visas even when they are in a third country.” [3]

Countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan are third countries being considered for the evacuation. However, these countries are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its Protocol. Therefore, sending SIV applicants there could result in long-term complications. Not only can SIV application processing take years, but there is a significant rate of erroneous denials that are corrected on appeal. [4] If an ally’s SIV application were to be denied while they wait for processing in one of these countries, they would be ineligible to seek asylum in the U.S. or come as a refugee and would face a high risk of being returned to serious danger in Afghanistan.

What are the alternatives?

Advocates are pushing for SIV applicants to be evacuated to Guam. There, applicants are protected under U.S. law and will have access to legal counsel and resources to resolve erroneous denials. They would also be able to apply for asylum if necessary.

There is historical precedence for the United States to evacuate its allies through Guam. Under the Ford Administration in 1975, 130,000 Vietnamese refugees were evacuated through Guam in Operation New Life. In Operation Pacific Haven in 1996, the Clinton Administration airlifted 6600 Kurdish allies from Iraq and again brought them to Guam. In both cases, these refugees were able to stay on the safety of U.S. soil while they were screened and their cases were processed. [5]

Because of its role in past evacuations, Guam has the infrastructure and institutional experience to host the SIV applicants and their families. In addition, the impact of the pandemic on tourism to the island has created a unique situation in which 8,000 hotel rooms in Guam are currently empty. [6] Bringing Afghan refugees to the island would not only provide the families with a safe and comfortable place to stay during screening and processing but would also boost a local economy decimated by the impact of COVID-19. Governor Lou Leon Guerrero of Guam sent an invitation to host the evacuees to the White House, but, as of a July 9 interview, said she had not yet received word on whether the offer was accepted. [7]

To protect both the evacuees and the local population, applicants and their families arriving in Guam would quarantine and receive the COVID-19 vaccine upon arrival. [8]

Some officials have claimed that SIV applicants cannot legally be flown to U.S. territory before their visas are approved. [9] However, U.S. law provides for the evacuation of allies to U.S. territory. The Department of Homeland Security has the authority to parole people into U.S. territory to allow applicants and their families to wait in safety while their SIV application is completed and processed.

Why is this issue important to the Catholic Church?

The Catholic Church proclaims the sanctity and dignity of all human life. As disciples of Jesus Christ and messengers of the Gospel, Catholics are called to advocate for public policies that protect human life, promote human dignity, preserve God’s creation, and build peace.
What can I do to help?

The U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 3985, the “Averting Loss of Life and Injury by Expediting SIVs Act of 2021” or the “Allies Act of 2021”, with broad bipartisan support on July 22, 2021. If enacted into law, this bill would amend the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to streamline the SIV application process and increase the number of visas available. More specifically, the bill would revise the criteria for SIV petitions and provide an additional 8,000 visas for the program. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has endorsed this bill. [10]

Those seeking to help Afghan SIV applicants can:

- Learn more about Afghan allies and their work;
- Call on the Senate to pass the Allies Act of 2021;
- Call on the Biden Administration to evacuate Afghan SIV applicants and their families to Guam;
- Advocate to address the root causes of conflict and secure a just peace in Afghanistan, enabling Iraqis and Afghans to safely thrive in their home countries; and
- Sign up for updates from the Justice for Immigrants campaign to stay informed and receive updates and action alerts to strengthen policies and programs for Afghan allies and other at-risk refugees and migrants.

Endnotes


[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.


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