

Canadian Veterans Fill Void to Help Afghans Who Once Worked With Them

Despite promises from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada has yet to produce a plan to bring Afghan interpreters and other workers to the country.



By Ian Austen

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OTTAWA — Frustrated by the lack of action by Canada to resettle Afghans who worked for the Canadian government in Afghanistan, some Canadian military veterans are using their own money, time and connections to get them into safer parts of Afghanistan.

With Western troops pulling out of Afghanistan and the Taliban tightening their grip, some 100 Afghans who once worked for Canada, and their families, now face the threat of reprisals. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his immigration minister, Marco Mendicino, have repeatedly promised that a plan will be announced soon.

After Canada's combat mission in Kandahar ended in 2011, the government offered a program that allowed 800 Afghans, mostly interpreters and their families, to settle in Canada. But several veterans remain critical of that program for excluding people who worked in other roles or who worked for government contractors. And in some cases, even interpreters were denied relocation for seemingly minor reasons.

Now, Canadian veterans are calling on Canada's government to follow the lead of Britain, which began accelerating the relocation of its Afghan staff members in late May, by coming up with a new program to relocate its own former workers as quickly as possible.

"Canada collectively woke up a few weeks ago to this being really, really serious and a moral obligation," said Dave Morrow, a retired army lieutenant who served in Afghanistan and now lives in Montreal. "But we're not seeing a public-facing commitment to bringing home Afghan interpreters, their families and those that work for the Canadian government."



Dave Morrow, a Canadian veteran who served in Afghanistan, says his country has on obligation to Afghans who worked for it. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

The efforts to relocate former staff members to safer parts of Afghanistan in preparation for a move to Canada has fallen to a loose group of volunteers, mostly veterans of the Afghan mission, and to the office of a member of Parliament from Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Robin Rickards, who deployed three times to Afghanistan with the army, said that most interpreters and others who worked with the Canadian military had fled areas that have come under Taliban control without help. But over the past two weeks, he estimated, the group has assisted about 25 to 30 families.

“We’ve just been trying to put resources in the hands of the people who don’t have them and who are at risk of being trapped,” he said. “It’s a case of trying to buy time until the Canadian government can get itself sorted out.”

The Canadian volunteers have for the most part been providing cash to Afghans who need it to escape and guidance about the least risky routes to safety. Mr. Rickards said that most of the money has come from a single member of the group whom he declined to name.

The Taliban have gained control of nearly half of Afghanistan’s district centers since their current offensive began on May 1, according to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, a research organization. The Taliban now control more than half the country’s territory, but not its population.

In the areas they have captured, at times without a fight, there are credible reports of violent retribution against those who supported the government.

The outlook for interpreters and others who worked for Western forces is grim.

Last month, the Taliban said in a statement that people who “show remorse for their past actions” and promise not to “engage in such activities in the future that amount to treason against Islam and the country” would not be harmed.

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But few believe those promises. Dozens of Afghans who supported international forces, or worked in civil society or for the Afghan government have already been the victims of targeted assassinations. Many former interpreters say they have received death threats.



Marco Mendicino with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau after being sworn in as Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. Blair Gable/Reuters

When Canada will finally unveil its plan, as well as the reason for the delay in the announcement, is unclear.

“We are seized with the urgency of the situation, and are working quickly to support the people who put themselves at great risk to support Canada,” Mr. Mendicino, the immigration minister, said in a statement, adding that officials are now in Afghanistan assessing the situation. “We know that lives are hanging in the balance. There’s a need to take timely and decisive action to support the Afghans who supported our armed forces, and we will.”

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on

their origin story and their record as rulers.

Human rights advocates and former service members from multiple countries have raised alarms about the rising threat that Afghan civilians who worked with United States and NATO-led forces face from the Taliban since the alliance announced the withdrawal of all troops by Sept. 11.

Britain has relocated just over 1,500 people out of the country, the British Ministry of Defense said Wednesday.

The United States, which has a backlog of thousands of applications from those who worked for the government and wish to resettle in America through its special immigration visa program, will begin evacuating applicants to the United States and third countries the last week of July while their applications are reviewed.

A coalition of U.S.-based news organizations including The New York Times asked Congress this week to create a special visa program for Afghan journalists and staff members who worked for them.



Former Afghan interpreters holding signs at a demonstration against the U.S. government in June, in front of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. Mariam Zuhaib/Associated Press

In Canada, the current volunteer effort has been largely organized through a Facebook group and the office of Marcus Powlowski, the Thunder Bay lawmaker. While Mr. Powlowski is a member of Mr. Trudeau's Liberal Party, he does not sit in cabinet and, like all backbench members of Parliament, he has relatively few personnel or financial resources.

Nevertheless, his small office staff has spent the past six months double-checking documents provided by the Canadian military to Afghans who want to come to the country, looking up former Canadian soldiers who appeared in photographs with them and following up on their references.

Mr. Powlowski said he was as much in the dark as anyone else about the government's plan. But he believes that after much delay, action is finally underway.

"We're going to get this done," he said, "but I think it has required a kind of putting it into fifth gear. I think the governments don't often don't go into fifth gear. I do believe the cavalry is coming to relieve us."

Adam Nossiter contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan, and Isabella Kwai reported from London.