

State Dept. Offers Potential Refugee Status to More Afghans Who Worked With U.S.

As the Taliban make territorial gains, more Afghans, including those who helped U.S. news outlets, will become eligible for visas.



By Michael Crowley

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The State Department is offering potential refugee status to several new categories of Afghans who assisted the United States during the war in Afghanistan, including those who worked for news media and nongovernmental organizations.

The department said in an announcement on Monday that the action was meant to protect Afghans “who may be at risk due to their U.S. affiliation,” but who were not eligible for a special immigrant visa program that has begun to resettle thousands of Afghans and their family members.

But Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, addressing reporters at the State Department on Monday, acknowledged that gaining entry into the United States would not be easy for the affected Afghans, who must reach a third country before they can even apply for U.S. refugee status, beginning a process that can take more than a year, thanks to backlogs and rigorous security vetting.

“This is incredibly hard,” Mr. Blinken said. “It’s hard on so many levels.”

Ned Price, the State Department spokesman, said that Afghans must first leave their country to apply for refugee status “due to the security situation in Afghanistan, and the lack of resettlement infrastructure, including personnel in place in the country.”

The White House has been under heavy pressure to protect Afghans who worked with the U.S. military over the past 20 years and who may be in danger from Taliban reprisals as the United States withdraws its troops from Afghanistan. As the Taliban make territorial gains around the country, Biden administration officials and prominent members of Congress have grown increasingly concerned about the threat to Afghans with ties to the United States.

The first planeload of more than 200 Afghan interpreters, drivers and others who aided the U.S. military arrived last week in the Washington area for resettlement as part of a government initiative under two congressionally devised special visa programs. A second flight landed early Monday morning, Mr. Blinken said.

Congress created the Special Immigrant Visa program to give refuge to Afghans and Iraqis who helped the U.S. military. But the State Department’s action on Monday reflects concern that the program still leaves many Afghans vulnerable.

Last month, a coalition of news media organizations — including The New York Times, along with The Washington Post, ABC News, CNN, Fox News and several others — sent letters to President Biden and congressional leaders asking them to take more steps to protect Afghans who had served as reporters, translators and support staff for U.S. outlets working in Afghanistan.

The letters noted that the Special Immigrant Visa program “does not reach those Afghans who have served U.S. news organizations. Yet they and their families face the same threat of retaliation from the Taliban, which views the American press as a legitimate target.”

The Taliban have “long conducted a campaign of threatening and killing journalists,” the letter pointed out, estimating that about 1,000 Afghans faced danger as a result of their journalistic affiliations.

The State Department is also offering “Priority 2” status — traditionally extended to ethnic, religious or national groups of special humanitarian concern — to Afghans who worked for U.S.-government-funded programs and projects in the country, as well as for nongovernmental organizations, which the Taliban have long targeted.

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Afghans who did not meet the Special Immigrant Visa program's minimum requirements for duration of service will also now be eligible for refugee status.

Unlike that program for Afghans who aided American military forces, the United States will not offer applicants flights from the country. That raised the question of how Afghans who may be poor and lacking passports and foreign contacts might be expected to relocate to another country to submit applications.

Mr. Blinken expressed sympathy but said that millions of refugees around the world face challenging circumstances.

"People have to do very difficult things to make sure that they can find safety and security, and we will do everything we can to help them," Mr. Blinken said.

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.

The Times is "actively discussing what type of assistance may be needed in individual cases now that one program is in place, and we will continue to urge Congress to create a visa program that would help relocate Afghan journalists and staff (currently in Afghanistan) who worked with American outlets," said Danielle Rhoades Ha, a spokeswoman for the company.

Kris Coratti, a spokeswoman for The Post, said the company expected "to provide assistance to Afghan employees who decide to seek refugee status, but we are still working through the terms of the program."

Several refugee advocacy groups praised the State Department's plan, while also expressing concern about how long it might take to put in place.

Sunil Varghese, the policy director of the International Refugee Assistance Project, urged the department to "ensure that interviews are conducted quickly and these refugees are vetted and resettled before it is too late."

The State Department said that employers could provide the department with contact information of current or former Afghan employees who are now eligible for refugee status, along with proof of their employment, so that U.S. officials could follow up with them directly.

Even as it offers resettlement opportunities to new categories of Afghans, the United States continues working to protect thousands more who aided the military and are thus eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa program.

About 2,500 Afghans are being relocated to Fort Lee, Va., as part of an effort that the White House calls Operation Allies Refuge, to remove them from harm's way as they complete their applications for visas and permanent resettlement in the United States.

U.S. officials say that some 4,000 more Afghans who are midway through the application process will soon be flown to other countries, along with their immediate families, before those who are granted visas are brought to the United States.