



# POLICY & ADVOCACY REPORT

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# Afghanistan is the Center of the World's Most Dire Humanitarian and Refugee Crises: Policy Recommendations for Action

As we move away from the United States' chaotic evacuation from Afghanistan in late August, focus has shifted to American soil, where more than 70,000 Afghans are being resettled. While the resettlement process has itself been mired in logistical and administrative disorder, many Americans have since forgotten the Afghans left behind, and the horrific conditions under which they are meant to survive. According to the International Organization for Migration, 2.2 million Afghans are living in countries as refugees, the vast majority residing in neighboring Pakistan and Iran [1]. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 18.8 million people in Afghanistan currently are highly food insecure due to intense drought [2], and the country's economic collapse [3] after the Taliban takeover and the U.S. withdrawal. The UN Development Program (UNDP) data indicates that a shocking 97% of the Afghan population could be living in poverty by the middle of 2022 [4]. Moreover, in 2021 alone, over 650,000 people were forcibly displaced from their homes, boosting the number of total IDPs (internally displaced people) to over 5 million [5]. In addition to the incredibly stark economic precarity, ethnic minorities, women, journalists, human rights defenders, and anyone affiliated with the former Afghan government, or the United States are fleeing by any means necessary, as they do not feel safe remaining in a country ruled by the Taliban. Afghans are no strangers to instability and tumult – their country has been essentially under siege for four decades since the Soviet invasion in 1979. However, the current humanitarian and refugee crises are beyond what Afghanistan has ever seen.

## Afghans in Pakistan

Pakistan has been hosting Afghan refugees for almost four decades despite the country not being party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, nor having any domestic asylum laws. The two countries have a long and fraught relational history, the modern chapter of which is illustrated by the Pakistani's profound support of the Taliban, a reality that many believe enabled ongoing violence in Afghanistan [6]. Nevertheless at present, 1.4 million Afghans live in Pakistan as registered refugees, but the country itself has not formally registered new refugees since 2007. Resultantly, another 1.5 million Afghans reside in Pakistan without legal status, according to government estimates [7]. The Pakistani government, in partnership with UNHCR, recently completed a country-wide campaign to identify and distribute smart identity cards to the 1.4 million already registered Afghan refugees. The program, however, did not account for the 1.5 million undocumented Afghans, nor any of the 200,000 Afghans who entered the country without visas since the Taliban takeover.

Before the fall of Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul, the Pakistani government was issuing short-term visas to Afghans, primarily for those seeking medical treatment. Yet border security tightened when Afghans began crossing one of two open border crossings in droves and without visas. Hundreds of Afghans have already been deported, recalling the Pakistani government's unlawful deportation of hundreds of thousands of undocumented Afghans and registered refugees in 2016 [8]. UNHCR is currently attempting to negotiate with Pakistani authorities to recognize incoming Afghans as asylum-seekers, but whether or not Pakistan agrees to such a proposal remains to be seen.

## **Afghans in Iran**

Afghanistan's western neighbor has similarly been hosting Afghan refugees for decades. Upwards of 780,000 registered Afghan refugees live in Iran, along with 2 million undocumented Afghans [9]. Unlike Pakistan, Iran is party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the subsequent 1967 Protocol, and has also historically been the preferred destination for Afghans looking to escape their home country. However according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, about a million Afghans who crossed the border into Iran this year have been deported back to Afghanistan. Returned Afghans allege Iranian authorities severely mistreated them, reporting beatings, lack of food and medicine, and being held in crowded and uninhabitable detention facilities. The allegations were made during the time when thousands of Afghans were crossing the border every day, with as many as 300,000 [10] having crossed since the Taliban takeover. Iranian officials maintain [11] they have provided all the necessary assistance to Afghan migrants, but the country is grappling with a profound economic catastrophe of its own, and does not have the internal capacity, or international support to fulfill the tremendous need.

## **Internally Displaced Afghans**

Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, recently deemed Afghanistan's displacement rate the "biggest in the world" [12]. Even prior to the Taliban takeover, IDPs accounted for nearly half of the country's total population, and the Taliban seizure of both large and small regions of the country forced even more Afghans out of their homes, and into makeshift camps and shelters. UNHCR reports that 58% of the IDPs are children. The UN Office of Coordinated Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been able to provide some humanitarian aid, but nowhere near enough to fill the vast need [13]. Fortunately, since the Taliban became the de facto governing body in the country, active conflict in some regions has reduced, allowing for about 150,000 Afghans to return to their homes. However, that number pales in comparison to the IDPs that remain without access to basic necessities, in areas humanitarian organizations are struggling to reach.

## **The Exacerbation of the Refugee Crisis**

The U.S. carried out one of the largest in civilian evacuations in history. However, due to its hasty and disordered nature, many people who should have been brought to the U.S. both through typical refugee channels and through special refugee programs, were abandoned. And instead of rectifying such mistakes after the fact, the U.S. has neglected to prioritize protection for that population. For example, tens of thousands of Afghans eligible for Special Immigrant Visas and their families through working directly for the U.S. military or diplomatic corps were not evacuated prior to, or since the August 31st withdrawal deadline. The Department of State restarted evacuation flights in late 2021, yet Afghans with SIVs, or who are somewhere in the application pipeline, have not been allowed seats on those flights – the seats are reserved for American Citizens or Lawful Permanent Residents and their family members.

Additionally, Afghans eligible for the Priority 2 (P2) designation program, which allows Afghans who worked on cooperative agreements and grants with the U.S. government, or with U.S. based NGOs and media organizations to gain admittance to the U.S through a special refugee program, have been erased from the U.S.' radar. Even though the P2 program was announced by the State Department in early August 2021 [14], a recent journalistic investigation revealed that not a single P2 has been admitted to the United States [15].

For Afghans who are not eligible for an SIV or the P2 program, the pathway for getting to the United States lawfully is through humanitarian parole. Humanitarian parole (HP) is a parole option aptly named for individuals needing to enter the U.S. for humanitarian reasons. More than 30,000 applications have been filed by Afghans still in country with the help of hundreds of U.S. based pro bono attorneys, handing over millions of dollars to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in the form of a \$575 application fee. However, instead of using their wide discretion to grant parole to Afghans, USCIS has been denying applications due to unnecessarily high documentation and threat-level standards. Immigration advocates have been engaging regularly with the Biden administration to mitigate mass denials as a consequence of exclusionary barriers, but unfortunately little movement has been made.

## **Policy Recommendations to Aid in the Protection of Afghan Refugees and IDPs**

### **For the United States**

1. Create and execute a concrete plan of action for evacuating all Afghans eligible for an SIV and their families.
2. Prioritize the expedited adjudication processes for Afghans eligible for and applying to the P2 program.
3. Establish a designated parole program specifically for at-risk and vulnerable Afghans who require protection from persecution, and reunification with family members in the United States.

### **For the International Community**

1. Reimagine the operation of global refugee admissions so that countries are taking in refugees based not only on geographic proximity, but also on proportional economic capacity.
2. Provide robust financial support to international humanitarian institutions that are administering lifesaving assistance to internally displaced Afghans, and to host countries who are currently bearing (and have historically borne) the brunt of the Afghan refugee population.

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# United States Issue Updates

## **Biden Renominates Ed Gonzalez to Head ICE**

On Tuesday, January 4, President Biden renominated Sherriff Ed Gonzalez to direct U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Gonzalez's original nomination expired after the Senate took no action in 2020. ICE has not had a Senate-confirmed leader since 2017. Gonzalez currently leads the Sherriff's Office in Harris County, Texas – the area including and around Houston – which is the third-largest office in the United States. ICE has an annual budget of \$8 billion, more than 20,000 employees, and manages immigration detention and removal, among other duties.

## **Administration Adds 20,000 H-2B Visas, Including 6,500 for Guatemalans, Haitians, Hondurans, and Salvadorans**

On December 20, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Labor (DOL) announced the joint publication of a Temporary Final Rule that adds 20,000 H-2B visas for fiscal year 2022. 13,500 of the 20,000 will be available for returning H-2B workers, and the other 6,500 will be set aside for nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and Honduras. Individuals applying for H-2B visas must be sponsored by employers for non-agricultural positions, most commonly lower-wage jobs in landscaping, housekeeping, construction, and restaurants. The Temporary Final Rule has yet to be published in the Federal Register as of January 7. To read the announcement, click [here](#).

## **ICE Announces Body Camera Pilot Program**

On December 21, ICE announced a pilot program in which its officers will wear body cameras during pre-planned operations. Initially, ICE will deploy the cameras in Houston, New York, and Newark, New Jersey in its Homeland Security Investigations arm (HSI). HSI investigates transnational crime including cross-national sexual exploitation, money laundering, identity fraud, and weapons violations. ICE will expand the body camera pilot to Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) at a later date, pending negotiations with the ERO union. To read more, click [here](#).

## **More than 150,000 immigrants in Alternative to Detention**

The federal government has placed 150,755 migrant families and individuals in Alternatives to Detention (ATD), according to data compiled by Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC). The figure is the highest recorded; data is available since 2004. Alternatives to Detention programs use a combination of technology and regular check-ins to monitor asylum-seekers and other individuals awaiting immigration hearings. Alternatives to Detention are cheaper than detention and enable more individuals to procure legal representation with little to no fall-off in compliance.

# Around the World in International Migration

## Air Strike Kills Three Eritreans in Tigray Refugee Camp

An Ethiopian air strike killed three Eritreans and injured four more at the Mai Aini refugee camp near the Tigrayan town of Mai Tsebri, according to the [United Nations](#). The strike, which took place January 7, follows on a series of strikes during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day that killed dozens of civilians in southern Tigray. Around 150,000 Eritrean refugees are living in Ethiopia, and both sides to the Tigrayan conflict have targeted Eritreans.

## Displacement Crisis Grows as 100,000 Cameroonians cross into Chad

A localized conflict between Musgum and Arab ethnic groups in Cameroon in August 2021 has reignited, leading to widespread displacement. Doctors without Borders estimates that [100,000](#) Cameroonian nationals are currently residing in informal camps in Chad, having crossed the Logone and Chari rivers to escape violence and reprisals. The violence from the summer had abated until December 8, when conflict over water use and water access led [3,000](#) people to flee in the immediate aftermath.

## Fire in Rohingya camp in Bangladesh leaves thousands of refugees homeless

A fire on Sunday at the Rohingya Camp-16 in Bangladesh destroyed 1,200 structures and left more than 5,000 Rohingya people without housing, according to [estimates](#) from camp officials. A similar fire swept through the nearby Balukhali camp last March, killing 15 and destroying 10,000 structures. The refugee complex in the Cox's Bazaar comprises the largest refugee camp and hosts more than a million refugees who fled Myanmar. In 2016 and 2017, the Myanmar government launched a campaign that forced more than 750,000 Rohingya into neighboring Bangladesh.

## More than 130,000 asylum seekers apply in Mexico, setting a record

According to figures [announced by COMAR](#), Mexico's refugee agency, more than 130,000 individuals applied for asylum in the country in 2021. In a change, asylum seekers from Haiti formed the plurality of applicants. Nearly [52,000](#) Haitians applied for asylum in Mexico in 2021, up from less than 100 in 2020, reflecting better access to the Mexican legal system through the work of advocates and attorneys in the country. Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has promised to tighten restrictions on humanitarian protection in the coming year.



## USCRI's Action and Resources on Afghanistan

For more information about the crisis in Afghanistan, resources for Afghan allies, and updates, please check out the links below:

[Resources for Afghan Allies](#)

[Human Faces of the Crisis in Afghanistan](#)

[USCRI Statement Calling for Extension of Evacuations](#)

[USCRI Snapshot: Humanitarian Parole for Afghan Evacuees](#)

## Upcoming Meetings and Events

**SAVE THE DATE for USCRI's Policy Briefing as part of Trafficking Prevention Month**

Join us on **Thursday, January 27th at 11am EST** for a virtual panel discussion entitled

***Policy Only Goes So Far: Identifying and Addressing Implementation Gaps in Child and Youth Trafficking Policy***

Registration is open now - [click here](#) to secure a spot.

**Click here to  
donate today!**

Interested in joining the USCRI team? [Click here](#) for current job openings!

If you have any questions or comments, please contact the Policy and Advocacy Division at [policy@uscrimail.org](mailto:policy@uscrimail.org).