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The United States Must Act to Save the Lives of Those Left Behind in Afghanistan

As thousands of Afghans attempt to flee to any country that will take them, the news has been full of stories about flights trying to get out and the chaos and tragedy occurring in and around the Kabul airport. What is getting less attention is the fact that, when the United States finishes its withdrawal on August 31st, 40 million Afghans will remain trapped in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. For these people who have been and will continue to be displaced by violence and instability, humanitarian needs will only increase after the evacuations end. The U.S. government must not forget these people and must continue to engage with Afghanistan to provide desperately needed aid to those left behind.

Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan

In addition to the increased terrorism and violence in Afghanistan amidst the U.S. withdrawal, the country has been suffering from a host of other traumas, including a drought, skyrocketing food prices, and lack of medical care as the COVID-19 pandemic rages. Afghanistan has also been experiencing conflict for over 40 years, and the newest wave of displacement is adding to the 3.5 million people who were already displaced within the country. All these issues, compounded with the current crisis, have left millions of trapped Afghans in dire conditions.

Drought and Food Shortages

Afghanistan began experiencing cycles of severe droughts over twenty years ago. The 2018-2019 drought uprooted hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, forcing them to find water elsewhere. Now, another looming drought has plunged one-third of the Afghan population into crisis levels of food insecurity. Millions of livestock are likely to die as water supplies run out, and the annual wheat harvest is expected to diminish by almost 50%. Farmers face particularly dire conditions, as their livelihoods depend on water for their crops and livestock; many in farming regions are expected to move to displacement camps or other areas with water sources as their water runs out.

Even for those who do not depend on farming for their livelihoods, the drought has caused such great food shortages that the price of food has surged, making basic necessities unaffordable for many Afghans. Before the pandemic began, half of Afghanistan's population was already living in poverty. With pandemic-related border restrictions and closings, imports have been interrupted, driving

prices up. Now that the Taliban has entered Kabul, the value of the Afghan currency (the Afghani) has plummeted. Banks and Western Unions are closed, preventing families from receiving remittances from abroad. As a result of these converging factors, even those who used to be relatively well off are in danger of acute food insecurity.

COVID-19 Pandemic

According to Amnesty International, Afghanistan has been experiencing a third wave of COVID-19 this summer, and the numbers point to “worrying signs of a steep surge.” The Afghan Ministry of Public Health reports that Afghanistan only has 1,063 hospital beds dedicated to COVID patients in a country of 40 million people. The Ministry has been calling on other countries to help hospitals obtain oxygen, as it estimates that 50% of hospitalized COVID patients are in need of oxygen. The Taliban takeover has also led to an 80% drop in people getting the vaccine, as people become displaced and prioritize their immediate safety.

Internally Displaced Persons

Internal displacement is a familiar concept in Afghanistan, a country that has been experiencing conflict for over four decades. According to the UN, 270,000 Afghans were displaced from their homes between January and early July of this year, before the Taliban took Kabul. That number brought the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country to over 3.5 million, or 9% of Afghanistan’s population. Between July 7th and August 9th, another 126,000 people were displaced, with thousands more continuing to flee daily.

Life in Afghanistan’s IDP camps is a struggle. With the tensions of poverty, conflict, and the pandemic, domestic violence is rampant in the camps, causing physical suffering and psychological trauma to women and children. IDP camps also lack basic resources such as water, food, and employment opportunities. Without water for cleaning and basic hygiene, and with the overcrowding in the camps, fighting the pandemic is nearly impossible.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

Given the added turmoil and displacement in Afghanistan due to the United States' withdrawal from the country, the United States must act to help prevent further suffering to the Afghan people. While the most immediate need is to continue ensuring the evacuation of all vulnerable people from Afghanistan, the United States must commit to the following long-term policies and practices:

1) Robust and flexible humanitarian assistance: The government must increase humanitarian assistance funding to ensure Afghans' access to emergency food, water, and medical aid. This should include increased funding for COVID-19 response and vaccinations, as well as assistance to survivors of gender-based violence. Funding streams must be flexible to allow humanitarian workers to operate in Taliban-controlled areas without unduly burdensome restrictions on where and how funding can be spent.

2) Support NGOs and female employees on the ground: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Afghanistan need immediate and continuing funding and support for their teams to continue to work safely. The U.S. government must fund women-led organizations and protect female NGO employees, and ensure that all policies and funding guarantee continued employment for women. The government must actively promote and protect women's work.

3) Diplomatic engagement: the U.S. government must engage with Taliban leaders to ensure the rights of women and girls and the protection of humanitarian workers.

4) Sanctions: Any sanctions placed on Afghanistan or the Taliban must exempt humanitarian workers, their facilities, and their supplies. Safeguards should be put in place to ensure that any sanctions do not impede humanitarian work and safety.

The United States must not turn its back on Afghans once evacuation efforts have ended. The people of Afghanistan will continue to suffer from the combined effects of war, poverty, climate disasters, food insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and many other struggles. The United States has the ability to alleviate this suffering, and policies must be put in place to do so.

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Update From Last Week's Brief: Suneeta's Family

Last week's brief featured USCRI's client Suneeta, an Afghan woman living in the United States who was desperately trying to help her four children escape from Afghanistan and reunite with her in America. Suneeta and her attorney Sara Lowry worked around the clock, reaching out to the U.S. government, nonprofits, volunteers, and even strangers for help getting the children to safety. As a result of their hard work and diligence, this past Sunday, Suneeta's children landed in the United States. They will be reunited with their mother soon. To read more about this incredible family and their happy news, check out their story on CNN [here](#).

United States Issue Updates

- **DHS Extends Parole to Afghans on Case-by-Case Basis**

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas announced on August 24th that the United States will begin extending parole to certain Afghans who arrive in the United States without Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) while they wait for their applications to be processed. Parole is a discretionary power DHS can use to authorize the entry of immigrants who do not have visas and would otherwise be ineligible to enter the country. To be eligible for parole, individuals will still need to complete security and background screenings in a third country before arriving in the United States. DHS has not clarified the criteria that will be used to determine who will be granted parole, but experts say the administration will prioritize SIV applicants and vulnerable populations. To read about the administration's parole policy for Afghans, [click here](#).

- **Migrant Protection Protocols Resinstated**

On Tuesday, August 24th, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the federal government's application to stay a district court decision reinstating the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). Two weeks ago, Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk of the Northern District of Texas ordered the Biden Administration to reinstate MPP, also known as the "Remain in Mexico" program. Implemented under the prior Administration, MPP forced applicants for asylum to wait for their cases to proceed in Mexico. Immigration advocates remain concerned for the lives and wellbeing of migrants who must continue to wait in Mexico, as many face dangerous and unsanitary living conditions and gang violence. To read the [opinion](#), [click here](#).

United States Issue Updates (Cont'd)

- **Rule Proposed to Speed Up Asylum Process for Those in Expedited Removal Proceedings**

On August 20th, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Justice (DOJ) published a notice of proposed rulemaking to allow asylum officers to adjudicate asylum and other protection claims for people placed into expedited removal proceedings. Under the rule, once a person in expedited removal passes a credible fear interview, an asylum officer, as opposed to an immigration judge, would be able to evaluate the person's case for asylum, and if the person is not eligible for asylum, then the officer would have to consider other protections, such as withholding of removal or Convention Against Torture protection. To read the proposed rule, [click here](#).

- **House Budget Resolution Provides Pathway to Citizenship**

On August 24th, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a budget resolution that includes \$107 billion to provide undocumented immigrants with lawful permanent residence (also known as a green card) and a path to citizenship. While the resolution does not specify which immigrants will qualify for green cards, the House Committee on Budget recently released a report listing DREAMers, Temporary Protected Status recipients, farmworkers, and essential workers as beneficiaries. To read the report, [click here](#).

Around the World in International Migration

• Aid Groups Warn of Water Crisis in Syria and Iraq

Aid groups have **warned** that more than 12 million people are at acute risk of losing access to food, water and electricity in Syria and Iraq due to record low rainfall. Five million Syrians depend directly on the Euphrates River, which is failing to carry enough water to meet agricultural needs. The lack of water has limited hydroelectric power, with some locations receiving electricity one to two hours per day. Low levels across rivers in the region threaten water access for seven million Iraqis. Problems from the drought are expected to compound, as farmers have in some cases taken on additional debt in order to keep orchards and livestock alive.

• Lithuania- Belarus Relations Continue to Decline over Migration Issues

Lithuania has **proposed** European Union (EU) sanctions for Belarusians who help smuggle migrants, as relations between the EU and Belarus continue to break down. Lithuania claimed that the Belarusian government collaborates with smugglers to bring irregular migrants into Europe, in a “hybrid attack” on the EU. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has said he would no longer assist EU migration control after the EU imposed sanctions last year, following widespread electoral fraud that returned him to office. Lithuania has responded by constructing a fence along its border with Belarus, which it expects to complete next year.

• Turkey Reinforces Border with Iran, Aiming to Keep Out Afghans

For Afghans who have fled and made the long journey through Iran to reach Turkey, they are now **being met** by a 10-foot tall barbed-wire fence. The wall is part of Turkey’s new efforts to build up its border to keep Afghan refugees from coming. Turkey plans to continue building the wall along the border, using ditches, wire, and security forces as reinforcement. Turkey is already the biggest host of refugees in the world, with almost four million Syrian refugees living in its borders. The country is attempting to avoid an influx of Afghans, and President Tayyip Erdogan has reiterated his call for European countries to step up, warning that Turkey has “no intention of becoming ‘Europe’s migrant storage unit.’”

• Report Finds 2020 Was Deadliest Year on Record for Bay of Bengal Crossings

A **report** released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has found that 2020 was the deadliest year on record for crossings in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Many Rohingya refugees attempting to flee to other parts of Southeast Asia have been caught in these rough waters as other countries tighten their borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 218 known deaths at sea in 2020, representing an eightfold increase from 2019. Some refugees end up trapped at sea for months, vulnerable to abuse and attacks by those who want to take advantage of their situations. Pushbacks from other countries leave migrants in limbo, unable to reach land to resupply food and water. UNHCR has called on surrounding countries to rescue these refugees and allow them to disembark to prevent further tragedies.



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 & Events

20 Years After 9/11: Afghanistan- Sept. 1

On Wednesday, September 1 at 3:00 PM EST, join the School of International Service in marking the 20th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The event will feature a panel discussion about the history of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, as well as the current crisis and the uncertain future of the country. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Let's Talk: #PrayforAfghanistan Roundtable Discussion- Sept. 2

On Thursday, September 2 at 10:00 PM EST, join Voices of Muslim Women to hear from Afghan leaders who will discuss their thoughts on the crisis in Afghanistan, as well as strategic action [plans](#). For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Refugee Convention at 70- Sept. 22

On Wednesday, September 22 at 10:30 EST, the Doughty Street Chambers immigration team will host a discussion of the new and recurrent threats to the refugee convention, as well as the impact of restrictive asylum policies on refugees. For more information and to [register](#), [click here](#).

[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.