

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 26, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1400 Defense Blvd, Washington, DC 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express concerns regarding the processing backlog of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program as troops are permanently withdrawn from Afghanistan.

As you know, the SIV program was created to provide those who served alongside U.S. forces following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 a path to safety. These men and women face very real threats on their lives from hostile groups in the region such as ISIS, the Taliban, and al Qaeda. Without U.S. troops on the ground, there is no telling what retaliation these allies and their families will face.

The recent attack on a school for girls in the Afghan capital, which left dozens of innocent children and teenagers dead, exemplifies the instability in the country and how difficult it will be for Afghan security forces to keep civilians safe. Since 2016, more than 300 Afghan interpreters have been killed by terrorists, many while their SIV applications were being processed.

The SIV program has broad bipartisan support and to date has offered a lifeline to more than 15,500 Afghans who served as critical support to the United States military. However, processing delays and bureaucratic red tape have made it unrealistic to ensure all applications are processed before the full withdrawal of U.S. troops on September 11, 2021.

The fate of interpreters after the withdrawal of U.S. troops is one of the looming uncertainties surrounding the pullout, including a possible resurgence of terrorist threats and a reversal of fragile gains for women if chaos, whether from competing Kabul-based warlords or the Taliban, follows the end of America's presence in the country.

Recently, both United States Central Command Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. and Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Mr. David Helvey have stated "if ordered" the Department of Defense (DoD) could conduct evacuation operations of vulnerable Afghans.¹ These actions could provide an opportunity for safety in third-country locations and allow more time for processing.

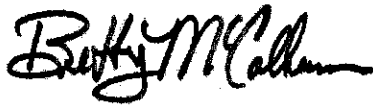
¹ <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2582980/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-commander-us-central-command-holds-a-press-briefi/>
<https://armedservices.house.gov/2021/5/full-committee-hearing-an-update-on-afghanistan>

I think we all agree that ensuring the safety of our Afghan allies is the right thing to do, and this may be the best way to do so. Abandoning our allies not only risks targeted violence today but will have long term strategic effects on all our current and future partners.

We urge you, in coordination with other relevant agencies as needed, to improve DoD's contributions to the SIV process.

We also call on you to engage with your NATO and regional defense counterparts who have fought alongside us for the last twenty years to ensure they too are doing all they can to support this effort.

Sincerely,



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



KEN CALVERT
Member of Congress