

As a legal refugee and a member of the Bennington, Vermont community, I would like to express my concerns regarding the conditions refugees face especially because of recent changes in federal policy.

The Afghan government was established and supported by the United Nations and the U.S. government. After 20 years, however, the government collapsed following the decision by the United Nations and U.S. soldiers to leave Afghanistan.

During the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, many individuals assisted the U.S. government in the successful implementation of its mission across various sectors. Afghans helped the U.S. government both directly and indirectly. Those who worked directly, such as interpreters and employees who achieved Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) status, were recognized, as well as those who worked indirectly and were granted P1 and P2 status. In many cases, those who worked indirectly supported the mission more significantly than the direct employees.

I would like to share my personal experience. I worked as a high-ranking government employee in Afghanistan, with experience in various fields. The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan frequently changed its economic officers, with new ones arriving every 3 to 4 months. When new officers arrived, they were often concerned about Afghan culture, community connections, and economic project implementation. I was always there to assist them. Even when I was directly under threat from the Taliban and those opposed to the U.S. government, I never refused to help. The previous officers, before leaving, always introduced me to the new officers, saying, "Don't worry, there is a lady named Zarghoona; she will help you."

On April 20, 2019, the Taliban attacked the Ministry of Telecommunications and the Afghanistan Regulatory Authority, where I was working. The Taliban entered the building, and a fierce battle began. The Taliban killed anyone who came into their path. We collected employees in a security room, but the fighting continued for hours, from 10 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. We were trapped inside the building, hearing gunfire and explosions, with no hope for survival. Our families called us, but we told them not to worry, as our phone batteries were about to die. After a long and terrifying ordeal, the police were able to open a route from the back of the building, allowing us to escape by ladder. A bomb exploded near us, but we were fortunate to survive.

Despite these dangers, I continued to support the U.S. government. I survived gunfire, explosions, and constant threats to my life, but I never stopped helping.

I always bridged the gap between high-ranking Afghan government officials and the U.S. Embassy. I facilitated connections between ministers, parliament members, and the embassy. This critical role led to my being granted P1 status, and I arrived in the U.S. on February 29, 2024. However, my children, who are over 21 years old, are still in a third

country, awaiting reunification. The new administration's suspension of refugee arrivals has had a negative impact on all Afghans who supported the U.S. government.

In August 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan once again. My family and I had to flee, just like many other Afghans who had supported the U.S. government. Over 100,000 Afghans sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and India. However, these countries are not refugees' host countries, and they pressured Afghans to leave. As a result, many are still in limbo in these countries, awaiting the completion of their SIV, P1, P2, or parole visa processes. They cannot return to Afghanistan, and the countries where they are currently residing are attempting to send them back, putting their lives at great risk. I am not the only resident of Bennington waiting to be reunited with family members stranded in dangerous situations overseas.

Thousands of Afghan refugees are in desperate situations, including my children. I urge you all as community leaders to support refugees. It is crucial to help reunite families. Afghans who supported the U.S. government and refugees from around the world who are seeking safety need your help now more than ever. Please do everything you can to encourage the United States to reopen its doors to refugees, especially those who put their lives on the line to support this country.

Respectfully,

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